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# Digital Impacts on Sociopolitical Relations: Problems, Trends, and Prospects<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT:** The purpose of this study is to find evidence of the digital transformation of sociopolitical relations in Russia, and to catalog the emerging trends and problems therewith. Consequent to the study, two main conclusions were drawn. Firstly, not all processes at the current stage of Russian digitalization can be considered trends of digital transformation—the latter are in their early days. Secondly, it is possible to stop the accretion of negative trends currently affecting the digital transformation of public relations. For this, it is necessary to apply the full potential of scientific forecasting methods, and the efforts of the scientific community should be directed toward this end.

**Keywords:** digital transformation; digital economy; e-democracy; e-elections; e-voting; digital transformation trends.

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## Общественно–политические отношения под влиянием цифровизации: проблемы, тенденции и перспективы<sup>2</sup>

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**Аннотация.** В настоящей работе поставлена цель выделить тенденции цифровой трансформации общественно–политических отношений в России, а также сформулировать намечающиеся проблемы такой трансформации. В результате исследования сделано два основных вывода. Во–первых, не все процессы, характерные для сегодняшнего этапа российской цифровизации, можно считать тенденциями цифровой трансформации — последние находятся в стадии становления. Во–вторых, именно сейчас есть возможность пресечь формирование негативных тенденций и разрастание негативных факторов, влияющих на цифровую трансформацию общественных отношений. На это должны быть направлены усилия научного сообщества и для этого надо применять весь потенциал методов научного прогнозирования.

**Ключевые слова:** цифровая трансформация; цифровая экономика; электронная демократия; электронные выборы; электронное голосование; тенденции цифровой трансформации.

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Digitalization is one of the primary directions of state policy in modern Russia. Due to digital technologies, virtual space has accelerated the digital transformation of modern life into the real environment. This transformation is equally applicable to political relations as well.

The modern public consciousness is generally characterized by a gap between the perception of the prospects and consequences of digital transformation at the level of governmental authorities and narrow specialists, on the one hand, and that of ordinary legal and political consciousness, on the other hand. Further, from the current viewpoint of the highest authorities, the assessment of digitalization has been positive. This viewpoint recognizes the objective necessity of digital transformation while emphasizing the favorable consequences and positive changes that it will lead to in the near future. In the sphere of ordinary people's assessments, expressed in social networks, on Internet forums, and on various platforms on the Web, a negative and critical perception of the digital transformation often prevails. Ordinary citizens focus their attention on the negative consequences of digitalization, such as technological unemployment, technological inequality, or the lack of security for personal data in electronic document management. The general public also concentrates on the difficulties of the transition period, when the technologies being introduced are unfamiliar, and the rules for working with them are "raw" and ill-conceived.

This chasm in perception is harmful both in terms of the effectiveness of the digital transformation processes and in terms of political stability in society and the legitimacy of power. The critical attitude of the population could significantly reduce the effectiveness of digital transformation and even cast doubt on the sheer possibility of certain reforms. In our opinion, we should carefully examine the reasons for the emerging gap, especially those for the negative attitudes toward digitalization as a whole.

In the narrow sense, the fields of politics and political relations should include the concept and the institutions of power accepted in a given society, as well as the procedures for creating power, the organization of that power, and the procedures and ways that an ordinary citizen can interact with power. Therefore, when speaking of the digital transformation of political relations, it is necessary to study the institutions of electronic democracy, electronic and digital services, electronic public services, electronic elections, electronic voting, electronic receptions of state and municipal bodies, and electronic state information and automated systems. These institutions, their development and their legal regulation are the primary trends in the digital transformation of political relations.

Broadly speaking, politics should include all relations and processes related to social stability and social progress. In terms of national security, the dominant political values are the governability of society and the stability of the state in relation to external challenges. Politically significant relationships include

demographic processes, social stratification, organization of the labor market and employment of the population, modifications of educational and child-rearing systems, as well as culture, ideology, and public consciousness. However, it should be noted that in the humanities all of these ideas are usually assigned to separate spheres of society that coexist side-by-side with politics.

The change most critical in its consequences brought about by the digital transformation of society is currently taking place in areas of politically significant relations. For example, the problem of technological unemployment, which belongs to the social sphere, has an undeniable and pronounced political connotation. Technological unemployment, as well as the problems of digital inequality and the digital divide, provokes social and political instability, growing public discontent, and falling opinions of the government's legitimacy, all of which explains the politically significant nature of these problems.

