Transformation of political process in digital society: case of contemporary Russia

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Abstract — **The paper is aimed to grasp those essential features of political process that it possesses nowadays in Russia due to digitalization of everyday life. It became a common point in academia now to argue that we should be persistent in our willingness to understand those changes that arise in the political process under the influence of the digitalization of society. Unfortunately, having agreed on the fact that the spread of the Internet influences on different domains of social life (including politics) we still remain too sketchy and speculative in our attempts to clarify what exactly has changed there. Probably there are no radical changes at all? We try to be more concrete in our attempt to catch new reality of politics in digital era. We argue that digitalization of society does not lead directly to a radical change in the nature of the political process – the same struggle for power is going on there. But digitalization of society highlights what has been transformed in politics recently and helps us to see those changes clearly. In order to support our thesis, we plan to use some results of our sociological survey of political process in contemporary Russia in a period of parliamentary elections in 2016. The survey shows that the political process in digital epoch has certain specificity indeed: it opens floor to a multiplicity of actors and afterwards moves normative political discussions from classic public sphere into virtual space.**

Keywords — digitalization, digital society, networks, elections, Internet, Russian political parties' manifestos, political process

I. INTRODUCTION

Digitalization of social reality is becoming an increasingly notable and important trend in development of Russian society. In the early 2000s the number of active Internet-users in Russia was estimated only as 4-5 of total population [15]. But recent researches confirm that the Internet has become a very important and so familiar part of life for the most of contemporary Russians: the number of active users is now estimated as 70% [19] or even 84% [10] of total population. And it is important, that most of contemporary Russians are used to using the Internet every day. Recent researches demonstrate that the Internet has become a ground for a plenty of ordinary social processes of Russian society, including economics [5], education [9], entertainment [18], civic self-organization [3] and other processes. In other words, we can see that the Internet in Russian society turned to be an important tool for everyday life of most of the people. Still the problem is that the process of digitalization of Russian society happened extremely fast. So, it remains to be a difficult task for social science to clarify and understand the outcomes of this process. Most of the scientists agreed that digitalization could have influence on different spheres of life of Russian society. But what exactly have changed? And how strong could these changes might be? Unfortunately, there is a lack of clear answers now.

One of the most problematic issue of that kind is related to the question of influence of digitalization on the essence of politics. The very possibility of such influence is recognized by many scientists. Discussions about the role Internet plays in preparing and organizing contemporary political events are evident both in Russian academia [13] and in foreign 'think tanks' [2]. However, there is still a need for conceptual framework that would help us to describe and explain the ways Internet use to change the politics clearly. We may even to make a provocative statement that description of such influence in social science is now based only on intuitive assumptions of the scientists. A fertile ground for guesses and speculations, isn't it? What should be done to anchor our statements on more stable ground? Most of the scientists argue that digitalization of society may make an influence on the political process, but almost no one has clear vision of the certain effects such an influence may produce. Moreover, it is possible to say that in circumstances mentioned above digitalization of society turns into a convenient vague factor for explanation of almost any spontaneous political trend. Obviously, any announced peculiarity of political process in digital society needs to be clarified. In addition, the clarification of such issues also has a high importance for management. State policy on Internet moderation is an inevitable trend that has emerged not only in Russia but also in other countries of the world. No doubt such a policy can be effective and adequate only if it is based on a deep analytical understanding of the effects of digitalization of society.

In this paper we would like to make an attempt to clarify what has really changed in politics due to digitalization. Using the data of our own survey and the pool of scientific literature, we are going to clarify new features of the political process in the context of digitalization of society. We do not pretend to make a final countdown of every possible feature contemporary political process might have – on the contrary we just want to make a step toward that goal. We plan to concentrate only on so called 'one-time thing' of this issue. We will focus on the features of political process in digital society that appeared in Russia in a period of parliamentary elections in 2016.

