




DOI: 10.22363/2313-1438-2022-24-3-339-350

Editorial article / Редакционная статья

Theorizing Digital Politics in Russian and Foreign Studies: Introducing the Issue

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Abstract. The guest editor of this issue Sergey Volodenkov, a recognized expert in the field of the theory of political communications in the Internet, of the manipulation and propaganda technologies in contemporary information warfare, of public consciousness management, problems of national information security and hybrid wars presents a thematic issue dedicated to the phenomenon of digitalization of political processes and digital politics in general. The purpose of the issue is to demonstrate the achievements of Russian political scientists who develop their original approaches and work in collaboration with foreign academics in the field of political communication studies and demonstrate the lines of highest research voltage.

Keywords: digital politics, digitalization, digital participation, digital trust, digital protest, big data, artificial intelligence, echo chamber, post-truth, fake news, digital metaverses

For citation: Volodenkov, S.V. (2022). Theorizing digital politics in Russian and foreign studies: Introducing the issue. *RUDN Journal of Political Science*, 24(3), 339–350. <https://doi.org/10.22363/2313-1438-2022-24-3-339-350>

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Политика в цифровом формате в исследованиях российских и зарубежных ученых: представляю номер

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Аннотация. Приглашенный редактор номера, профессор кафедры государственной политики факультета политологии МГУ Сергей Володенков, признанный специалист в области теории политических коммуникаций в интернет-пространстве, технологий манипуляции и пропаганды в современном информационном противоборстве, управлении общественным сознанием, проблем национальной информационной безопасности и гибридных войн представляет тематический номер, посвященный феномену цифровизации политических процессов и цифровой политике в целом. Цель номера — продемонстрировать достижения российских политологов, разрабатывающих оригинальные подходы и работающих в коллаборации с зарубежными учеными в области политической коммуникативистики, а также показать линии наиболее выраженного исследовательского напряжения.

Ключевые слова: цифровая политика, цифровизация, цифровое участие, цифровое доверие, цифровой протест, большие данные, искусственный интеллект, эхо-камера, постправда, фейк-новости, цифровые метавселенные

Для цитирования: *Володенков С.В.* Политика в цифровом формате в исследованиях российских и зарубежных ученых: представляю номер // Вестник Российского университета дружбы народов. Серия: Политология. 2022. Т. 24. № 3. С. 339–350. <https://doi.org/10.22363/2313-1438-2022-24-3-339-350>

The reader is presented with a thematic issue dedicated to the digital transformations of contemporary socio-political relations. This issue is of a global nature; thus, it includes articles by authors from several different countries, including Russia, the US, Ukraine, and Bulgaria. As representatives of the Russian academic community, we think that science remains out of politics, and under the current conditions of international scientific interaction we give the floor to scientists from different countries, regardless of the nature of the political relations between these or those countries. We will certainly follow this tradition in the future.

A few preliminary remarks should be made about the topic of the current issue. Until recently, the development of digital technologies in the socio-political

sphere was associated exclusively with the good — with implementing the democratic transit or ensuring freedom of speech for everyone; and the processes of digitalization of the socio-political space, as well as the of its institutions and actors, were considered as a kind of extension, supplementing the traditional opportunities for social and political interaction. Similarly, digital solutions, interfaces, algorithms, and mechanics were considered by most experts mainly as add-ons in relation to traditional socio-political processes.

However, at a certain point, it became obvious that digitalization is not just a superstructure, an extension, an addition to the traditional socio-political space. The intensive development of digital technologies and their active implementation in key areas of the state and society life has led to the emergence of fundamentally new models, principles and mechanisms of digital socio-political interaction, as well as the emergence of new actors capable of competing with traditional political players and effectively influencing mass consciousness. Contemporary digital technological transformations of traditional socio-political institutions and processes most directly affect the content, structural, and functional parameters of the life of the state and society, as well as their key institutions, have a direct impact on the existing political order, the system of traditional power relations and socio-political dynamics in general [Lovink 2019].

In this regard, it seems quite natural that in his work *A.Yu. Mamychev from Lomonosov Moscow State University* analyzes in detail the change of eras and the emergence of a new global scale for digital forms of socio-political organization, while also addressing the key changes caused by the digital transformation of public politics and power relations. The author considers, on the one hand, the problem of preserving and reproducing traditional political institutions, and on the other, the emergence of new digital era institutions, digital governance structures and practices of public-power interactions. The research focuses on the competition of the state and new digital and technological actors in the political space, while the author discusses various scenarios of digital transformation of society, state, and government and considers such digital effects in the modern political process as “information noise”, “information overload”, “profile reconfigurations” of relations, the formation of alternative digital spaces (metaverses), as well as their influence on the current political order, power relations, and socio-political dynamics.

