THE INTERNET AS A COMMUNICATIVE TECHNOLOGY AND ITS POLITICAL VALUE

Mikhail S. Konstantinov¹

Abstract: The work presents some results obtained in the process of implementing two sociological studies of the consciousness of students in the South of Russia, conducted by the research team of the Southern Federal University in the period of 2014-2016 and 2018-2019. Methodologically, both studies included a series of free group interviews, questionnaires and focus groups. Analysis of the data obtained shows a significant shift in the sentiments of student youth towards greater opposition to the current government: if in 2015 less than two-thirds of the respondents (60.6%) believed that radical changes in Russia were impossible, then in 2019 more than two-thirds of respondents expected serious shocks (72.4%). Among the key reasons for the growing tension in Russian society, students name socio-economic (42.2%) and internal politics (50.0%). But the greatest resonance in the student mind is caused by the attempts of the Russian authorities to control the Internet. Thus, according to a survey conducted in 2019, 37.4% of respondents consider the Internet the most important source of information, and another third (29.5%) point to the anti-constitutional nature of these laws. Therefore, Internet restrictions may well become an annoying factor: 39.7% of those surveyed declared their readiness to take part in protests, if there are any. The analysis shows that the communicative value of the Internet is at a much deeper level of the cognitive structures of student consciousness than traditional political values. The value of Internet freedom turns out to be one of the most basic values for today's youth, comparable to fundamental values such as social connections, recognition, identity, etc.

UDC Classification: 316.6, **DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.12955/pss.v2.221>

Keywords: political ideology, cognitive-ideological matrices, student consciousness.

Introduction

One of the main problems in the study of political ideologies is the mobility, polysemy and amazing plasticity of key ideological concepts, the meanings of which vary significantly depending on their peripheral environment (Freedman, 2006). This problem has repeatedly become the object of study. Suffice it to mention the classic study conducted under the leadership of Philippe Convers (2006) which demonstrated the discrepancy between the beliefs of the masses and the convictions of educated elites - carriers of ideology. In this regard, one can also mention the concept of F. Jameson's (2002) ideologeme, as well as the concept of "floating signifiers" proposed by J. Lacan, and then developed by E. Laclau and C. Mouffe (1985), S. Žižek (1989) and others describe the relationship between heterogeneous mass consciousness and logically ordered ideological systems. This idea of the conceptual plasticity of modern political ideologies capable of borrowing elements of competing ideologies became the starting point for a series of sociological studies of student consciousness in the South of Russia conducted in 2015–2019 by a scientific team that brought together scientists from the Southern Federal University and the Southern Scientific Center of the Russian Academy of Sciences (Potseluev et al., 2016; Lukichev et al., 2019; Potseluev et al., 2020).

Materials and Methods

Conceptualizing this problem, the researchers decided to turn to the level of student consciousness at which ideology is still in a latent state, is just emerging and crystallizing. The theoretical and methodological basis of the study was the author's concept of cognitive-ideological matrices (Konstantinov, 2018), which describes a pre-reflective (and therefore politically neutral) environment in which protoelements of political ideologies are formed from the elements of the sedimented social experience of an individual. This is the same "zero level" of ideology, at which ideological "protoplasm" arises through the formation of an individual's predisposition to one or another, and more often leads to several ideologies at once. Methodologically, both studies included a series of free group interviews, questionnaires, and focus groups. In 2015, the sample for the survey consisted of 718 people (350 male, 368 female; standard deviation for the whole sample: $\pm 3.7\%$); in 2019 there were 816 respondents (435 - male and 381 - female; standard deviation: $\pm 3.4\%$).

Results

An analysis of the data obtained shows a significant shift in the sentiments of student youth towards greater opposition to the current government: if in 2015 about two-thirds of the respondents (60.6%) believed that radical changes in Russia were impossible, then in 2019 more than two-thirds of

¹ Southern Federal University, Institute of Philosophy and Social & Political Sciences, Department of Theoretical and Applied Political Science, konstantinov@sfedu.ru

respondents expected serious shocks (72.4%). Among the key reasons for the growing tension in Russian society, students name socio-economic (42.2%) and internal political (50.0%). These factors, according to respondents, increase the likelihood of a political crisis and mass protests.

There have also been significant shifts in the perception of possible threats to Russia, as well as its place in the world. Among the threats, students name foreign policy ("world war"), as well as socio-economic: mass protests and corruption. Sharp shifts have taken place in the perception of Russia's place in the world. They reflect disillusionment with the imperial foreign policy of the authorities that crystallizes into the idea of the regional character of Russia. Finally, we are witnessing a sharp decline in the popularity of Russian politicians, with a parallel nostalgia for the talented and active politicians of the past. All these factors together sharply increase, according to the views of the students surveyed, the likelihood of a political crisis associated with mass demonstrations and protests.