II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Even a sketchy and fast analysis of relevant scientific literature demonstrates that the key question about the specifics of political process in the realities of a digital society is quite predictable if not even simple. Key discussions in this area are mainly focused on the question about the degree of influence of new information technologies on political process. Does it mean that these new information technologies only provide new instruments for implementation of political process? Or we need to admit that new technologies change the essence of political process? Discussions of this kind appears on regular basis and partly becouse they are new for social science. Contemporary scientiests often describes specific cases of strong changes that digitalization of society caused in a number of other social processes: education [21], work [7], friendship, and love [17]. Will it be strange to assume that anything similar is going on in politics now? That's hardly so. Overwiew of scientific literature shows that there are at least two big conceptual approaches for explanation of possible influence of digitalization of society on political process. Each of these approaches leads to its own and unique answer.

From one hand, some researchers claim that the influence of digitalization of society on political process is quite limited or overestimated [8, 12, 16]. These researchers believe that the penetration of the Internet into society is an important trend, but it does not change the foundation of essential social processes. According to the basic logic of this approach, political process in a 'digital society' does not have strong differences in regard to previous type of society. Political process in the circumstances of digitalization of society is carried out by the same subjects, it focuses on achieving the same goals and it proceeds through the same typical stages. Digitalization changes only the form and speed of this process: actions begin to take place faster and can involve more people in less time. The essence of the political process, according to the logic of this approach, was not changed due to the digitalization of society.

From other hand we may suggests that the digitalization of society stimulates structural changes in the essence of political process. The adherents of this approach claim that digitalization changes the basic rules of social processes and stimulates significant transformations in their nature [1, 11, 14]. That is why digitalization always means significant changes in the nature of political process. The wide spread of the Internet in society changes the subject of political process: new technologies allow crowds of people to declare their position an get involved in politics, and in the same way avoid 'traditional' ways of political activity. Besides, digitalization changes the aims of political process: its goal can be different to a famous struggle for state power and include more multifaceted tasks (for example, drawing attention to some environmental problem).

Unfortunately we have no space to provide the reader with detailed version of argumentation that goes from all sides and reconstruct all spectrum of complicated discussion between the parties. We mentioned these approaches here for two pragmatical reasons. Firstly, the very existence of different approaches to understanding of the specifity of the political process in a digital society illustrates the simple fact that there are difficulties in scientific analysis of the topic and there is no agreement yet. Secondly, these approaches provide us – being different – with different starting points to analyse political processes in digital society and both of them might have their own pros and cons.

It seems that both approaches have strong limitations. The statement that political process does not have any special features in digital society looks slightly simplified: it ignores the ways information is created, get shared and finally flows nawdays. At the same time it would be too reckless to think that political process in digital society has absolutely new and unique nature. Classical definitions of a political process connected it with the actions of entities that interact about the distribution of power and determine the nature of the functioning of the political system [6]. And the claim that digitalization of society could change something in the basic nature of such interaction so deeply seems rather a bit harsh. In other words, we believe we could go somewhere in between Scilla and Haribda and find place for more balanced argument.

Our research hypothesis was that the digitalization of society rather helps us to highlight transformation of political process then lead to radical changes in its nature. We argue that political process of a digital society is similar to the political process in a more classical (not digital) periods of human history. However, it has its own particular specifics in some details. We assume that the key features of political process in digital society are diversification and virtualization. The massive spread of the Internet provides people an opportunity to have their finger on politics, to express their opinion and join political and semi-political communities. So, the Internet makes political process diversified: it provides an opportunity for involvement into political process for many people who didn't use to have such an option before. Further, the Internet not only provides these people with an opportunity to engage into politics, it also provide them with a 'new' platform (s) to get linked together. Thus we can say that political process in digital society becomes more or less virtual: quite important part of this process goes on on the websites of the Internet. Probably people engage in "virtual" devirsified politics even more devotedly than we might expect from them if they have only classical public shere for their normative politicla claims. Of course, all that might seem to be only an analytical hypothesis, which should be tested by empirical data. And we plan to go to results of such a survey.

