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Digital trend in the development of communication between Russia's authorities and population*

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Abstract. In the contemporary information society, the state not only strives for but is often forced to develop a dialogue with citizens in the online space — on websites, portals, apps and social networks that have become an integral part of our everyday life. Personal appeals to officials have become online — instead of spending hours in state institutions, we quickly fill out special forms in electronic "reception rooms", which gives rise to new forms of dialogue between government bodies and citizens, contributing to the development and improvement of communication channels of interested parties at all levels of social management. Special services and apps allow us to receive government services remotely, ask questions to government representatives, leave complaints, vote for proposed solutions, etc. Within the Russian e-government model, a transition to an open state

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model is underway to develop trusting relations between the government and society, but rapid technological innovations also have a downside: the growth of digital inequality, technical failures, a noticeable gap between regions in the level of provided government services. The state aims at implementing large-scale digitalization projects that will not only improve the quality of life and availability of public services but also develop a dialogue with the population. Therefore, on the one hand, the state needs to identify requests and real communicative and technological capabilities of citizens; on the other hand, citizens needs effective forms of interaction with the state; in both cases, sociological methods (mass surveys, focus groups, content analysis of the media) are in demand, taking into account the pace of communicative and technological processes in different regions and at different levels of government. The article outlines the main aspects (communicative, technical and social) of the sociological analysis of current trends in the digitalization of dialogue between the population and the state in the contemporary Russian society.

Key words: social communication; sociological approach; population; authorities; state; digitalization; information society; electronic services

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The sociological approach to the study of communication focuses on its social dimension, i.e., the exchange of information and opinions in different situations and at different levels to develop and maintain social relations and structures. Each sphere of life (work, education, politics, etc.) has communicative peculiarities [60], but the social dimension includes all types of communication in the given social environment (to establish contacts, to form connections, to resolve conflicts, etc.). Therefore, the functions of social communication are as follows: information (to obtain information about realities and other people, to understand correctly their opinions and ideas); regulatory (to regulate interaction and people's behavior in different situations in order to identify the boundaries and norms of socially acceptable behavior); affective (to express emotions and feelings, to understand the emotional state of other people); motivational (to stimulate and motivate

certain actions); expressive (to express one's individuality, identity, interests and preferences); reflexive (to analyze and be aware of one's thoughts and actions, to take into account the experience of other people). Social communication has a number of features that distinguish it from other types of communication: diversity of forms (oral and written, verbal and non-verbal); complexity (linguistic, social-cultural, psychological and other aspects); reciprocity (a two-way process, each participant plays a certain role); uncertainty (depends on many factors — personal features, emotional state, etc.); contextuality (cultural, social, political, economic and other external factors); symbolism (linguistic, iconic, graphic and other symbols convey information and create meanings).

Although communication is a part of all spheres of our life, there are differences in its functioning. For instance, political communication aims at influencing the opinion and behavior of people to ensure the achievement of political goals, is based on the interaction of political leaders/groups and organizations with population, has some specific features (special terms and concepts related to politics, technologies for dissemination, etc.). In other words, political communication pursues special goals, applies special methods to achieve them, uses special forms of dissemination and patterns of interaction, and each society has specific cultural and historical factors that determine the nature and content of political communication as a tool for expressing interests of different social groups. Contemporary technologies (Internet, social networks and mobile devices) have changed political communication, providing new opportunities for interaction between its participants to form, support, change or destroy political values, attitudes and beliefs [22].

The main function of political communication is to ensure the dissemination of political information (publication of government decisions, informing about government policies and political events in the media and public channels [6]) in the social system (political figures and parties, public organizations and government institutions [25; 29; 31]). Functions (information,

legitimizing, regulatory, integrative, control and representative) of political communication are determined by its channels — the media (TV, press, Internet and specialized channels) and other structures of communication with the population (for example, public councils), which do not always pursue political goals directly/openly (adopting laws, maintaining political processes and legitimacy of power, affirming values and interests of political groups) [21; 47].

