

**PERAET 2021****International Scientific Conference «PERISHABLE AND ETERNAL: Mythologies and Social Technologies of Digital Civilization-2021»****DIGITAL AGENDA AT THE MUNICIPAL LEVEL  
IN RUSSIA: STUDY OF OFFICIAL DISCOURSE**

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**Abstract**

Within the framework of the study of the digital agenda, the most relevant issue is the question touching the people that shape this agenda. Is it true that politicians, including mayors, are the starting point in the political process that sets the vector for the development of the political agenda in the digital space? To what extent do municipal and regional politicians shape or reflect the digital agenda? What is included in this agenda? What is the reaction of users / residents of the city to this agenda as an official discourse produced by the heads of cities? To find answers to these questions, we conducted a study of the digital agenda. through network analysis, content analysis, visual analysis and linguistic and discursive analysis of the official accounts of the mayors of Russian cities. The selection of mayors was carried out on the basis of the Medialogia rating for 2020: A. Lokot, Mayor of Novosibirsk, N. Kotova, Mayor of Chelyabinsk, I. Khadzhimuradov, Mayor of Grozny, Y. Rokotyanskaya, Mayor of Ryazan. The empirical base was compiled by the method of continuous sampling of posts, hashtags, photos and videos as well as all comments under the specified posts of the official accounts of Instagram, VKontakte, Facebook, Twitter and Odnoklassniki for the period October 1, 2020 – December 31, 2020. The main conclusions obtained during the study of the discursive topics of the analyzed accounts, the visual component and comments as a reaction of users to the digital agenda and official discourse are presented.

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## 1. Introduction

In recent years we have seen a strong strengthening of the role of the Internet not only in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic but also in connection with the digitalization of all spheres of human life. This leads to a change in many processes taking place in the modern media sphere which results in a change in the formation of the political agenda, and the digital agenda, in particular. There is a parallel formation of information flows from new media, political actors, bloggers, members of the public which leads to a modification of the role of traditional media in shaping the political agenda. Now we are increasingly seeing the emergence of new actors and tools capable of broadcasting the most relevant topics thereby shaping the current digital agenda in the online space (Schwanholz & Jakobi, 2020).

The agenda is of the greatest interest because it is of great importance for a fairly wide group of people and sometimes for entire states. It includes a number of issues ranging from global and ending with local or municipal. It is important to note that the agenda is not uniform and complete for every society, city or country; it is always dependent on many factors. Therefore, the agenda is a certain phenomenon which despite the fact that it is limited by the institutional environment of formation still covers the most pressing topics of a wide range of people. Based on this, we see that the modern digital agenda is a reflection of the modern world that exists in the institutional field determined by the sphere of politics (Hösl, 2019).

Any relevant information from the spheres of economics, sociology, culture, etc. can become political within the framework of the modern agenda. Most often, this mechanism is used to solve certain problems, giving them political status, through political measures since others are less effective. It is also important that a formed agenda with a political aspect usually claims to be an effective management tool.

Speaking about the political agenda, one cannot but mention the online space capable of shaping the digital agenda which seems to be the most relevant in modern society. Currently, the online space represents a field of political practices that expands the traditional view of public politic, including new structural elements and political practices (Ryabchenko et al., 2019).

Citizens' interest in public politics in the online space depends on the motivation for participation in political life in general. So, for example, during protest activities in many countries with different levels of well-being, there is an increased interest in using digital space as a field of public policy capable of showing the most pressing and significant problems (Katermina et al., 2020).

The relevance of this study lies in the fact that in modern society digital agenda acts as a separate actor in the political process capable of shaping various moods of society and setting trends. The study of the official discourse will reveal the relationship between the formation and reflection of agendas by the mayors of cities in modern Russia.

## 2. Problem Statement

The transformation of the modern political sphere and the growing importance of digital agenda are taking place including many factors; the most important in our opinion are the following three.

Firstly, control over information flows and information space begins to act as the main resource. As practice shows, it is those who have a wide information resource are opinion leaders: they have an

opportunity to independently formulate the agenda taking into account their subjective point of view while beginning to have power over those who consume this information. Communication on the Internet allows opinion leaders to choose the formats of interaction with the audience, its volume, types of content and frequency of publications. This naturally determines the magnitude of the influence of this or that political actor. Within the framework of such communication, subjects of influence have much more opportunities to manipulate public opinion (Ladner et al., 2019; The age of perplexity: rethinking the world we knew, 2018).

Secondly, in the modern political and administrative field, the level of implementation of modern technologies in the political process has grown. This happens at various levels ranging from the creation of various kinds of sites and platforms that allow citizens to communicate with the authorities and individual political actors in real time and ending with the sequential formation of the image-enhancing activities of individual subjects within the framework of personal political blogs in various social media, taking into account diverse focus groups. In our opinion, this is a positive trend which shows that opinion leaders care not only about their trust rating published in the media but also try to get as close as possible to the audience within the online space using various communication methods including personal blogs (Lacatus, 2020).

Thirdly, a tendency has emerged that in countries and regions with a high number of Internet users, the level of demands on the authorities is increasing. The electorate wants to see more transparency and openness from the subjects of politics, thereby speaking of the possibility of increasing the level of trust as a consequence of rapprochement with the authorities. The result of this interaction is an intensive shift from traditional media such as newspapers, magazines, television and radio to more modern Internet resources. Here, both positive and negative consequences can be noted. Political subjects more open to their audience appear and by their direct communication they are able to win a large number of audiences and stimulate them to take all sorts of actions. Despite the fact that the authorities are getting much closer to their voters they are forced to constantly transform their methods of interaction since the official pages of the authorities on the Internet are more likely an administrative information resource than a high-quality and understandable platform for interaction (Kuznetsov, 2020).

