

<https://doi.org/10.22363/2313-2337-2026-30-2-233-249>

EDN: DDTWRH

Research Article / Научная статья

Social structure in the digital era: Typological characteristics of state influence on social processes

Sergey B. Zinkovskiy  

RUDN University, *Moscow, Russian Federation*

Odintsovo branch, MGIMO University, *Odintsovo, Russian Federation*

 zinkovskiy-sb@rudn.ru

Abstract. This article analyzes key characteristics of social structure and their significance for identifying the place and role of the state in social processes during the digital era. The methodological foundation integrates elements of class and stratification theories of social structure, enabling characterization of social groups by their heterogeneity and divergent ideological bases of organization and functioning. The study substantiates that resources shaping the nature and foundations of social structure exhibit varying differentiating power across historical periods. Consequently, differentiation of social structure and its disparities form the basis for conflict potential, overcome through changes in the state's role, degree of intervention in social processes, and influence on social group formation and development. The state, as a mechanism integrating society, modifies existing value systems to harmonize social interests and prevent threats to sovereignty from opposing forces. The study shows that the digital era combines criteria for socioeconomic inequality and social structure — from purely economic ones to status-based, political, legal, and sociocultural. It features greater polarization and disunity among social groups, reduced upward social mobility, and subordination of social structure to state-strengthening interests and coercive influence. The article substantiates the gradual alienation of most people from influencing social processes in the digital era. This rests on degradation of human rights and freedoms, shifting conceptual and legal bases for state-society-individual interactions, amid a crisis of anthropocentric principles of the social, political, and legal organization of society.

Key words: typology of law, essence of law, crisis of anthropocentrism

Data Availability Statement. All data generated during this study are included in the published article.

Conflict of interest. The author declares no conflict of interest.

Received: 17th February 2026

Accepted: 15th April 2026

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For citation:

Zinkovskiy, S.B. (2026) Social structure in the digital era: Typological characteristics of state influence on social processes. *RUDN Journal of Law*. 30 (2), 233–249. <https://doi.org/10.22363/2313-2337-2026-30-2-233-249> EDN: DDTWRH

Социальная структура в цифровую эпоху в контексте типологической характеристики влияния государства на общественные процессы

С.Б. Зинковский  

Российский университет дружбы народов, г. Москва, Российская Федерация
Одинцовский филиал МГИМО МИД России, г. Одинцово, Российская Федерация
 zinkovskiy-sb@rudn.ru

Аннотация. Рассматриваются основные характеристики социальной структуры с точки зрения их значения для выявления места и роли государства в общественных процессах в цифровую эпоху. Методологической основой исследования стало сочетание элементов классовой и стратификационной теорий структуры общества, что позволило охарактеризовать социальные группы с позиций их неоднородности, различий в идейных основах их организации и функционирования. Обоснован тезис о том, что в разные исторические периоды ресурсы, предопределяющие характер и основания социальной структуры, обладают неодинаковым дифференцирующим потенциалом. Отсюда – заложенные в ней диспропорции становятся основой для ее потенциальной конфликтности, которая преодолевается изменением роли государства в обществе, степени его вмешательства в общественные процессы и влияния на формирование и развитие социальных групп. Государство, являясь механизмом, интегрирующим общество, меняет существующие в нем системы ценностей с целью согласовать различные группы социальных интересов и не допустить усиления общественных сил, представляющих угрозу для государственного суверенитета. Исследование показывает, что цифровая эпоха демонстрирует сочетание критериев построения системы социально-экономического неравенства и соответствующей ей социальной структуры – от в чистом виде экономических до статусных, политико-правовых и социокультурных. Цифровая эпоха демонстрирует большую поляризацию и разобщенность социальных групп, меньшие возможности для вертикальной социальной мобильности, ярко выраженную закономерность подчинения социальной структуры интересам усиления государства и его принудительного воздействия на общество. В работе обосновывается тезис о постепенном отчуждении основной массы людей в цифровую эпоху от влияния на общественные процессы. Идейным фундаментом для этого становится деградация системы прав и свобод человека, изменение концептуальной основы взаимодействия государства, общества и индивидов, а также правовых форм такого взаимодействия, происходящие в контексте общего кризиса антропоцентричных начал социальной, политической и правовой организации общества.

Ключевые слова: типология права, сущность права, кризис антропоцентризма

Заявление о доступности данных. Все данные, полученные в ходе этого исследования, включены в опубликованную статью.

Конфликт интересов. Автор заявляет об отсутствии конфликта интересов.

Поступила в редакцию: 17 февраля 2026 г.

Принята к печати: 15 апреля 2026 г.

Для цитирования:

Зинковский С.Б. Социальная структура в цифровую эпоху в контексте типологической характеристики влияния государства на общественные процессы // *RUDN Journal of Law*. 2026. Т. 30. № 2. С. 233–249. <https://doi.org/10.22363/2313-2337-2026-30-2-233-249>
EDN: DDTWRH

Introduction

Throughout human history, the social structure and interests of various social groups have served as indicators of the outcomes of processes transforming society (Ermakov, 2014:18). Formed as a result of these processes, they, being reflected in the law of a particular era, help determine its essence and, in this sense, function as one of the factors underlying the formation of historical types of law.