Among the main lines of tension associated with the current processes of digitalization we can recognize the significant changes in traditional values and semantic systems that have developed over a significant period of human civilization; the growing influence of alternative ideologies and ideological currents associated with digital decentralization and requiring a revision of the concepts of power and politics in the network, calling into question the need for the existence of classical state institutions that perform controlling, regulatory and supervisory functions in centralized systems. It is no coincidence that *I.A. Bykov and S.V. Kurushkin from Saint Petersburg State University* in their work refer to the ideas of post-humanistic philosophy and analyze the prospects of political communication in the context of

digitalization. They aim to study the specific features of political communication in a digital society based on an anthropocentric approach and in the context of opposing modern humanistic values to the ideas of technocratic control and management. The empirical basis of the study includes the results of two focus groups (students and senior citizens) held in St. Petersburg in the spring of 2022, where participants discussed the problems of communication between people and chatbots.

Another author, *G.S. Brekhov from RUDN University* makes an attempt to study one of the most unconventional branches of anarchist philosophy and its influence on the digital life and politics of modern states. With the help of functional and comparative methods of political research, the author analyzes crypto-anarchism as part of the ideology of anarchism, trying to determine if crypto-anarchism is viable as an independent movement. The article raises the question of whether the ideas of crypto-anarchism can be used to effectively address current socio-political problems. Obviously, crypto-anarchism is not limited to the range of contemporary ideological currents that have emerged in the process of the evolution of digital technologies. So, for example, the ideology of cypherpunks awaits its deep study as a response to the attempts of the state to ensure its control over the modern digital space.

This latter problem is largely reflected in the work of *M.V. Yakovlev from Lomonosov Moscow State University*, in which the author substantiates the thesis that the pressure of systems of power and domination aimed at maintaining sovereignty and control in cyberspace, the formation, in the language of S. Zuboff, of the “surveillance capitalism” [Zuboff 2019], caused “digital resistance” among civil activists striving for free data exchange and privacy, which led to the renewal of the architecture and functionality of the Darknet, its transformation into an alternative space for information exchange and a base for building up opposition potential. The author aims to determine the conceptual prism for studying the Darknet and using the method of comparative historical analysis reveals the causes and time of the political birth of the Darknet, characterizes its resources and political role through system and content analysis, systematizes and clarifies the concepts of power and politics in the Network based on the provisions of R. Gel, M. Castels, C. Schmitt, etc. The author names the expansion of states (especially autocracies) in the digital space as the main factor in the politicization and transformation of the Darknet.

Speaking about the problem of the forming digital ideologies, one cannot but pay attention to the digital socialization of young people in the context of contemporary technological transformations in the communicative environment [Vidnaya, Merkushina 2021; Malkevich 2019]. New media act as an intermediary in the formation of cognitive-ideological matrices in individual and group consciousness, as well as a catalyst for the process of ideological acceleration. In this regard, we must state the relevance of the study by *S.P. Potseluev, T.A. Podshibyakina and M.S. Konstantinov from the Southern Federal University*: their article is considering the issues of political participation of adolescents in close relationship with the processes of digital socialization of the younger generation,

which is carried out through Internet communities and social networks. The authors consider the methodology for studying what until recently seemed insignificant in the minds of schoolchildren: fully formed ideological attitudes influenced by the ideological language of the new media. The authors note the need for a political study of the issue, using the achievements of interdisciplinary research in the fields of linguistics, cognitive science, and ideologies. They propose an approach based on the theory of metaphorical framing (J. Lakoff) and the authors' concept of cognitive ideological matrices.

Closely related to the topic of youth and digital ideological activity is also the work of *D.A. Kazantsev, D.A. Kachusov, Ya. Yu. Shashkova from Altai State University*. In the article, the authors explore the nature of the digital presence of patriotic movements on social media.

Based on the analysis of online resources, including social media accounts, the authors make conclusions about the content of the social media of organizations involved in the patriotic education of young people in Russia. Additionally, they distinguish 4 clusters of non-commercial organizations and, using the TargetHunter parser, analyze social media posts. The authors note that the digitalization of patriotic education is complicated and diverse because of the specifics of patriotic organizations, as patriotic content is second to entertainment and educational content on the web.

Among the lines of tension, we can also mention the certain crisis of traditional institutions of representative democracy — traditional parties, which implement the classical functions of aggregation and articulation of group interests. Obviously, in the context of the development of digital tools for direct democracy [Gerbaudo 2018], part of the population of modern states, and especially young people, raises questions about the need for the continued existence of the traditional institutions of representative democracy in an unchanged form.