III. RESEARCH MATERIALS AND METHODS

In order to verify the mentioned hypothesis, we conducted our own sociological survey. The research work was carried out in 2019 at the Ural Federal University in Yekaterinburg, Russia. The key goal of the research was to analyze the specifics of the political process in contemporary Russia (which was seen as an example of digital society). Our goal was to check whether the Internet had become one of the spheres of the political process in modern Russia and whether it was possible to say that a sufficiently wider number of subjects were involved in this process than before. To work it out we had to compare tendencies that took place in the virtual

space and beyond during the peak period of political processes. We decided to concentrate on a period of elections to Russian State Duma, which happened in 2016. Moreover, according to Russian sociologists most contemporary Russians see Parliamentary elections as important ones and perceive it as a fateful event for society [4]. Therefore, we assumed that intensification of discussions about the preferable ways of the country's development during the preparation of the elections in 2016 could lead to the activization of the political process and attract more public interest to it. In other words, we believed it was a good field for the survey.

Our research was implemented as a content-analysis of two types of documents that reflected the specifics of the political process in virtual space and beyond in a period of elections in 2016. These documents were:

- The pre-election programs of political parties that they prepared on the eve of the State Duma elections in 2016. In order to make clear the most stable trends we focused on the programs of the parties that used to have place in the State Duma in 2011: "Spravedlivaya Russia", "KPRF", "LDPR", "Yabloko", "Edinaya Russia", "Patriots of Russia" and "Partia Rosta" (the last from the list is the heir of party "Pravoe Delo", which participated in the elections in 2011).

- Texts that appeared in political communities of Russian social networks on the eve of the State Duma elections (from September 4 to September 18, 2016). These texts were extracted from three certain social networks: "Facebook", "LiveJournal" and "Vkontakte". Using the inner tools of ranking inbuilt in these social networks, we selected in each of them up to 1000 of communities, which had the largest number of subscribers at the time of the research. Then we selected the communities, which were directly devoted to the political topics. And finally, we excluded from the analysis some "empty" communities, which did not contain any text messages in a period of elections in 2016. As a result, the focus was made on 8 communities from Facebook", 10 communities from "LiveJournal" and 11 communities from "Vkontakte". We extracted the full texts of messages and comments published in these communities in the period we mentioned above.

During the analysis of these two types of documents, we tried to find out normative claims and political discussion that were hidden in the texts and reconstruct ideological basis that these claims could have. Methodologically in both cases we used content-analysis technique. I.e., by counting indicator-words we planned to make conclusions about the basic ideas and the ideological basis of these texts. Theoretically we used the three-term classification of ideologies which was presented by I. Wallerstein to underpin the survey. According to Wallerstein's theory, there used to be only 3comprehensive ideological doctrines in Modernity, which had implemented in a set of specific values: conservatism, liberalism and socialism [20]. Having in mind those characteristics that I. Wallerstein attributed to conservatism, liberalism, and socialism we compiled a list of political values that could fit the expectation of those who discussed the most desirable development of Russian society in 2016 (see Table 1).

TABLE I. IDEOLOGIES AND THEIR VALUES ACCORDING TO THE THEORY OF I. WALLERSTEIN

Ideology	Values
Conservatism	patriotism, morality, stability, family, order
Liberalism	Freedom of speech and thought, freedom of action, democracy, personality, property, market, law, human rights, peace, changes
Socialism	Powerful state, social guarantees, equality, solidarity, labor, health, struggle.

Using various Russian dictionaries, we selected 10 specific words to indicate each value. As a result, we prepared a content analysis codifier of 23 values and 230 indicator-words and started the survey. We counted the number of indicator-words in each of the texts and it helped us to clarify basic values, which were presented there. So, it was the way to see the specific political rhetoric of these texts and their ideological basis– both within the Internet and outside it.

Looking ahead, our content analysis helped to see how controversial our statements about the future development of society on the Internet and in political parties' manifestos were on the eve of the 2016 State Duma Elections.

IV. RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Our analysis allowed us to formulate some conclusions about the specifics of the political process in a digital society.