The basis for social division and differentiation of social interests lies in the diverse range of resources – material, temporal, human, and power resources whose distribution and accessibility determines a person's social status. At different historical moments, these resources possess varying degrees of differentiating power. Consequently, depending on the era, law may reflect varying degrees of homogeneity in the social structure, its potential for conflict, and the imbalances within it. Since law, in any historical era, is called upon to act as a factor integrating society, the mechanisms through which it can realize this function are unique to each period. As a result, specific types of law are characterized by distinct value systems expressed in these mechanisms and their specific social purpose, enabling law to mediate between diverse groups of social interests, whose polarity depends directly on the degree of homogeneity of the social structure.

Taking this logic into account, *the aim of the study* is to determine how the structure of society and the corresponding social interests that shape the typological characteristics of law are evolving in the digital age.

Methodology and materials

To study the dynamics of changes in social structure in the digital age, it seems possible to use two well-established scientific approaches – the class and stratification theories of social structure – which examine different aspects of social differentiation and reflect distinct sections of the system of socio-economic inequality.

From the perspective of social stratification theory (the gradational approach), particular attention is paid to the criteria (status indicators) used to divide society into social strata. The spectrum of these criteria is broad, ranging from strictly economic indicators (such as income and property) to political and legal ones (such as authority and power), and sociocultural indicators (such as prestige, education, lifestyle, mindset). The hierarchical nature of social strata is also of interest. This theory is especially relevant to the study of social structure in the digital age, as the stratification model it proposes is directly linked to the prevailing system of values in society, which underpins the normative criteria for assessing human activity, social roles, their ranking, and the legal regulation of these outcomes.

In the social sciences, several main approaches to explaining social stratification have been developed and can be used in analyzing the dynamics of social division in the digital age.

The approach proposed by Ralf Gustav Dahrendorf, who developed his own theory of social conflict (Dahrendorf, 2002), proceeds from the assumption that the criterion of social stratification is the political concept of “authority”. Accordingly, the structure of society is divided into the governed and the governors. These elements of the social structure are themselves heterogeneous: the governed group includes, on the one hand, the labor aristocracy – a privileged stratum of workers who achieve more favorable conditions in the production process owing to high qualifications, position in the production structure, or organizational potential – and, on the other hand, a group of ordinary workers. The group of governors, in turn, is differentiated into owners and non-owners.

R. Dahrendorf also describes the characteristics of the so-called “new middle class”, which includes representatives of liberal professions (doctors, lawyers, scientists, teachers, and others). This class is distinguished by the absence of direct managerial control over the production process and limited potential to physically influence movement of capital. In the present study, an alternative interpretation of the “new middle class” is also considered, the content of which is determined by real social processes characteristic of the digital age. Nevertheless, the key characteristics of this social stratum proposed by R. Dahrendorf remain relevant and are reflected in the author’s interpretation of this concept.

American sociologist William Lloyd Warner, among the criteria of social division, identifies educational characteristics, income level, occupational prestige, and ethnicity of the individual (Warner, Meeker & Eells, 1949; Warner & Lunt, 1941:14; Warner, 1997). The class system described by W.L. Warner, where each class – upper, middle, and lower – was subdivided into two subcategories, was based on the idea that a class is a group of people enjoying the same status in the eyes of surrounding community. This conclusion arose from the observation that, already in the second half of the twentieth century, the mere possession of a large number of material goods did not guarantee a high social position. In other words, a person’s social status is not always directly correlated with their economic or professional standing. Instead, the assessment of an individual by the community is formed primarily on the basis of their lifestyle and patterns of behavior in society.

Using these behavioral patterns, W.L. Warner developed a generalized indicator for assessing social class – the Index of Status Characteristics (Baturenko, 2022:119–136) – which formed the foundation of his model of social stratification.

Another American sociologist, Bernard Barber, constructed his social stratification on criteria such as occupational characteristics, prestige, income level, education level, degree of religiosity, status of relatives, and ethnicity (Barber, 1957; Wearne, 2002). A further representative of the American sociological school, Peter Blau, specified the parameters that determine an individual's position in society, distinguishing between nominal characteristics (such as gender) and rank-based characteristics (including position and field of activity, age, origin, prestige, material resources, income, ethnic, racial, linguistic, and religious affiliation, and place of residence) (Blau, 1981).

The French scientist Alain Touraine proposed access to information as a criterion for social stratification: the greater the ability of representatives of different social groups to access information, the higher the position those groups occupy in the social structure (Turen, 1986).