No less important is the problem of legitimizing new digital tools and procedures that are used today in the traditional spheres of political activity, including elections. In his work *N.A. Baranov (Northwest Institute of Management — Branch of the Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration)* uses the comparative, normative and functional methods to analyze the usage of digital technologies in the electoral process, emphasizing the practice of electronic voting and remote electronic voting in the Russian Federation. The use of digital technologies, according to the author, entails legal, psychological, and technical problems. However, the author notes that it is possible to legitimize the use of digital technologies in elections if voters recognize the advantages of remote electronic voting and other digital innovations in the electoral process, and provided technological problems are solved.

Closely related to the problem of legitimation of digital technologies is the problem of trust in digital institutions. In this regard, we can mention the work of young scientist *S.G. Chepelyuk from Lomonosov Moscow State University* in which the author substantiates the thesis that trust in technological innovation is becoming a factor characterizing the quality of change and the introduction of

digital technologies in public administration. The main purpose of the author is to explore how the factor of civil trust influences the implementation of digital technologies in government by studying the new phenomenon of “digital trust” and implementing content analysis of the main programmatic and analytical documents on the realization of the digital government concept. The article describes the impact of the trust on the digital government effectiveness, and defines the basic principles of trust building, such as openness of the digital government system for citizens, security and reliability of electronic services, two-way communication with citizens.

An equally significant line of tension seems to be the transformation of digital user data into a resource for targeted management of individuals and their groups based on the use of Big Data technologies, which allow the subjects of such management to determine the individual characteristics of people acting as the object of management, sometimes even more accurately than people themselves, their friends, and relatives are capable of doing. In fact, Big Data is now becoming a new resource for modern administration in the socio-economic and political spheres [Kosinski, Matz, Gosling, Popov, Stillwell 2015; Odintsov 2017; Bolsover, Howard 2017].

And the leading role in the process of collecting digital traces of billions of users around the world today is played by global social media platforms that have transformed into a new type of digital resources, with the help of which it is now possible to profit from people’s digital activity. It is no coincidence that we saw the emergence in scientific discourse of such concept as platform capitalism [Srnichek 2020]. In addition to monetization of user activity, social media today play a significant role in socio-political communications, both at the level of managing information flows that form people’s ideas about the current socio-political reality, and at the level of deplatforming undesirable politicians, media, public figures, and movements [Van Dijck, de Winkel, Schäfer 2021]. Recently, we have witnessed a significant number of cases of blocking and “digital erasure” of the accounts of the actors identified, which has led them to lose their numerous user audiences in the social media space, reaching the number of hundreds of millions of people around the world.

Social media today act as full-fledged platforms for socio-political communications, which allow them to significantly influence the parameters of communication and the design of relations between different groups of users, as well as citizens and government institution, on the one hand, causing splits and confrontation between groups of citizens, and on the other hand, forming models of protest behavior among network users. It is no coincidence that several authors have turned their attention to social media platforms as a space for modern social and political communications [Kuzheleva-Sagan, 2022; Samsonova, 2020; Astashkin, Bresler 2018]. In this regard, of great relevance is the article by *D.K. Stukal and A.S. Akhremenko from Higher School of Economics and A.P. Petrov from Keldysh Institute for Applied Mathematics (Russian Academy of Sciences)*. Based on the analysis of the observed behavior of social network

users, they identify key polarizing splits by analyzing the use of hate speech against various target groups. The authors present an alternative approach as well as a novel coding schema for textual data, which includes two components: an operationalized definition of hate speech as a phenomenon with at least one of the three elements — insult, discrimination, or aggression; and an original coding guide for human coders annotating the use of hate speech. The authors then apply this approach to the analysis of empirical data that includes over 5000 posts on the social media platform VK about the meetings between the Presidents of Russia and Belarus in 2020-2021. The results of the study highlight the prospects of applying the proposed methodology to a broad range of textual data, as well as the benefits of exploratory analysis that helps overcome the limitations of survey instruments.

The article by *Y.Y. Kolotaev of Saint Petersburg State University* is also devoted to the topic of hate rhetoric. The author shows that the digital rhetoric of hatred is today one of the most significant examples of the impact of digitalization on political processes, and the manifestation of hatred on the Internet has become a serious challenge for political systems around the world. The study aims to identify the social mechanisms that make hate speech an instrument in information campaigns and illustrates the discursive and emotional aspects of the public manifestation of hatred. The theoretical basis of the work is the theory of “emotional regimes” and the concept of “regimes of truth”, which express the mutual influence of subjectivity and public discourse. Comparing the theoretical framework with the practical aspects of hate speech demonstrates that digital platforms and social networks form an environment that accelerates and facilitates the dissemination of hatred in the public space.