One of the problems that irritates students the most is the desire of the Russian authorities to tighten control over the Internet. Thus, according to a survey conducted in 2019, 37.4% of respondents consider the Internet the most important source of information, and another third (29.5%) point to the anti-constitutional nature of these laws. Therefore, Internet restrictions may well become an annoying factor: 39.7% of those surveyed declared their readiness to take part in protests, if there are any. Against this background, the fact that the noted increase in irritation is accompanied by a clear decrease in interest in politics looks somewhat paradoxical (for example, the number of respondents who are fully or partially not interested in politics increased from 20.7% in 2015 to 38.1% in 2019). However, this paradox arises only if one accepts that the student youth are concerned about the authorities' attack on specific values directly related to the students' "here and now," and at the same time perceived by the students themselves as political values. In relation to most of the studied values, either the first condition or the second is wrong. The same is true of the value of Internet freedom. If we look at the conjugation of this value with others, we find the following. First of all, students are very rational in answering questions about the Internet: the analysis of conjugations shows that they give these answers quite consciously. For example, the interface between the interpretation of laws regulating the Internet and the declared readiness to defend its freedom is quite dense (Table 1).

Table 1: Correlation between the declared willingness to act to protect freedom on the Internet and the interpretation of laws regulating it

What do you think, will the adoption of laws regulating the Internet in Russia lead to any protests?	...ready to take part in protests	...go to conflict with the authorities is not worth it	...The Internet needs regulation	...The Internet is a Western intelligence project	...the adopted laws do not change anything
How do you feel about the laws governing the Internet?					
The Internet is the most important source of information, therefore the authorities' aspiration to control it is unacceptable	50.5	43.7	10.8	23.8	20.0
Criticism of the authorities and freedom of exchange of opinions is my constitutional right, and the adopted laws are unconstitutional	36.3	33.7	16.7	9.5	13.3
The adopted laws are nothing more than a desire to clear the Internet of information waste; I support these initiatives	2.8	7.0	36.3	9.5	0.0
In China, the Internet is regulated by very strict means, but this did not prevent China from becoming the second largest economy in the world	1.2	0.5	13.7	33.3	0.0
Laws in Russia are applied selectively, so there will be no serious consequences	0.3	2.5	6.9	0.0	0.0
The Internet is technically impossible to control, so these laws will not work	5.8	7.0	9.8	19.0	46.7

Source: Author

Thus, the desire of the authorities to control the Internet has already become a very annoying factor. By itself, it can hardly generate mass dynamics, but in combination with other factors, including socio-economic ones, this possibility cannot be denied. For example, the confidence of student youth that discontent is growing in the impoverished Russian society, which can give rise to mass protests, may well resonate with their own irritation from the authorities' desire to restrict free access to information, and this, in turn, resonate with information about the curtailment of political rights and freedoms, etc. Thus, young people who highly appreciate the importance of the Internet, overall, feel the growing tension in Russian society more acutely, and are themselves more determined. On the other hand, the analysis did not reveal a correlation between the value of freedom on the Internet and socio-political values. For example, supporters of Internet freedom, who are even ready to take part in actions to protect it, socially prefer the quite banal values of family, work and material wealth, rather than social and even more so political activism. In fact, the declared interest in politics by the respondents is in no way connected with the value of freedom on the Internet (Table 2).

Table 2: Correlation between anxiety about Internet regulation and a declared interest in politics					
To what extent are you currently interested in politics?	I am constantly interested	I am interested from time to time	Rather, I am not interested	I am not at all interested	I am at a loss to answer
How do you feel about the laws governing the Internet?					
The Internet is the most important source of information, therefore the authorities' aspiration to control it is unacceptable	13.5	50.5	23.6	11.2	1.2
Criticism of the authorities and freedom of exchange of opinions is my constitutional right, and the adopted laws are unconstitutional	21.1	47.5	23.2	7.5	0.6
The adopted laws are nothing more than a desire to clear the Internet of information waste; I support these initiatives	11.0	54.1	27.4	6.4	1.1
In China, the Internet is regulated by very strict means, but this did not prevent China from becoming the second largest economy in the world	13.7	48.0	20.6	15.7	2.0
Laws in Russia are applied selectively, so there will be no serious consequences	23.3	48.8	23.3	1.2	3.5
The Internet is technically impossible to control, so these laws will not work	14.1	46.9	25.5	12.0	1.6
Source: Author					

Finally, an analysis of the links between this value and attitudes towards politicians shows that the degree of politicization of respondents who are concerned about the authorities' desire to control the Internet practically does not differ from that of those who try to legitimize adopted laws in one way or another. In particular, among those who emphasize the informational value of the Internet, about a third (33.8%) are sympathetic to V.V. Putin. It is clear that the share of sympathizers of the President of the Russian Federation is much higher in the group of respondents trying to legitimize the measures taken to control the Internet (up to 64.4% in the position "The Internet needs to be cleaned of information garbage"), but there is also a high percentage of such sympathizers among those who defend the freedom of the Internet and are also very symptomatic. The second point that attracts attention is the rather high rating of R.A. Kadyrov. And here it is extremely important that the highest level of antipathy towards R.A. Kadyrov (36.0%) is expressed precisely by those respondents who see the restrictions on the Internet as a violation of their constitutional rights. As well as the political "omnivorousness" of supporters of the informational significance of the Internet, who express

approximately the same sympathies / antipathies as towards V.V. Putin and R.A. Kadyrov, given that the former sees the Internet as a “project of Western special services”, while the latter has introduced total censorship of the Internet in Chechnya, and any criticism of the authorities can have very sad consequences in the republic. Thus, the “technological” attitude to the Internet as a medium of information, and not as a value of freedom of speech, makes the very concept of “information” very plastic and politically tolerant. In general, the dominant attitude towards the leading politicians of modern Russia is indifference. And against this background, even respondents who are highly critical of the authorities express their sympathy to V.V. Putin. In this case, the well-known formula plays in favor of the current Russian president: “If not Putin, then who?” (Table 3).