The functionalist theory of stratification, developed by Kingsley Davis and Wilbert E. Moore, assumes that the existence and development of society depend on the

completeness and correctness with which its members fulfill various social roles. These roles vary in their social significance and functional characteristics. The more complex such roles are, the greater the need for incentives to motivate individuals to acquire the necessary skills. These incentives take both material forms and the form of recognition of high social status or prestige (Davis & Moore, 1945; Davis, 1942). It should be noted that this concept of social stratification is considered universal in nature, since the cultural characteristics of society do not fundamentally alter the necessity of filling such socially significant roles.

The evolutionary theory of social stratification traces its causes to the gradual increase in cultural complexity, which leads to specialization and division of labor, and more broadly, to all forms of social activity, and, as a result, to the growing complexity of social division. Types of social activity vary in their significance: some acquire greater social importance, while others are more widespread and easily replaceable. As society develops, a hierarchy of social activities emerges, and the social stratification based on this hierarchy is systemically determined by the prevailing consensus of values between governed persons and the governors.

The evolutionary theory of social stratification was developed in the 1970s and 1980s by American sociologists Patrick Nolan and Gerhard Lenski (Nolan & Lenski, 1974; Lenski, 2005). The methodology is particularly interesting in that it analyzes social stratification through the prism of biological concepts – such as adaptation, competition, and interdependent relationships within and between populations, as well as the interaction of populations with their environment. Technological changes, which underlie sociocultural evolution, are recognized as playing a significant role in the development of social stratification. Among these changes, the most influential are transformations in the characteristics and parameters of information, on the basis of which the management of the material and spiritual world is carried out.

According to G. Lenski, the human species separated itself from the animal world and from nature through a qualitative leap in the transmission and use of information: while some information is transmitted genetically, the most significant portion is acquired individually by each person. The further accumulation and modification of information's characteristics could enable humanity to use it to control its own evolution. In this perspective, the solution to technological problems becomes crucial for society, serving as a basis for the search for new forms of social governance, manipulation, and social engineering – that is, it predetermines the development trends of society, social structure, human history, and their political and legal forms.

Class approach (relational approach) examines socio-economic groups from the standpoint of their position in the social division of labor. Unlike status-based or stratification models, this approach does not aim to reflect the precise hierarchical positions of specific social groups in the social hierarchy, but rather explains the unequal positioning of such groups through the peculiarities of interclass relations. Within this framework, three main directions of analysis can be distinguished: a) socio-economic (structural / theoretical) direction, which focuses on the structure of class positions, the analysis of the content of individual positions, and the forms of connection between them, as well as on how economic relations are transformed into social structures (Giddens, 1981:105); b) the demographic direction, which centers on the people who occupy specific class positions, their social mobility and related empirical patterns; and c) the general-cultural (cultural)

direction, which is characterized by a heterogeneous subject matter – from class consciousness to lifestyles and cultural practices – and poses the central question: how do people reproduce the class structure through their culture?

Together, these directions allow the class approach to identify the socio-economic, demographic, and cultural reasons for the unequal position of social groups within the system of division of labor and to analyze the legal forms through which this system is institutionalized.

The class interpretation of social development is based on the ideas of its two founders, Karl Marx and Max Weber. Despite important differences in their conceptions of class division, their approaches largely complement each other, grounded in: (a) a similar understanding of “class” as a socio-economic group, and (b) recognition of property as a key criterion of class division of society.

The combination of the approaches of Karl Marx and Max Weber in the analysis of social division in the digital age will allow us to pay attention to the following factors of class formation:

1. Karl Marx's dynamic concept helps explain the origin of the economic potential of certain classes and its absence in others, emphasizing the role of production relations and exploitation as generators of inequality.

2. The integration of Marx's polarized view of the social structure with Weber's analysis of multiple forms of inequality and the so-called “middle class” allows us to examine the dynamics of social stratification in the digital age, to trace how the middle class is being transformed, what alternative classes emerge, and how this shift alters the balance of social interests that shapes the essence of law.

3. Finally, Marx's focus on capital – as the means of production and self-expanding value – as the main engine of class formation, combined with Weber's broader conception of property (as including status, power, and cultural resources), enables us to identify what becomes capital in the digital age. It also reveals how general-cultural factors – such as lifestyle, patterns of thinking, behavioral stereotypes, and consumption practices – shape the contemporary dynamics of class formation.

Class analysis is a product of Western political and legal culture. However, it possesses a certain degree of universality. For example, Eastern societies, even while preserving a traditional cultural “layer,” cannot avoid the impact of modern digitalization processes. They are subject to social transformations governed by the objective laws of development characteristic of class societies, now amplified by the imperatives of digital development. This convergence leads to a gradual erosion of anthropocentric principles in social, political, and legal organization, and, as a consequence, to the homogenization of the main trends of social development across different regions.

Among these trends, the following deserve particular attention:

1. In modern economic relations, the central subject is no longer the individual owner but an impersonal one – the corporation – acting as a key carrier of capital and social power.

2. In the era of digitalization, a crisis of the middle class has become evident, social inequality has sharpened, and the protective function of legal regulation has been increasingly actualized.