In a broader sense, communication in the political sphere aims at exchanging information to achieve public agreement/consensus [18; 58]. However, research emphases in the study of political communication practices and processes differ: the institutional approach focuses on political institutions and their influence on the political system (its structure and rules of the game [32; 59]); the cultural approach — on cultural values and symbols that influence political processes (within political system and interaction of its participants; for instance, to avoid negative consequences of digitalization and automation, i.e., the fourth industrial revolution [57], active participation of government, corporate leaders and civil society is necessary); the political-science approach — on the interpretation of political processes and institutions through the prism of law and legislation, governance and decision-making (principles and methods, structures and mechanisms [19; 62]).

Traditional definitions of the political [2; 4; 28; 50] reduce it to events, relationships and interactions associated with the struggle for power, its preservation, strengthening and use, or, on the contrary, with the opposition to all of the above (the general interaction of political entities — government agencies, political parties, corporations, political leaders, public organizations — realizing their needs and interests with the help of power), i.e., such definitions do not consider features of the communicative interaction of political entities within the implementation of political norms (such as the publicity of activities, views and values). The sociological approach to communication in the political sphere emphasizes its feedback mechanism as allowing a more complete study of the nature of communication, the place

and role of its participants in the social system [15; 45; 49]. Communication acquires a political character if it has a direct or indirect impact on politics or concerns the sphere of state relations, i.e., political communication is the targeted transmission and selective reception of information, without which it is impossible to form, maintain and develop political processes [12], create, disseminate and circulate political information (data, views and opinions, in official written form of laws, referendums, reforms or unofficially) for the constant exchange of "data", even if such an exchange is situationally determined. The situational nature of political communication is explained by the fact that the political system is both a set of political positions (which can change) and a set of ways to respond to political situations (situations and their number, type and nature can change), given the multiple interests of political subjects. The most important aspect of political communication is the formation and maintenance of stable social representations through the management of information flows in order to ensure, maintain or strengthen legitimacy of the social order.

There are several approaches to the study of political communication, although they all are all based on the concept of function. Thus, the system approach focuses on the functions of communication in the political system, in particular mobilization (to encourage participation in political life), legitimization (to establish and maintain the legitimacy of political power, to present government actions in a positive light and support public trust), socialization (to transfer values, norms and knowledge necessary for political participation and social adaptation) and coordination (to coordinate actions in the political sphere, to ensure cooperation); thereby, not only the content of messages is important but also the means by which they are 'sent' — both influence public consciousness and behavior [30]. The structural-functional approach defines political communication as an integral part of the political system (a structure of interconnected elements with certain functions [35; 42]), which ensures the functioning of its institutions (unification and expression of group political interests, exchange of information between political

institutions [6; 39]). The neo-Marxist approach [33; 54] characterizes political communication as primarily an instrument of ideological control of masses (the media controlled by the ruling elite form and disseminate those ideological, cultural and value concepts that are necessary to maintain the stability of the capitalist system and the loyalty of public opinion). The technological approach examines technological transformations (channels) of political communication, through which certain mass cultural codes and models are generated and disseminated [20]. The communicative approach focuses either on the model of information impact on society (for example, the media influence public consciousness indirectly, through the interpretation of content by opinion leaders who disseminate the interpreted meanings and opinions) or on the aspects of communicative influence and inequality (political power is based not only on physical or economic force but also on control over meanings and symbols [3], i.e., legitimacy of power as administrative control is ensured by communication management [52]).

Thus, digitalization does not change the essence/functionality of political communication but increases its speed and efficiency while maintaining its fundamental characteristics — homogeneity of political information (identical in all communication channels), mobility (ability to quickly spread, availability in different places and forms), sufficient volume (for all participants in the political environment) and focus (one-sided or two-sided, feedback mechanisms, interaction systems) — and the most important functions: transfer of political experience (training in politics, improving the quality of decisions through the exchange of knowledge and experience [34]), political socialization (assimilation of values and skills necessary for participation in political life) and social adaptation of political decisions (control over how society understands and accepts them [16]).

In the sociological perspective, under digitalization the most interesting function is adaptation of political decisions, i.e., finding the right/relevant ways for informing specific people, groups and communities about political decisions. Certainly, this mechanism is used primarily in interactions

between the state and population as the dissemination of socially significant information is one of the most important functions of government agencies. Such messages can be statements of facts that are of interest to the addresser (for example, statistical data on the efficiency of management decisions) or explanations of events (for instance, appropriateness of reforms). As a rule, the initiator of messages (communicator) is a leader (the head of the state or a government agency, a leader "from below") or a political organization (NGO, party); therefore, political communication is often presented as vertical [44] (through the media), but feedback is also necessary as a mechanism for adapting activities of government bodies to the goals, interests and needs of society [24; 38], which ensures a kind of 'dialogue' (through public opinion polls).