It is inappropriate to analyze the changes in political relations independently under the influence of digital technologies without also considering the state and modifications of other spheres of social life. The digital transformation of social relations is systemic. Further measures to introduce digital innovations in various spheres of public life should be carried out comprehensively.

Experts believe that Russian young people traditionally have a low level of trust in public political institutions and the same level of trust in electoral activity. Among the reasons for this state of affairs are a skeptical attitude to their own role in the electoral process and election results, and an insufficient level of legal culture, i.e., legal nihilism [1, p. 51–52].

On the one hand, Russia actively develops services in the field of public services, while more and more processes are transferred to the digital environment. This digital transformation attracts people, especially young people, because huge queues and long trips to obtain a certain service are a thing of the past. On the other hand, the younger generation looks at the government primarily via the lens of pervasive rights restrictions. Young people are quite concerned about the emerging trend of digital totalitarianism. Young people do not trust the culture where social networks raise the issue of limiting political competition and media freedom and blocking undesirable sites. They are further concerned by the concept of a developing sovereign Internet and state interference in the personal lives of citizens via the control of various messengers and messenger services.

This rise of the problem is not out of the realm of possibility, because even Klaus Schwab, one of the ideological inspirers of the fourth industrial revolution, wrote about the likelihood of increased oversight and excessive power of state agencies via new surveillance technologies [2, p. 56].

One of the primary manifestations of political digitalization in Russia is the idea of creating the state as a

digital platform. In November 2019, Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev approved a roadmap for the creation of a digital government platform through 2024<sup>3</sup>.

In theory, the "state as a platform" approach has a social orientation and implies many positive changes in the organization of political relations. In particular, this approach should allow us "...to reduce the influence of the subjective factor in public administration, to avoid duplication of data and resources of different state agencies, to ensure transparency of decisions made by the state, and to optimize the costs of the state apparatus by eliminating unnecessary processes, functions, staff units of civil servants" [3, p. 18–19]. But, as we know, theory does not always mesh with practice.

The position of the first persons in practical development and implementation of the project known as "the state as a digital platform" is alarming. "Maximum effect can only be achieved via maximum transparency: give the state access to a bank account, turn an account on the public services portal into a whole digital profile, so that the state can proactively respond to life situations that arise"<sup>4</sup>, according to Boris Glazkov, the Deputy President for strategic initiatives at Rostelecom, which has been supporting and developing the public services portal since 2009. One comes to the uneasy conclusion that the technology is working in only one direction. Under the current system, it is only about transparency on the part of citizens and businesses to the state; the state itself offers no such transparency. Such one-sided transparency is unacceptable and unsustainable in a democratic state, where digital technologies should strengthen and develop the democratic foundations of the society. But in this context, the use of digital technologies is more like an imperceptible transformation of democracy into an eventually completely different political regime, digital totalitarianism. In terms of their technological bases, both cyber democracy and cyber totalitarianism are distressingly similar. The only substantial difference between them is that in the "totalitarian" digital world the state with the help of information technology can see through the citizen, while in the "democratic" world, in contrast, the citizen can see through the transparent state<sup>5</sup>.

Through understanding the sphere of socio-political relations in a broad sense, we can identify various trends in the digital transformation of socio-political relations in Russia. For the convenience of further analysis, we will divide these trends into positive and negative ones. However, it should be emphasized that this division is purely conditional, since any one process usually generates both positive and negative consequences.

<sup>3</sup> Business will be provided the state service. URL: <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4173672> (дата обращения: 05.05.2020).

<sup>4</sup> An invisible state. URL: <https://www.vedomosti.ru/partner/articles/2019/12/19/819009-nezametnoe-gosudarstvo> (accessed on: 05.05.2020).

<sup>5</sup> Business will be provided the service. URL: <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4173672> (accessed on: 05.05.2020).

### ***Positive trends in the digitalization of socio-political relations***

The digital marketplace in Russia has experienced a number of trends in socio-political relations. Among these are:

1. Active use of telecommunications and information technologies in the sphere of political relations, law-making, and publication of power decrees.
2. Active use of telecommunications technologies in the electoral process.
3. The use of digitalization as the main tool for solving social and economic problems (distance education, remote work, expansion of the range of benefits accessed in digital form).
4. An emphasis on increasing the number of digital services available in the system of communication between the government and the individual citizen (along with the increasing desire to minimize the actual contact between officials and applicants).
5. Emphasis on the multi-channel transmission of information by traditional and alternative media via telecommunications technologies (along with the standardization of official information to the detriment of its completeness and accuracy).