3. According to Gordon Marshall, “class inequalities in industrialized countries have remained more or less constant throughout most of the twentieth century”. Therefore, the central problem of class theory is not, as generations of critics assumed, the supposed

disappearance of social classes in developed societies, but rather the need to explain their persistence as a potential social force (Marshall, 1997).

4. In contemporary conditions, the scope of the concept of “capital” extends beyond money and the means of production to include a broader range of phenomena designated in the social sciences as “human,” “organizational,” “informational,” “cognitive,” and “cultural” capital. All interpretations of capital share one common core: for K. Marx and for contemporary theory alike, capital is a process whose content is the increase in value (Marks & Engels, 1987), that is, the growth of economic potential. This growth creates opportunities for political domination in various forms and for the legal consolidation of privileges enjoyed by economically and politically dominant classes.

5. Finally, the institutionalization of the relationship between the categories of “capital” and “resource” in the digital age has become a universal trend in social development. Capital is always a resource, but not every resource is capital. The distinction helps explain why owners of similar resources may occupy different positions in the class structure, why the volume of resources does not always translate into social progress, why the capital that underpins social structure is unevenly distributed, and why different types of capital possess varying capacities to shape social outcomes.

Research results and discussion

The application of elements of the described methodologies to studying the dynamics of social division has yielded the following results.

The digital age is characterized by the coexistence of multiple criteria for constructing a system of socio-economic inequality and the corresponding social structure – from purely economic indicators to status, political-legal, and socio-cultural dimensions.

In the modern era, social class division is expressed in the existence of the following social groups.

First, there is the *working class* – the bearers of the resource “labor”. The level of technological development in a particular society creates the conditions for differentiating the working class into groups of skilled and unskilled workers. These groups differ in their access to alternative resources: a) *cultural resources*, that is, the level of qualifications that arises not from individuals’ innate potential, but from the demands of specific production processes, their technological equipment, and complexity; and b) *temporal resources*, that is, the amount of time individuals must invest to acquire the relevant qualifications.

The resources available to a member of the working class are predominantly internal to the person. Their formation and conversion into capital are, however, largely beyond the individual’s direct control. Consequently, the social interest of a member of the working class extends beyond the mere receipt of a monetary equivalent for their labor; it includes access to opportunities for upgrading their skills with a reasonable investment of time and the subsequent conversion of acquired knowledge and skills into capital.

The phenomenon of the “office proletariat,” which emerged in the 20th century, deserves special attention. This category includes hired workers engaged in relatively simple forms of mental labor (for example, payroll clerks, inventory control workers, and other administrative staff). These individuals share social interests similar to those of ordinary manual workers and likewise lack the autonomy to develop their own resources and convert them into capital.

Secondly, there is the *bourgeoisie* – individuals whose status depends on resources external to the person, such as money, land, means of production, which they convert into capital. On the one hand, the social interests of this group have remained unchanged since the bourgeois revolutions in Europe and are expressed in the pursuit of capital accumulation and its protection, together with the minimization of costs. On the other hand, several factors reshape the position and influence of the “classical” bourgeoisie in the digital age.

First, the development of information technologies elevates information into the main resource for development. The inability of the “classical” bourgeoisie to control this resource significantly limits their capacity to influence social processes. Second, the volume of material resources at their disposal no longer automatically guarantees access to political and economic power. Third, the modern bourgeoisie has become internally differentiated into owners and non-owners – top managers and executives. This division gives rise to a distinctive phenomenon: the same individual may, at certain moments, simultaneously act as both a manager and an owner, thus bearing the interests of both groups, which often conflict. In this dual role, such individuals occupy a vulnerable position, and the effectiveness of their use of capital – particularly in terms of gaining power and controlling social processes – is reduced.

Thirdly, there is the *digital (tech) oligarchy*, a “new” bourgeoisie emerging from the contemporary form of social organization described by Manuel Castells as “informational capitalism” (Castells, 2000:40, 497). According to Castells, “in the new informational mode of development the source of productivity lies in the technology of knowledge generation, information processing and symbolic communication” (Castells, 2000:39). Consequently, control over these technologies predetermines an individual’s real capacity to influence social processes. In Castells’s model, “traditional” economic activities – such as production and consumption – are subordinated to the technologies of information interaction between their participants. The individual who controls the instruments through which this interaction occurs thereby acquires decisive leverage over economic activity itself.

Thus, the digital (tech) oligarchy occupies a “dominant position in the production system of the future” (Ermakov, 2014:19). In other words, the top of the social structure is formed by those individuals who possess the means of production associated with the creation or processing of information. The digital age is giving rise to new forms of social inequality – chiefly, the division of society into a technologically advanced minority, led by a technological oligarchy, and a technologically limited majority. These two segments have different interests and varying degrees of ability to influence social processes.

Digital (tech) oligarchs constitute a relatively narrow group of individuals whose economic potential has been generated within the IT industry, yet whose political and cultural influence has become total for the following reasons.