There is no point in specifying interpretations of public opinion: whether we are talking about state elites, which to one degree or another rely on some collective non-specific opinion (generalized ideas, social stereotypes, collective representations) [48], a set of issues that concern certain social groups [9] or a critical oppositional agenda formulated by the most active individuals and their associations in the information and political spheres [10; 14]. The main thing is that today political subjects (at least declaratively) recognize that the needs and interests of social groups can be important for public administration; therefore, participation of citizens in political communication became necessary not only to ensure the democratic nature of the social system but also to 'include' in management decisions collective representations, mass expectations and group demands.

The study of the dialogue between the state and population is a topical issue for Russian researchers. Some authors believe that public consciousness is largely structured by the media that forms a system of opinions, attitudes and stereotypes, thus, setting mass reactions, assessments and behavioral models. Other authors argue that political communication creates a social-information space for exchanging political information, structuring political activity and filling it with new meanings and sentiments. Mass

communications have become an integral part of politics, providing indirect forms of interaction between government entities and between the state and civil society. Still other authors use the concept of "modes of interaction between government and population", defining interaction as "a generalized characteristic of the degree of real involvement of public opinion in the political decision-making" [7. P. 60]. On the one hand, power institutions constitute a social role of any phenomenon by its inclusion and definition in the legislative system; on the other hand, in the course of implementing specific political measures, public opinion is to one degree or another allowed/involved in decision-making.

There are different modes of interaction between the authorities and population [7]: suppression of public opinion by government structures (harsh pressure from institutions; public opinion is formal and nominal, with no practical expression); ignorance of public opinion (a kind of removal from power — mass evaluative judgments and volitional manifestations are as if taken out of the political process, do not intersect with the space of public administration); paternalism (elements of democratic representation of interests of different social groups and strata in the structure of power and governance); cooperation (democratic nature of electoral institutions, a wide range of legal guarantees of the efficient public opinion, equality of the authorities and the public in discussions); pressure on government institutions (through a network of institutions for the study and representation of public opinion); dictatorship of public opinion (extreme weakness of all government structures). Based on this typology, it is possible to trace a trend to the transition from the model of ignoring public opinion by the authorities to a dialogical type of their interaction. In other words, in addition to manipulative media tools, discussion platforms for the public and the authorities are formed in the information space together with strategies for government institutions to respond to mass assessments and public recommendations, and this trend intensifies as the scale of digitalization increases, ensuring primarily the openness/publicity of the system of political interaction between the state and society in the interests of social sustainability.

In fact, the information-communication mechanism consisting of four blocks begins to dominate in the political system: receiving and selecting information; its processing and evaluation; making decisions; implementing decisions based on feedback mechanisms [56; 63]. This ensures a continuous exchange of information between individuals and groups at all levels of social governance, which guarantees agreement between those who govern and those who are governed [58]. This exchange is carried out through many communication channels, but in recent decades digital ones have developed most actively — official online feedback formats and informal channels (rumors, jokes, memes, etc.) [5; 40], which reflects the request of the public policy not for unilateral acts of informing but for channels of feedback, i.e., for an almost equal exchange of accurate, complete and verifiable information.

In Russia, during both the Soviet and post-Soviet periods, the nature of communication between the authorities and society did not meet the criteria of partnership/dialogue but represented a monologue of the statecommunicator (laws, decrees, regulations and orders were sent "from above" without any feedback) [15], although open and trusting relationships between the state and society presuppose a constant dialogue. Otherwise, citizens can be drawn into other political mechanisms that share their interests and problems [11] even if purely declaratively (for opposition or fraudulent purposes). In recent years, the unidirectional nature of political communication in Russia has changed — there is a tendency to the development of a two-way dialogue system (albeit still declaratively) primarily due to digitalization. Although the channels of communication between population and government are not always effective (as evidenced, for example, by formal replies to complaints and appeals by numerous "electronic receptions" of official structures), it is wrong to talk about the lack of interest in dialogue on the part of "those in power". Rather there is a need to help government bodies in building effective communication with society, and sociologists can play an important role of a 'link' by studying public opinion and social problems, adapting management decisions to socialcultural realities and assessing the general social-political situation.