### ***Negative trends in the digitalization of social and political relations***

Unfortunately, the digital marketplace in Russia has also experienced a number of negative trends in this same area. Among these are:

1. The state's forced digitalization policy, which does not take into account the readiness of a given regional infrastructure and the level of people's computer literacy.
2. Commercial use of individuals' personal data without their consent and without development and implementation of effective mechanisms for protecting citizens' personal data.
3. The use of digital technology primarily for imposing digital control on the population and its activities.
4. Mixing legal, ideological, informational, and educational mechanisms in the framework of communication in the system "government – society."
5. Reducing the quality standards of law-making procedures and substitution of legislative regulation by power administrative decisions (in terms of the regulation of the use of digital technology and the people's rights and responsibilities in connection with such use).
6. Reducing the quality standards of official and journalistic information (its completeness, accuracy, reliability, pluralism, analyticity, and diversity), replicated on the Internet and in traditional media.

In fact, there are many more trends, negative and positive. However, it should be noted that those named are not trends of digital transformation in their pure form. Rather, this is an incomplete list of processes characteristic

of the Russian experience in digital transformation of social and political relations, as well as some signs of the occurrence of such processes. Some of these processes, either comprehensively or singly, can become trends of the public relations' digital transformation. That is why it is so important to identify the problems of digitalization, the accompanying negative processes, and the reasons for the population's critical attitude to the ongoing reforms. This hard-won knowledge will help to prevent the eventual rise of the digital transformation negative trends.

In our opinion, there are several alarming trends that characterize the public attitude to digital transformation. More precisely, the current perception of digital changes by non-specialists has a number of negative characteristics, and we would prefer to prevent the latter from becoming established as trends in the digital transformation of social and political relations in Russia. These disturbing characteristics include the following:

- A wary or negative attitude toward digital innovations on the part of a significant portion of a given population;
- Formalization and bureaucratization of digital transformation on the ground, when imitations of digitalization and informatization are carried out rather than implementation of required fundamental changes.

These two characteristics are inextricably linked. Russia's political and bureaucratic tradition gives rise to a notable trend: "digitalization for digitalization's sake". This trend is expressed in attempts to automate, digitize, computerize, and informatize as many spheres as possible and as quickly as possible, regardless of the expediency, readiness of public consciousness, and even availability of infrastructure. The accelerated introduction of technologies into different spheres of society, despite infrastructural, technical, and personnel unpreparedness, generates formalization and bureaucratization of activities under the guise of technological renewal [4, p. 111]. According to the experts, over time electronic voting and elections, along with

digital signatures will develop and become a mass practice. So far, however, they cause disruption in the process and impose a social attitude of the type associated with the expectation of negative consequences [5, p. 16–19].

It can fairly be said that Russia is undergoing a kind of "transition period", being at the beginning of the digital transformation in various spheres of social relations. Such periods in the history of a society are virtually always characterized by numerous disparate and multidirectional development vectors, of which a few of the most mass or or the most viable directions will stand out in the future. It is during this transition period that the foundations of future socio genesis trend are laid.

As the experts of the World Economic Forum point out, it is important to correctly assess promising technologies: they cannot be regarded either as tools fully under our conscious control, or as external forces that cannot be controlled. Both positions are wrong and fraught with serious problems in the historical perspective. "Instead", Klaus Schwab notes, "we should try to understand how and where human values are embedded in new technologies and how technologies can be applied for the common good, environmental protection, and human rights" [6, p. 15].

Not all of the processes and characteristics inherent in today's Russian digitalization process can be considered digital transformation trends. First, when one is inside the process, it can be difficult to assess the prospects for certain changes or events to occur at all. Secondly, those changes which do become trends will naturally crystallize from the mass of changes and, we will be able to judge this later, in hindsight, having already had the material for generalization.

However, on the other hand, it is possible to stop the formation of negative trends and the proliferation of negative factors affecting the digital transformation of social relations now. The scientific community's efforts are aimed at this, and all the potential of scientific forecasting methods must be applied to achieving this goal.

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