First, the products they produce are used by the whole world. Through these products, they can shape the everyday life and long-term development of humanity as a whole. Second, digital (tech) oligarchs control not only IT-related patents, but also the critical infrastructure on which these technologies operate. The modern world and human activity are no longer confined to physical reality. Gradually, an increasing share of human activity at least touches virtual reality, and in some cases becomes fully immersed in it. The tech oligarchy controls both the virtual space itself and the systems that sustain it – operating systems, cloud servers, data centers, and related platforms.

By 2025, statistics indicate that the Facebook* ecosystem¹ encompassed approximately 2.28 billion active users. This means that the owners of such ecosystems can exert direct influence over all of these individuals: their personal lives, careers, psyches, beliefs, and behavioral motives can be shaped by decisions made by ecosystem management. The technologies underlying this influence are largely impervious to cultural differences; they are standardized for both East and West, for religious and secular societies, and for mono-ethnic and multi-ethnic states.

Another example of near-total control in the virtual space is Amazon, whose cloud servers account for roughly one-third of global cloud capacity. These servers are rented by major economic actors, the US government, and international organizations such as the United Nations, thereby consolidating the tech oligarchy's position at the core of global digital infrastructure.

Finally, entire spheres of human activity are gradually becoming dependent on information-technology (IT) systems, which are actively penetrating these domains due to their efficiency and ability to reduce costs. A key IT tool today is artificial intelligence, which is increasingly integrated into all spheres of society and the infrastructure of human activity – from social networks and financial markets to the military and governance.

Third, at the beginning of the 21st century, political processes themselves have become digitized: the political sphere has become increasingly influenced and, in many respects, controlled by the digital (tech) oligarchy. The state and its institutions have effectively become clients of the IT industry, while the population has become the target of political manipulation carried out through internet-based technologies. Social media, which previously could ruin the lives of ordinary individuals, is now also a powerful instrument for building and destroying the careers of political figures. A prominent example is Donald Trump, who became president in 2016 thanks in part to Facebook* support, only to see his political career significantly undermined in 2021, at least in part because digital (tech) oligarchs temporarily blocked his access to major social media platforms. These platforms are now routinely used to manage the electoral process, public protest activity, and the formation of public opinion.

Fourth, digital (tech) oligarchs are increasingly seeking to infiltrate the legislative process. A key example is “Proposition 22.” In California. In 2020, several California lawmakers proposed a bill that would have equated delivery workers and taxi drivers working through platforms such as Uber and Lyft with employees, thereby imposing the corresponding social obligations on platform companies and threatening their profitability. In response, the platforms drafted an alternative measure – a proposition that reclassified these workers as independent contractors rather than employees, thereby freeing the platforms from most social-insurance obligations. A large-scale lobbying and propaganda campaign followed, financed primarily by Uber and Lyft (accounting for more than half of the total expenditure), which succeeded in securing public support for Proposition 22. The proposition was adopted, although its constitutionality was later challenged in court. The outcome was a sharp increase in the value of Uber and Lyft shares, which several times recouped their lobbying and publicity costs.

* By the decision of the Tverskoy District Court of Moscow dated March 21, 2022, in case No. 02-2473/2022, the activities of Meta Platforms Inc. in the operation of the Facebook and Instagram social networks have been declared prohibited in the Russian Federation on the grounds of extremist activities.

¹ *Facebook Global Users Statistics 2025 / FB Demographics*, The Global Statistics. Available at: <https://www.theglobalstatistics.com/facebook-global-users-statistics/> [Accessed January 15, 2026].

The growing influence of the digital (tech) oligarchy over the economy and politics cannot remain unnoticed by the state. Recognizing the threats posed to its sovereignty by the activities of large tech companies, the state is increasingly resorting to restrictive measures in areas where it is most vulnerable. Examples include efforts to build a “sovereign internet” in Russia and China, as well as proposals to differentiate between transborder and national artificial-intelligence models for the purposes of legal regulation and to apply distinct regimes of legal restrictions accordingly.

Moreover, the state sometimes assumes the role of a kind of a “public digital oligarch,” exercising influence over the information economy both domestically and internationally. Domestically, this may include measures such as blocking banking operations within the national banking system. Internationally, the state can use instructions such as the global bank-transfer infrastructure to exert political and economic pressure on other countries.

In the digital age, the state possesses far greater opportunities than in previous periods of historical development to influence the capital of the social group aspiring to power – the digital (tech) oligarchy. While restricting the rights of the “traditional” capitalist owner is a painful process that risks undermining the very foundations of the prevailing economic order, limiting the rights of the digital (tech) oligarchy can occur in much simpler forms and with a clear ideological justification rooted in the ideas of digital and technological sovereignty of the state. This shift fundamentally alters the model of interaction between the state and social groups that seek power: the state can, at any time, create conditions within the national framework that effectively “nullify” the claims and the potential influence of the digital (tech) oligarchy over social processes.