First, the analysis proves that the Internet have to be seen as one of the important platforms for the political process of digital society. It cannot be said that it becomes the dominant platform of the political process in our society, but it plays an important role indeed. The analysis shows that the Internet has become no less important place for discussion about the future of society than political parties' manifestos. Moreover, the role of the Internet in discussing this future may look even more remarkable. For example, there are thousands of mentions of indicator-words of the most popular values in the texts from the Internet: indicator-words of "democracy" were mentioned 8935 times and markers of "law" – 7775 times. But the situation in pre-election programs was different: indicator-words of the most popular value ("social guarantees") were mentioned there only 1,280 times; others were mentioned less than 1000 times. So, probably, if we look at these differences only through the logic of simple counting, we can conclude, that the Internet has become a more important platform for discussing the future of the country than parties' printed propaganda. But please don't go ahead with such a conclusion.

The reason for such a large gap in total amount of indicator-words appears due different ways of analyzing the documents. The pre-election program of a political party is always written by a limited number of professionals and it is published only once. At the same time, discussions on the Internet are conducted almost continuously and can involve an unlimited number of users and reposts. And the large number of users involved in such discussions was empirically confirmed during the survey. We identified a significant

number of unique users involved in discussing relevant issues on the Internet in a period of preparation of elections in 2016: 234 unique "Facebook" users, 91 unique "LiveJournal" user, 317 unique "Vkontakte" users. That was the reason for the mentioned differences in total amount of mentioned indicator-words. Political discussions were constructed by a plenty of users there and the communication between them was significantly more intense. But we don't have enough reasons to say that Internet completely won the game and parties' manifestos have lost their meaning at all.

In fact, these results indirectly confirmed the validity of the initial hypothesis of the research. The data mentioned above indicated clearly that in the reality of a digital society the political process does involve a significant number of 'virtual' participants and often proceeds on the basis of diversified Internet. However, during the analysis, we reached two more observations that made the results of the research more complex and multifaceted.

Firstly, we have found that the content of the political discussions on the Internet and beyond it was different. At least within the survey it turned out that the discussions about the development of society that were conducted in Internet communities were significantly different from what was indicated in the programs of the political parties (See Table 2).

TABLE II. IDEOLOGIES AND THEIR VALUES ACCORDING TO THE THEORY OF I. WALLERSTEIN

Values	% of mentions among total number of mentions of all indicator-words	
	Programs of parties	Internet-discussions
Changes	7.0	4.1
Democracy	5.8	15.1
Equality	5.1	4.7
Family	2.4	1.7
Freedom of action	1.2	4.7
Freedom of thought	0.4	1.0
Health	3.1	1.0
Human rights	2.8	2.7
Labor	5.4	2.6
Law	10.2	13.2
Market	2.3	0.5
Morality	5.9	3.6
Order	3.4	2.4
Patriotism	4.2	6.3
Peace	1.3	0.7
Personality	8.9	8.1
Powerful state	8.8	6.2
Property	2.0	1.5
Social guarantees	10.7	7.1
Solidarity	3.2	5.7
Stability	3.0	2.1
Struggle	2.7	5.1
Total	100.0	100.0

Despite certain similarities in the lists of the most and least relevant values of party programs and texts of Internet discussions, it is clear that the key messages and rhetoric in them were different. For example, the values of "social guarantees" and "Powerful state", which had one of the key roles in the texts of political parties' manifestos, were not intensively mentioned in the communication of Internet users. While the value of "democracy", on the contrary, turned to be

extremely significant for Internet users, but in the programs of political parties it was receded into the second plan.

Secondly, we may assume that political process on the Internet and beyond it was based on different ideological ground. One more remarkable circumstance became clear now. We argue that ideology works differently in different public spaces. Summing up the frequency of references to indicator-words and the values indicated by them, we were able to trace how the ideas of conservatism, liberalism and socialism were indicated in manifestos and in the body of texts extracted from the Internet. As it shown in Figures 1 and 2, there were some differences in the way indicator-words of liberalism, conservatism and socialism were distributed.
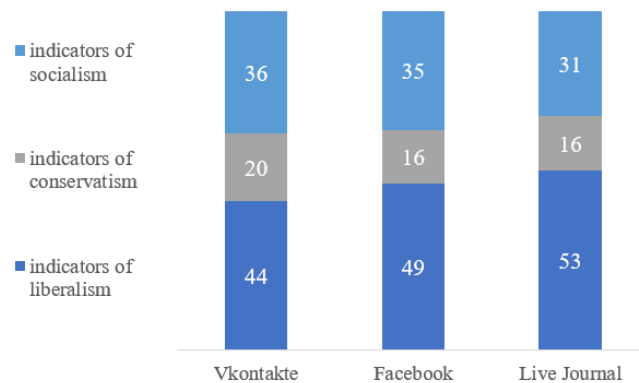