Today, the Russian state aims at building a dialogue with its citizens in the media space through its Internet resources and social networks that have become an integral part of the contemporary life (at least in large cities, especially in Moscow). Personal appeals to officials and queues in their reception rooms have gradually become things of the past due to being replaced by communication on online forums and pages of government agencies [41. P. 21]. The Internet is used to develop a dialogue between the state and society at all levels of social management, including regional and local authorities. This dialogue is ensured mainly by the direct participation of citizens in solving social problems in the most important areas (healthcare, education, transport, housing and utilities) through communication channels. Within the Federal Project "Digital Public Administration" of the national program "Digital Economy" such interaction has been developed in the form of services and apps that allow not only to use government services remotely but also to ask questions, leave complaints and vote for proposed solutions [36], which makes state measures and reforms more relevant for population of specific districts and cities. Feedback forms are developed on the websites of government agencies and in government accounts on social networks, special platforms are created to obtain information on issues of social concern (such as electronic portals "Good-Doer", "Active Citizen", etc.).

Let us consider advantages and limitations of online communication between the state and society on the example of a relatively new form of such online interaction in Russia — the remote electronic voting (REV), an experimental (technically) form for expressing citizens' will. This system was implemented in several regions as a supplement to the usual in-person voting (at polling stations with ballot boxes and ballots). The REV was approved by the Federal Law No. 154-FZ of May 23, 2020 "On Amendments to Certain Legislative Acts of the Russian Federation", which defines it as "voting without paper ballots but with special software".

The popularity of the idea of electronic voting is determined by the convenience and simplicity of expressing will, since this format provides citizens with the opportunity to make a choice regardless of location. The relevance of the REV has increased significantly under the coronavirus pandemic — with the widespread forced introduction of online communications, i.e., remote access tools. Under the pandemic, the REV was positioned not only as an interesting innovation but also as a way to ensure voters' safety. In addition to obvious measures to counter the spread of the disease, remote elections simplify electoral procedures and save time [54; 55]: the data obtained is aggregated faster, the number of resources used is reduced, remote settlements and immobile groups are covered, people can vote at any time of the day, etc.

In 2021, the remote form of voting was used in the Kursk, Nizhny Novgorod, Murmansk and Rostov Regions and in the federal cities of Moscow and Sevastopol. At that time more than 2.5 million Russians decided to vote online, two-thirds were residents of Moscow [13. P. 45]. The remote format was most popular among the middle-aged: according to the Russian Ministry of Digital Development, Communications and Mass Media, in the 2021 elections, the overwhelming majority of the remote voting participants (60 %) were aged 35 to 60; every fourtt was 25-35 years old; every tenth was over 60 years, and the share of remote voters under the age of 25 was 7 %. In 2022, the REV was used in seven regions: Kaliningrad, Kaluga, Kursk, Novgorod, Pskov, Tomsk and Yaroslavl Regions, and at the municipal elections in Moscow. According to the Ministry of Digital Development, Communications and Mass Media, more than 86 % of Russians registered in the REV system did vote: 110 thousand voters who applied on the State Services portal were included in the list, and over 95 thousand voted. The new capabilities of the system allowed to conduct voting in different time zones. The "Mobile Voter" system was used — people could vote at a convenient polling station or at their actual location instead of their permanent or temporary registration place.

Certainly, the REV has some advantages over the traditional voting: first, the REV eliminates the need to visit a polling station, which significantly saves time — voting with gadgets takes only a few minutes and can be done at any convenient time, which is especially important for those working and disabled. The second positive factor is territorial: although since 2018 Russians can choose the nearest polling station, the REV does not require a specific place of residence at all. The third factor is the elimination of the influence of third parties on voters and voting results: electronic ballots, unlike paper ones, cannot be distorted or falsified at the stationary polling station. Moreover, the electronic format increases the efficiency of voting, since it is easy to hold elections in hard-to-reach and remote settlements.