The fourth group is the *traditional middle class*. Its members' capital often combines labor power with various organizational and cultural resources and is frequently supplemented by means of production and monetary capital. Representatives of the “traditional” middle class include workers who directly provide services or goods, small producers and merchants, and intellectuals – such as lawyers, doctors, low- and mid-level managers, low- and mid-skilled IT specialists, bank employees, and creative professionals, among others.

The trends in the development of the middle class observed in the digital age have their roots in the last quarter of the 20th century. Globally, middle-class incomes began to decline in the 1970s and have continued to fall². The digital age appears increasingly incompatible with the ideology of the middle class, which holds that education and hard work are the keys to success. Digitalization tends to devalue the importance of education, and economic growth in the digital age is not directly linked to labor efficiency, but rather to the effectiveness of control over social processes. The growing role of such control by the state leads to a change in the nature of its interactions with society and with individuals, requiring a corresponding adjustment to the ideological foundation of state activity.

In the pre-digital bourgeois era, the middle class – distinguished by its ability to protect its own rights and to carve out spheres of autonomous activity – functioned as a mainstay of the state and social forces that supported the idea of public authority as a service. The strengthening of the state's coercive influence on social processes, which is both inevitable and necessary for maintaining state sovereignty in the context of

² Korovkin V. The End of Work: Why There's No Place for the Middle Class in the World of Tomorrow. Forbes.ru. Available at: <https://www.forbes.ru/biznes/403801-konec-raboty-pochemu-v-mire-budushchego-net-mesta-dlya-srednego-klassa> [Accessed January 15, 2026].

competition between state structures and representatives of the digital (tech) oligarchy, tends to render the middle class superfluous, thereby posing a threat to the model of public administration dictated by digitalization.

Historically, the formation of the “traditional” middle class can be traced back to the French Revolution and was inextricably linked to ideas about human rights and freedoms, formal equality, and the value of one's own labor. The tools of the digital environment now being introduced into public life – for example, digital money, artificial-intelligence-based social-credit systems, digital personal profiles for identification when receiving social services, and the digitalization and robotization of professions traditionally reserved for members of the middle class – are aimed at creating mechanisms of social control. Digital money, for instance, could undermine the very idea of owning and disposing of material goods (the material basis of the middle class's existence): at any moment, these funds could be frozen in a virtual account or reduced to zero. Under such conditions, the incentive to own would disappear – why own something you cannot control? Digital technologies can thus erode one of the pillars of the human-rights and freedoms system: the right to property. Political trends characterizing the development of modern states show signs of the decline of the era of democracy and liberalism and, as a consequence, of the degradation of the concept of human rights and freedoms and the denial of the human dimension in the individual himself.

The crisis of the system of human rights and freedoms – the ideological foundation of the “traditional” middle class – is also fueled by the specific nature of the digital economy. The pre-digital consumer economy and alternative economic models of the pre-digital era, to a certain extent, took into account people's interests and contained a humanistic dimension. In contrast, the digital economy aims to manipulate people, largely disregarding their value as human beings; individuals are treated as machines within the process of social production. Viewing people as machines, that is, without regard for their cultural capital, leads to a loss of significance for the state, law, and society of attributes such as qualifications, psyche, and spirituality. In other words, we are witnessing the gradual degradation of anthropocentric principles in the regulation of social relations – a specific typological characteristic of law in the digital age.

These processes inevitably give rise to dissatisfaction among members of the middle class toward the state and the performance of public institutions that lead social transformations in a digital society – a phenomenon described in academic research as “social disillusionment of the middle class”. For the increasingly powerful state of the digital age, such a middle class, which has historically formed the system-constructive core of civil society, proves disadvantageous for several reasons. First, the middle class's financial independence from public funds, along with its strong appreciation of individual freedom and autonomy from both society and the state, reduces the degree of state control over it. Second, the middle class's ingrained understanding of the state's service role in political and legal consciousness is incompatible with the expanding scope and intensity of coercive state intervention in social processes. Third, the middle class plays an important role as a social model, competing with the ruling elite and thereby undermining the latter's social prestige and creating an alternative locus of authority. Finally, the numerical and socio-economic weight of the middle class does not fit comfortably within the framework of the contemporary crisis of the welfare state in most countries of the world – particularly in relation to the increasingly popular concept of a universal basic income. For the middle

class, the material basis of existence is not a basic income, but the ability to satisfy a wider range of needs beyond the mere essentials.

It appears that the main direction of the transformation of the “traditional” middle class in the digital age will be the deepening of an emerging trend: the state will actively promote the “replacement” of its politically and socially active members with more compliant figures. This is reflected in the gradual displacement of individuals with specialized professional education and an active civic life from the middle class and their substitution by officials and representatives of the army, police, and other state security structures – that is, by proponents of an ideology based on a kind of sacralization of the state and the legitimization of the expansion of its coercive intervention in social processes³.

The fifth group is the so-called “new” *middle class*. Representatives of this class are wage earners whose primary asset is cultural capital. Labor power, or labor treated as capital, is secondary in characterizing the “new” middle class; these individuals derive their main income from the expertise they provide to their employer or client, the complexity of which determines its scarcity and its price.