In their turn, the team of authors including *E.V. Brodovskaya and R.V. Parma, M.A. Davydova of Financial University under the Government of the Russian Federation and K.A. Podrezov of Tula State Lev Tolstoy Pedagogical University* uses a hybrid research strategy in combination with cognitive mapping and social media analysis to identify and analyze the dynamic, structural and substantive characteristics of the information representation of events that happened in Kazakhstan in January 2022 in the Russian segment of social media. The context of the study stems from the significant intersection of the Russian and Kazakh segments of social media and the mutual influence of political processes. Influenced by the political mobilization of the mass protests in Kazakhstan, which turned into an attempted coup, the activities of Russian counter elites intensified in various regions of Russia. The study revealed that the Russian opposition attempted to use manipulative “contamination” technology in order to extrapolate the political and economic discontent in Kazakhstan to the situation in Russia.

As for the situation directly related to protest activities in social networks in Russia itself, *I.B. Philippov from Higher School of Economics* considers domestic experience in his article devoted to the “Moscow Case”. The author explores the impact of legal negative sanctions against participants in the protest movement occurred in Moscow in 2019 on protest communication in the VKontakte social network. The empirical analysis of the mentions of protests and juridical

prosecutions allowed to estimate the volume of discussions about the negative sanctions, to compare it with the discussions around the protest rallies and to outline the main factors affecting how active the discussion is on different episodes of negative sanctions. The results show that the coverage of the criminal persecution of activists provokes substantively less interest among the authors and the readers than the communication on the protest movement itself.

Simultaneously, it seems obvious that in order to form and maintain a politically polarized digital space, in which splits and confrontation between various groups of citizens, as well as generating protest potential is possible, it is necessary to implement projects for information encapsulation of users, “cutting off” civilian masses from the real world with the help of media constructs that allow creating limited models of socio-political reality, including radical and extremist models that operate on the “friend or foe” principle [Volodenkov, Artamonova 2020]. And one of the tools actively used to conduct such work is the well-known tool of echo chambers [Sunstein 2001]: the work presented by our colleagues M.A. *Beznosov* from the University of West Georgia (USA) and A.S. *Golikov* from V.N. *Karazin* Kharkov National University (Ukraine) is dedicated to this very phenomenon. In their article, the authors present a comprehensive overview of Western academic literature and consider various approaches to understanding echo chambers in the digital space as a political phenomenon. The authors examine different approaches, their similarities and general differences, advantages, and disadvantages, and provide a consolidated and critical perspective that will hopefully be useful for future research in the field. The paper presents the results of a systematic review of Western academic studies on the existence of echo chambers in social media, an initial classification of the literature and the identification of research patterns. The authors show how conceptual and methodological choices influence research findings on the topic.

Additionally, an essential line of tension is the need for the traditional states and their power institutions to adapt to the contemporary processes of digital technological transformations. The digitalization of modern states and their adaptation to current technological transformations is today a complex and largely ambiguous set of processes that includes political opportunities and associated risks, threats, and challenges for both the state itself and its institutions, as well as directly for the civil society, which is no less rapidly increasing its complexity and diversity through intensive digitalization [Collington 2021]. This circumstance brings to the emergence of a wide range of scenarios for forming models of state and political governance in the context of a rapidly emerging digital technological reality of a new type [Smorgunov 2019].

This topic is discussed in the article by S.V. *Volodenkov* and Yu.D. *Artamonova* from Lomonosov Moscow State University and S.N. *Fedorchenko* from Moscow Region State University. The authors attempt to determine the political potential of the modern state and its institutions of power at adapting to digital technological transformations, as well as to identify the key risks, threats and challenges associated with the processes of such adaptation. The authors of the article conducted a corresponding international expert study, that allowed to determine how digital

technological transformations influence the functioning of traditional states and their power institutions. Also, based on the integration of expert assessments, the authors identified the essential characteristics of digital technological transformations' effect on contemporary institutions of state power. The study results concluded that the digitalization of contemporary states and their adaptation to current technological transformations is a complex and largely ambiguous set of processes. The article shows how the adaptation of the traditional state as an administration system to the technologically more complex environment is necessary to ensure the effective viability of both the state itself and its institutions.