The trust of Russians in the electronic voting system has become one of the main reasons for their participation in elections. According to the All-Russian Center for the Study of Public Opinion, in 2020, when choosing between different voting methods, 51 % would prefer the Internet if they had such an opportunity, 46 % — the traditional in-person method of expressing their will, 23 % — electronic voting. The main reason for distrust in the electronic voting system is fear of possible deliberate manipulation and fraud (as 60 % of supporters of the traditional voting believe); less frequently respondents mentioned technical unreliability and the lack of confidence in the secrecy of the vote [43]. According to the data for 2022, 85 % of voters knew about the REV; 51 % had a positive attitude to the Internet voting, 35 % were rather critical, 19 % — indifferent; and there are more supporters of three-day voting than opponents (47 % vs 22 %).

In general, the secrecy of the vote remains one of the main technical and ethical issues for the REV. Electronic elections are inextricably linked with the use of online technologies, so there is a high probability of violating the principle of secret voting due to technical failures or cyber-attacks [13. P. 48]. There is also the question of the legitimacy of voting results: during the REV, voters cannot be as sure that their online vote was accepted as when personally casting a paper ballot into a ballot box. Thus, to maintain social-political stability and increase the efficiency of the political system the state needs to ensure information openness, data security and effective feedback;

otherwise, the national-scale REV may exacerbate negative social sentiments and increase social mistrust in government agencies.

One of the sources of social tension is the closed access to the REV: today only residents of certain subjects of the Russian Federation can participate in it; the factor of technical capabilities (gadgets, Internet connection) remains crucial; and such an 'exclusive' nature of remote voting may lead to a decrease in social interest in it. Openness and accessibility are important features of interaction between the state and population, and in relation to remote voting special attention should be paid to external and internal factors. The development of a technically innovative method for expressing will without creating equal conditions and guarantees for participation in it may affect civil initiative, causing a feeling of electoral discrimination and distrust in the electoral system [27. P. 32]. Moreover, technological shortcomings significantly undermine the reliability of this form of interaction between the state and society — a skeptical attitude to the electoral system is aggravated by distrust in electronic technologies.

Today there are two possible solutions [37; 51]: first, the rejection of the electronic voting system in favor of traditional electoral mechanisms. Although the REV is used only in some countries (for example, in Estonia, Switzerland, Great Britain — as an additional stage of elections [54. P. 30]), online electoral democracy seems to be an integral part of our future. States create electronic governments and develop online dialogue with citizens, scientific-technological progress determines inevitability of widespread online systems, and electronic voting becomes convenient and accessible. In addition, the Internet turns into a popular platform for civil activity, so remote voting will also affect the desire to participate in elections. However, the REV should become not just additional but special form of voting — a new branch of interaction with the electorate. Since the fundamental rejection of electronic voting does not seem to be a successful solution, it is better to focus on the second path — increase public awareness and explain advantages of the new voting system (as simple, convenient and time saving).

Despite positive trends in ensuring a trusting and accessible dialogue between the state and population, there are serious limitations in online political communication due to technical problems (connection to the Internet and online platforms), insufficient information support (low awareness of interaction mechanisms), low efficiency (ignorance of proposals and appeals), etc. Therefore, regular monitoring of the general satisfaction with online interaction with the government agencies and of the popularity of platforms created for open dialogue is necessary to adapt communication forms to new social challenges and demands. The efficiency of such monitoring can be achieved by a combination of the following methods:

- online [4] and offline [46] public opinion polls (including focus groups [23; 61]);
- analysis of the state communication strategies; for instance, the regional feedback system acquired a national character due to the "Regional Control Centers" (RCC) acting as a link between citizens and the state; according to the Decree of the Russian Government of November 16, 2020 No. 1844, the RCC "coordinate the monitoring and processing of all types of appeals and messages received by government bodies and organizations... and published by citizens and legal entities in a publicly available form on social networks, messengers, and other means of electronic mass communication";
- analysis of the work of digital feedback platforms (like "State Servies, Let's Decide Together") and 'open government' (mandatory official pages of government bodies on social networks with up-to-date information about their activities [17. P. 256]);

assessment of technical capabilities of communication between the state and society: for instance, the so-called 'platform studies' focus on how digital network platforms create conditions for combining the concepts of egovernment and e-democracy, promote civil participation in state affairs and improve the quality of public services; in Russia, the use of government services is monitored annually by the Ministry of Digital Development, Communications and Mass Media, but there are also regional studies of portals' accessibility [26]; usability testing is gradually introduced —

users independently master the use of platforms and describe their experience, i.e., interesting interaction situations are modeled in a kind of "laboratory" conditions.