The difference between representatives of the “new” middle class and the working class is that, for the latter, cultural capital is not the primary source of income; their main resource is their labor force.

For the state, the development of such a “new” middle class is beneficial at least in that it is easier to artificially influence the demand for a particular cultural resource – by creating conditions for its conversion into capital or, conversely, by restricting it – than it is to manipulate labor force markets or to interact with the “traditional” middle class, whose capital presupposes a combination of cultural and organizational components. By negatively influencing the demand for any given cultural resource (for example, through licensing or other restrictive and permissive measures), the state can weaken the representatives of the “new” middle class and confine their social activity to the purely economic sphere – if not even to the sphere of mere survival.

The characteristics of the cultural capital of the “new” middle class confirm the broader trend toward the devaluation of education, which in itself does not automatically constitute cultural capital. An educated person may, in some cases, successfully convert their education into capital and join the “new” middle class, while in others, they may remain within the working class. This distinction also creates opportunities for the state to manage regional development more efficiently: in certain parts of the country, individuals are given the conditions and public support necessary to convert their education into capital, while in other regions such opportunities are deliberately restricted.

In modern foreign class concepts, the idea of a “new” middle class appears quite frequently, although its content varies across studies. For example, J. Goldthorpe refers to this group as a service class or salariat, including employed administrators and managers who receive relatively high wages, enjoy social guarantees, and possess a significant degree of autonomy in carrying out their daily professional tasks (Goldthorpe, Llewellyn & Payne, 1987; Goldthorpe & Erikson, 1992; Goldthorpe, 1995). E.O. Wright, in turn, includes

³ Selina M.V. The Future Under Sanctions: The Situation on the Labor Market and Social Processes in Russia in the Coming Ten Years May Develop According to Different Scenarios... IQ Media: Brand Media of the Higher School of Economics. 21.03.2023. Available at: <https://iq-media.ru/archive/821709241.html> [Accessed January 15, 2026].

expert managers, expert supervisors, and non-managerial experts among “new” middle class (Wright, 1985; Wright, 2001; Wright, 1997).

In Russia, the concept of a “new” middle class has acquired a specific substantive meaning. Its formation in Russia was first publicly articulated at the All-Russian Banking Conference in 2024 by M. Matovnikov, Senior Managing Director and Chief Analyst at Sberbank⁴. He linked the emergence of this “new” middle class to rising wages in three key economic sectors – manufacturing, IT, and construction – as well as to the changing patterns of consumer behavior among their representatives (who were described as a “new class of borrowers” that “have a lot of money and whose needs have changed”). This interpretation received support from representatives of the scientific community⁵. Several characteristics of the “new” middle class in Russia were identified: a) regional residence within the Russian Federation; b) a sharp increase in income over a short period; c) demonstrative and often irrational spending; and d) a lack of experience in long-term financial and social planning. In other words, the formation of an extremely vulnerable social group is underway – one highly dependent on external influence and lacking the skills needed to independently secure economic stability and a solid material foundation for its livelihood. Such a group becomes an ideal target for directed influence and manipulation.

The sixth group is the so-called *precariat*. The concept of the precariat was firstly introduced into scientific literature by P. Bourdieu, and a comprehensive class-based analysis of the precariat was later developed by G. Standing (Standing, 2014). In the digital age, the precariat is a class whose representatives are characterized by the following features (Manokhina & Mityaeva, 2022:137–144): a) unstable employment, b) lack of long-term guarantees and social benefits, c) income volatility, and, as a consequence, the lack of a solid material base for existence and social activity, d) the erosion of professional identity, and e) psychological vulnerability and a pervasive uncertainty about the future. The precariat is, in essence, a class of “new poor” – individuals engaged in low-status work, who are unable to secure a higher level of education for themselves or their descendants and whose opportunities for vertical mobility are severely constrained.

The precariat is becoming increasingly important both for social production and for other social processes. Its inclusion of the system of social groups of the digital age, as constructed in this study, is to some extent arbitrary, since it encompasses a highly heterogeneous set of people – from freelancers to temporary and seasonal migrant workers. Nonetheless, they share one common feature: the transition to the digital economy was decisive in institutionalizing them within the concept of the precariat.

The reasons for the growth of the precariat in society of the digital era can be identified as follows: a) digital platforms have caused the restructuring of the labor market and the emergence of new forms of employment – such as freelancing, remote work, outstaffing, and other flexible arrangements – whose very nature implies instability and contingency; b) job cuts driven by automation and robotics; c) the introduction of artificial intelligence systems across various areas of labor activity, which generates uncertainty about

⁴ Morozova, A. Sberbank Reveals the Emergence of a “New Middle Class” in Russia. Forbes.ru. 23.05.2024. Available at: <https://www.forbes.ru/society/513122-v-sbere-rasskazali-o-poavlenii-novogo-srednego-klassa-v-rossii> [Accessed January 15, 2026].