A special challenge for states in terms of their adaptation strategies was the COVID-19 pandemic, which was accompanied by forced digitalization of many traditional spheres of life. The ability to effectively use digital technologies in the context of national lockdowns has become one of the key conditions for preserving and maintaining social stability and the viability of power institutions. Undoubtedly, the accelerated digitalization has created new opportunities in the field of socio-political communications. This topic is the subject of an article by our *Bulgarian colleagues from University of Plovdiv Paisii Hilendarski D. Pastarmadzhieva and M. Angelova*. The COVID-19 pandemic has jeopardized numerous national and international systems and relations, and the authors focus on identifying the problems related to communication between society and government in the EU member countries and identifying possible solutions for public policy dialogue in situations similar to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Simultaneously, it should be noted that successful and effective adaptation of states to digital technological transformations is impossible without owning highly qualified human resources in the national sphere of IT. And here today we are witnessing very serious problems associated, first of all, with the outflow of IT specialists abroad. This circumstance makes the work on “digital nomads” by *V.V. Taisheva of RUDN University* especially relevant: the author attempts to identify the key reasons for the migrating specialists in the field of information technology, considering various “push” and “pull” factors that exist in the context of the Russian IT market.

As you can see, the authors of the articles included in this thematic issue pay attention to a fairly wide range of issues related to the digitalization of the modern socio-political sphere, which convincingly demonstrates the scale and depth of digital technologies' penetration into the life of the state and society. At the same time, it seems to us that today, in many cases, digital technologies only supplement the mechanisms of offline politics with new technical tools, which, however, are inevitably limited to institutions of power and their authority.

We must emphasize that today it is impossible to clearly determine whether the main contemporary technological processes of digitalization have an unambiguously positive or negative impact on the political system, civil society, the public administration system and the functioning of government institutions. Rather, we are dealing with a complex bundle of effects the consequences of which are not entirely clear and obvious. It is no coincidence that the works of our authors analyze both the

constructive and destructive potential of modern digital technologies in the current conditions of technological transformations. Of course, it is impossible to cover and consider the entire range of issues and problems related to the digitalization of modern socio-political and state-administrative processes within the framework of one issue. And many promising areas are awaiting their researchers.

Thus, an extremely important and promising line of tension, which is not considered in this issue, is, in our opinion, the rapid development of artificial intelligence technologies and self-learning neural networks, which are now beginning to be actively used in social and political practice. In this regard, digital actants are of particular interest to researchers and scientists today. At present, social activity, both at individual and collective levels, “neighbours” or coexists with the activity of non-human elements [Rezaeva 2020]. Socio-political processes are increasingly “objectified” through digital forms that generate specific events in the socio-cultural and digital reality.

Digital actants (autonomous robotic complexes, bots, digital platforms, artificial intelligence systems, self-learning neural networks, etc.) significantly influence the design, nature, and direction of the development of socio-political relations in the digital space. Currently, a new research problem emerges regarding the status of the new drivers of political confrontation that are difficult to designate with the traditional concept of the “subject” (digital personalities, digital platforms, digital algorithms, and other active digital actors), but which significantly affect political interaction and the dynamics of the political process [Beer 2017; Nazarov 2020; Borgesius 2020].

An equally important and promising research area is the study of socio-technical reality and the aggravated digital virtualization of the socio-political space. The trend towards even deeper virtualization of real, including political, space today is represented not only by attempts to use augmented reality technologies, digital avatarization, the post-truth phenomenon and deepfake technology, but also by the contemporary desire of global technology companies to create spaces of artificial sociality in the form of rapidly developing digital metaverses, which, in fact, form a new virtual dimension of human existence [Rezaeva 2020].

Such projects involve the active movement of user actions from physical to virtual reality, as well as the replacement of personalities with digital avatars in the process of their interactions because of which direct traditional person-to-person contact will be replaced by a digital avatar-to-avatar format. Obviously, such avatars can also be digital simulacra of fictional personalities, which enables forming a virtual space of mass digital interaction with a high manipulative potential, while not only deflecting human consciousness from the real world, but largely replacing it with digital reality [Isaev 2021].

In this regard, for future political research, we deem it important and relevant to pay special attention to such digital problems as the emerging opportunities for aggressively replacing the reality with the virtual content of political processes, monopolizing information and the symbolic public space (including on the basis of AI-agents’ dominance), completely excluding citizens from socio-political decision-

making, virtualizing political action and substituting real political participation with virtual one. However, these reflections are of a promising nature and are aimed at, first of all, drawing the attention of domestic and foreign political scientists, as well as specialists in the field of digital social and political communications and public administration to those challenges that can be relevant for the real political practice in the nearest future.

Received / Поступила в редакцию: 20.04.2022

Revised / Доработана после рецензирования: 10.06.2022

Accepted / Принята к публикации: 15.06.2022

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