Thus, today online political communication gradually turns into a multistage system — with different functional capabilities, rules and forms of service provision. To assess the efficiency of government interaction with society on the Internet, we need to study not only technical capabilities and availability of information but also the society's satisfaction with its dialogue with the authorities. In Russia, the autonomous non-commercial organization "Dialogue" compiles rankings of federal government bodies based on their work on the Internet in three main areas: official social networks (work with comments, content quality and audience involvement), media projects (with resources of external partners and in collaboration with them), content planning (depth and quality of content plans). Based on the assessment results, development strategies indicating strengths and weaknesses are provided to the government bodies.

However, the dialogue between the state and population cannot be described by a few parameters or by the level of trust in government bodies — we need a set of indicators describing conditions of interaction (types and forms), methods (channels) and structure of communication (including results). When developing a research program, it is necessary to first identify the type of platforms under study, possible requests to government bodies on a given platform, communication methods and opportunities provided. To assess the efficiency of the dialogue between the authorities and population, the following empirical indicators can be used: accessibility — how accessible government bodies are for communication, whether there are online communication mechanisms; convenience to what extent online platforms of government bodies are adapted to the needs and capabilities of population; simplicity/understandability — whether any person can send an electronic request; publicity — information about management decisions in the public domain, free access to data on the work of government and regional/municipal bodies; productivity — how effective the dialogue is in terms of achieving goals (sending a message and receiving feedback); demand — how popular the mechanisms of online interaction with government agencies are, to what extent the interests of all segments of population are taken into account.

Since the state transfers communications with population to the online space, we need to study such online interaction to adapt government decisions and management mechanisms to the specifics of the Internet. Continuous monitoring of the results of the state programs aimed at creating a digital management environment is an important part of reports of senior officials and technical specialists, but this is not enough. The sociological approach is also needed to assess the trajectories of dialogue development and the efficiency of government communications with population, to track its perception of the dialogue with the authorities (for instance, whether technical limitations cause mistrust in online communications, what the main problems of communication channels are and how they should change, etc.). The role of the sociologist in the study of the dialogue between society and government structures is much more than just analytical and connecting — it is also creative, predictive and transformative.

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Цифровой вектор развития коммуникации между властью и населением в современном российском обществе*

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Аннотация. В современном информационном обществе государство не просто стремится, но зачастую вынуждено выстраивать диалог с гражданами в онлайн-пространстве посредством сайтов, порталов, приложений и социальных сетей, которые стали неотьемлемой частью повседневной жизни. Личные обращения к чиновникам переводятся в онлайн-формат — вместо часов ожидания в учреждениях мы быстро заполняем специальные формы в «электронных приемных», что порождает новые формы диалога между органами власти и населением, способствуя развитию и совершенствованию каналов коммуникации заинтересованных субъектов на всех уровнях социального управления. Специальные сервисы и приложения позволяют получать государственные услуги в удаленном режиме, задавать вопросы представителям власти, оставлять жалобы, голосовать за предлагаемые решения и т.д. В рамках российского электронного правительства осуществляется переход к модели открытого государства, призванный развивать доверительные отношения власти и общества, однако у быстрых технологических новшеств есть и оборотная сторона: рост цифрового неравенства, технические сбои, заметный отрыв ряда регионов по уровню внедрения государственных услуг (прежде всего, городов-миллионников, особенно Москвы). Государство нацелено на реализацию масштабных проектов цифровизации, которые позволят не только повысить качество жизни и доступность государственных услуг, но и развивать диалог с населением, поэтому, с одной стороны, государству необходимо выявлять актуальные запросы и реальные коммуникативно-технологические возможности населения; с другой стороны, и оно нуждается в эффективных формах взаимодействия с государственным аппаратом; причем в обоих случаях востребованы социологические методики (массовые опросы, фокус-группы, контент-анализ медиасреды), учитывающие темпы развития коммуникативнотехнологических процессов в разных регионах и на разных уровнях государственной власти. В статье обозначены основные аспекты (коммуникативный, технический и социальный) социологического анализа нынешних тенденций цифровизации диалога населения с государством в современном российском обществе.

Ключевые слова: социальная коммуникация; социологический подход; население; органы власти; государство; цифровизация; информационное общество; электронные услуги

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