⁵ Lebedinskaya O. The New Middle Class in Russia: Who Are They? Associate Professor Lebedinskaya Explains Who Belongs to the New Middle Class in Russia. – Text: electronic. IA REX. 24.05.2024. Available at: <https://iarex.ru/news/131105.html> [Accessed January 15, 2026].

employment, affects working conditions, and heightens the degree of control over workers; d) the heterogeneity and chaotic character of processes in the digital economy, which further expands the precariat; and e) the spread of the so-called gig economy – based on short-term contracts and on-demand work.

These factors collectively shape the characteristics of the precariat in the digital age. Dependence on digital platforms and the algorithms on which they operate strengthens control over precariat members and ensures their loyalty to the owners of the digital resources, without any corresponding reciprocal obligations on the part of the latter. The behavior of precariat representatives is subject to algorithmic control, a fact that confirms the broader trend toward the algorithmization of social regulation – and, in particular, of legal regulation.

The algorithmization of regulation makes members of the precariat vulnerable to the very algorithms that evaluate their performance according to parameters set unilaterally by platform owners⁶. This opens broad opportunities for manipulation of their working conditions, earnings, and overall life prospects.

At the same time, the legal blurring of worker status in relationships mediated by digital platforms weakens the social contract and fosters distrust of state institutions among members of the precariat. This distrust creates the risk of social discontent and potential collective destructive action, especially if such activity is coordinated by an interested third party.

Conclusion

A review of the main trends in the development of social structure in the digital age shows that the means of production, in all their diversity, and other criteria of social division possess varying degrees of differentiating potential. In this context, the digital age is characterized by greater polarization and fragmentation among social groups, fewer opportunities for upward social mobility, and the increasing subordination of social structure to the interests of strengthening the state and expanding its coercive influence on society.

At the same time, the analyzed aspects of the emerging social structure reveal its inherent disproportionality and the alienation of the majority of people from the ability to influence social processes. In the near or medium term, this situation may provoke conflicts between the complex social communities described above. The ideological basis of such conflicts is likely to be shaped, at least in part, by the following factors:

a) the degradation of the system of human rights and freedoms and, as a consequence, a transformation of the conceptual basis for interaction between the state, society, and individuals, as well as the legal forms of such interaction;

b) a change in the content of the criteria of social division and their mutual relationship – if in the pre-digital era the link between the volume of material resources a person possessed and the degree of access to power was relatively clear, the digital age places new forms of capital, among which information occupies a key position (French & Raven, 1959), at the center of power relations, largely predetermining who can exercise power and on what grounds (Grishaeva & Kulikova, 2018).

⁶ Zotin, A. The Economy of Protest: The Precariat of the Digital Age. Kommersant. 2018. 8 July. Available at: <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3674787> [Accessed January 15, 2026].

The study confirms the idea advanced by the American sociologist E. Hargittai, who argued that digital factors will become the basis for new social differentiation and the corresponding social structure (Hargittai, 2011:936–944). These factors manifested themselves in the following ways:

a) the use of digital technologies has created new social constraints that have shaped the evolution of the social structure; among these constraints, key roles are played by access to, ownership of, and control over the use of digital technologies;

b) information technologies have transformed the nature, availability, and methods of delivering social services, thereby intensifying social differentiation;

c) the need to strengthen the regulatory role of the state, in response to the political aspirations of the digital (tech) oligarchy, has entailed the weakening of social groups that, in the pre-digital era, functioned as a “counterbalance” to state intervention in various spheres of society.

The study suggests that the further evolution of social structure in the digital age will inevitably be accompanied by the state's search for new forms of social governance, manipulation, and social engineering. Through its influence on the economic foundations of human activity, as well as lifestyle and mindset, the state will actively shape the dynamics of class formation. It is expected that the dominant factor in this process will be the degradation of anthropocentric principles of social, political, and legal organization.

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About the author:

Sergey B. Zinkovskiy – PhD in Law, Associate Professor of the Department of Theory of Law and State, Law Institute, RUDN University; 6 Miklukho-Maklaya str., Moscow, 117198, Russian Federation; Associate Professor of the Department of Public Law, Odintsovo branch, MGIMO University; 3 Novosportivnaya str., Moscow region, Odintsovo, 143007, Russian Federation

ORCID: 0000-0001-6494-0542; SPIN-code: 8662-8904; Scopus ID: 57194431845

e-mail: zinkovskiy-sb@rudn.ru

Сведения об авторе:

Зинковский Сергей Борисович – кандидат юридических наук, доцент кафедры теории права и государства, юридический институт, Российский университет дружбы народов; Российская Федерация, 117198, г. Москва, ул. Миклухо-Маклая, д. 6; доцент кафедры публичного права, Одинцовский филиал МГИМО МИД России; Российская Федерация, 143007, Московская область, г. Одинцово, ул. Новоспортивная, д. 3

ORCID: 0000-0001-6494-0542; SPIN-код: 8662-8904; Scopus ID: 57194431845

e-mail: zinkovskiy-sb@rudn.ru