It is also characteristic that among the apologists for the value of the Internet, the greatest level of sympathy for the current President of the Russian Federation is experienced by conformists who do not want to go into conflict with the authorities and risk their careers (41.9%). This explains a lot in the attitudes of the students towards the political processes taking place in Russia. Even at the stage of group interviews that preceded the questionnaire survey, we found that fear is the dominant emotion with regard to politics among students. On the contrary, among the protest-minded youth declaring their readiness to take part in protest actions, the level of antipathy towards all current politicians is much higher.

Table 3: Correlation between anxiety about Internet regulation and attitudes towards politicians

Which of the politicians make you feel...	V.V. Putin			D.A. Medvedev			...	R.A. Kadyrov		
	sympathy	antipathy	no feelings	sympathy	antipathy	no feelings		sympathy	antipathy	no feelings
The Internet is the most important source of information, therefore the authorities' aspiration to control it is unacceptable	33.8	26.8	29.3	17.6	39.7	34.0	...	29.4	28.7	28.3
Criticism of the authorities and freedom of exchange of opinions is my constitutional right, and the adopted laws are unconstitutional	23.5	39.3	25.5	5.7	54.1	31.3	...	21.4	36.0	29.5
The adopted laws are nothing more than a desire to clear the Internet of information waste; I support these initiatives	64.4	5.3	23.5	26.7	25.3	39.5	...	34.9	12.8	32.7
In China, the Internet is regulated by very strict means, but this did not prevent China from becoming the second largest economy in the world	52.0	8.8	32.4	20.6	23.5	48.0	...	41.2	9.8	33.3
Laws in Russia are applied selectively, so there will be no serious consequences	43.0	7.0	43.0	14.0	20.9	57.0	...	32.6	12.8	40.7
The Internet is technically impossible to control, so these laws will not work	35.4	18.2	35.9	10.4	30.2	51.0	...	19.3	22.4	42.7

Source: Author

Conclusion

Taken together, this means that the correlation between interest in politics and anxiety about the encroachments on the political value of Internet freedom, if any, is unstable. Therefore, it is hardly justified to consider the freedom of the Internet as a political value. In the opinion of the respondents, this is more a communication technology than a value. However, this does not mean that attacks on the Internet will remain unanswered. On the contrary, the communicative value of the Internet lies at a much deeper level of the cognitive structures of student consciousness than traditional political values. The value of Internet freedom turns out to be one of the most basic values for today's youth, comparable to fundamental values such as social connections, recognition, identity, etc.

Acknowledgements

The study was performed with the financial support of Russian Foundation for basic research under the scientific project No. 18-011-00906 a.

References

- Converse, P. E. (2006). The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics. *Critical Review: A Journal of Politics and Society*, 18 (1-3), 1-74.
- Freeden, M. (2006). *Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Approach*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Jameson, F. (2002). *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. London & New York: Routledge Classics.
- Konstantinov, M. S. (2018). Cognitive-ideological Matrices. *Politika razvitija, gosudarstvo i mirovoj porjadok: Materialy VIII Vserossijskogo kongressa politologov, Moskva, 6-8 dekabnja 2018 g. [Development policy, state and world order: Proceedings of the VIII All-Russian Congress of Political Scientists, Moscow, December 6-8, 2018]*. Moscow: Aspect Press, 270.
- Laclau, E. & Mouffe Ch. (1985). *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. London: Verso.
- Lukichev, P. N., Potseluev, S. P., Konstantinov, M. S. (2019). Language, Religion and Civic Identity. *The European Proceedings of Social and Behavioural Sciences*, LVIII, 514-528, doi: 10.15405/epsbs.2019.03.02.59.
- Potseluev, S. P., Konstantinov, M. S., Lukichev, P. N., Vnukova, L. B., Nikolaev, I. V., Tupaev, A. V. (2016). *Igry na ideologicheskoy periferii. Pravoradikal'nye ustanovki studencheskoj molodezhi Rostovskoj oblasti [Games on the ideological periphery. Right-wing radical attitudes of student youth of the Rostov region]*. Rostov-on-Don (Russia): YuNC RAN.
- Potseluev, S. P., Konstantinov, M. S., Podshibyakina, T. A. (2020). Flickering Concepts of Cognitive-Ideological Matrices. *Gênero & Direito*, 9(2), 807-826.
- Žižek, S. (1989). *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. London: Verso Books.