Fig. 1. Markers of ideologies in Internet-discussions. *(% of mentions among total ammount of mentions of all indicator-words)*

It is easy to see that indicators-words of liberalism were mentioned in discussions of Internet-users much more often, than it used to happen in pre-election programs of political parties. We can even say that liberal ideology is the most popular one for users of all of the mentioned social networks: in each of them indicator-words of liberalism appeared more often, than markers of conservatism and socialism did.

AS it can be seen at Figure 2, political parties' manifestos, on contrary, emphasize another ideological spectrum. In the programs of some of them ("Yabloko", "Edinaya Russia" and "Spravedlivaya Russia"), indicator-words of liberal ideology were also mentioned sometimes. But other parties appealed to liberal rhetoric rarely (for example "KPRF"). In other words, in an ideological sense, the texts that were extracted from the Internet and those from manifestos were relatively different products.
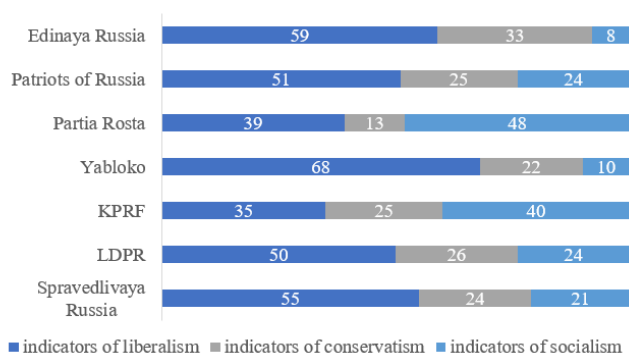
Fig. 2. Markers of ideologies ir programms of parties. *(% of mentions among total amount of mentions of all indicator-words)*

Summarizing these dispersed results, we can formulate the main conclusions for the paper. First of all, it seems that analysis confirmed the initial hypothesis of the research. The Internet became an important area for the political process in digital society indeed. And it really facilitates an engagement of a significant number of participants into the politics. However, the analysis also leaded us to another, slightly unexpected result. It might be argued that the Internet is not only became an additional platform for political activity in a digital society, but it also creates a special form of existence of this process. We tried to show that political debates on Internet had its own special ideological background. In fact, we face up with two forms of political process in digital society. One of these forms exists outside the Internet and might be understood as domain of 'classical' public sphere. Another one exists inside the Internet or via Internet. This is a new, 'non-classical' place where real political discussions are going to move at. Thus, we probably have not only a fragmentation of the political process in the realities of a digital society, but two-faced politics there.

V. CONCLUSIONS

The basic intention behind this paper was our will to grasp the essential features of the political process in a digital society – if digital society really changed anything. Our assumption was that 'digitalization' doesn't lead to radical changes in the essence of political process, but it forced it to go in a different way. We argue that the digital society provide its members with diversified access to politics but moves normative political discussions from classic public sphere into virtual space. The empirical part of the survey shows differences in ideological rhetoric in respect to social networks and political parties' manifestos during 2016 State Duma Elections in Russia. Finally, we came up with idea that that the Internet is not only became an additional platform for political activity in a digital society, but it also creates a special form of existence of this process.

In fact, we conclude that two forms of political process in digital society co-exist now. One of these forms exists outside the Internet and might be understood as domain of 'classical' public sphere. Another one exists inside the Internet or via Internet. This is a new, 'non-classical' place where real political discussions, as we tried to show, tend to occur.

However, it is obvious that both the digitalization of social processes and the tricky game politics started to play with and via Internet deserve to be studied in more detailed way. We do believe a lot of words on the issue of political values we tend to defend or criticize in our complicated world will be printed and / or posted in the nearest future.

Acknowledgment

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