It should be noted that in 2020 the role of the Internet has increased significantly. The global pandemic has made additional adjustments to the way people live. All reality has moved to the online space. If earlier people used to communicate with friends, watch videos and exchange photos, since 2020 we spend maximum time on the Internet. All working meetings, studying at schools and universities, parties with friends, online cinemas – all this speaks of the growing role of the Internet. The Internet in 2020 – 2021 plays a dominant role in many social, political and economic processes.

### **3. Research Questions**

The main research task was to find answers to the question: how by means of the study of official discourse we can determine the points of fractures and intersections between the digital agenda broadcast by mayors and the expectations of the population reflected in the comments under their posts on social networks.

#### 4. Purpose of the Study

According to the dictionary of modern English, an “agenda” is a list of topics to be discussed; a set of measures that need to be taken (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, 2011). Moving on to a theoretical study of the political agenda, we should note that it is viewed as a set of goals of an ideological group or a topic discussed by the authorities (Agenda-setting theory, 2021). It is important to note that in most cases it is the power, most often the executive one, that is to be regarded as the subject that forms political power. In turn, parties, various NGOs, media and bloggers are able to influence the process of forming the agenda which is what happens in a modern post-information society. Agenda setting was reviewed by McCombs and Shaw (2006). The researchers have formulated three kinds of agenda. Firstly, personal – a system of priorities in relation to the most important social and political problems for the individual himself. Secondly, interpersonal – a system of priorities in relation to problems that an individual discusses with members of his microgroup. Thirdly, social – the individual's ideas about what problems are most important for the society to which he belongs (McCombs & Shaw, 2006).

The agenda appears at the intersection of the efforts of various media, the state and other socio-political institutions and groups of influence while it is subject to the influence of uncontrollable events and sudden crises (Luo et al., 2019). Also, the agenda is a set of urgent social problems that reflect the needs of society or individual interest groups to which politicians and administrators are able to respond. Anderson (2003) argues that the political agenda is formed from the requirements that politicians personally choose feeling that the time has come to react to them, or at least create the appearance of such a reaction.

The second theoretical and methodological basis was the prism of the discourse analysis of the digital agenda. Van Dijk (2006) defines discourse as a complex communicative event, which can be both written and oral containing verbal and non-verbal components. In a narrow sense, discourse is a text or conversation, that is, a verbal product of a communicative action. Based on this, discourse is understood as: a specific conversation: the use of the concept of discourse always refers to some specific objects in a specific setting and in a specific context; the type of conversation, that is, the type of verbal production; genre, for example, “news discourse”, “political discourse”; social formation, when the concept of discourse refers to a certain historical era, social community or culture (Van Dijk, 2006).

The third approach was the network one. Recently, the online space is increasingly influencing the agenda, network resources have greater potential than the traditional political space and are ready to meet the needs of citizens faster (Ryabchenko & Malysheva, 2020). There are several reasons for this phenomenon. Firstly, at present, the most active part of the population interested in politics interacts with the Internet one way or another. Based on this, we observe a tendency that representatives of the most active part of citizens can influence the processes taking place in the offline space. This process occurs because the user can simply make a comment or repost of the post popularizing any “political” opinion. Secondly, content and events from the Internet are beginning to increasingly influence traditional media. The latter, in turn, are forced to adapt to the work of the online space able to put forward the most urgent agenda faster. Thirdly, the online space provides a wide range of opportunities for interactive communication between users. They have an opportunity to discuss issues in real time regardless of

location and time of day. The consequence of this is a more trusting level of relations between the average user who is interested in politics and the actor of public policy (political parties, opinion leaders, online media bloggers, etc.). This communication certainly has both positive and destructive effects (Rosenblatt, 2020).

## **5. Research Methods**

The study of the digital agenda was carried out by means of network analysis, content analysis, visual analysis and linguistic and discursive analysis of the official accounts of the mayors of Russian cities. We considered these accounts as an official discourse that creates and at the same time reflects the digital agenda. The sample of mayors was based on the Medialogiya ranking for 2020 (Medialogiya, 2021). Among the mayors selected for analysis in the context of the study, politicians that belong not only to different genders, but also to different constituent entities of the Russian Federation, age categories, popularity in social networks and positions in the overall rating for all cities were selected. The empirical base was compiled by a continuous sample of posts, hashtags, photos and videos as well as all comments under the specified posts of the official accounts of Instagram, VKontakte, Facebook, Twitter and Odnoklassniki for the period October 1, 2020 – December 31, 2020.

The posts were duplicated in all 5 social networks for all heads of cities. As a result, we selected four mayors, two women and two men:

- Anatoly Lokot – Mayor of Novosibirsk, 4th place in the Medialogia ranking, Instagram ([https://www.instagram.com/a\\_lokot/](https://www.instagram.com/a_lokot/)), VKontakte ([https://vk.com/a\\_lokot](https://vk.com/a_lokot)), Odnoklassniki (<https://ok.ru/anatoly.lokot>) and Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/Anatoly.Lokot>): 158 posts, 286 photos and over 4000 comments;

- Natalya Kotova - Mayor of Chelyabinsk, 5th place in the Medialogia ranking, Instagram (<https://vk.com/id576287930>) and VKontakte (<https://www.instagram.com/natalyakotova.official/?hl=ru>): 14 posts, 90 photos and more than 1500 comments;

- Isa Khadzhimuradov - mayor of Grozny, 79th place in the Medialogia ranking, Instagram (<https://www.instagram.com/isa.patriot/?hl=ru>): 196 posts, 223 photos and about 10,300 comments.

- Yulia Rokotyanskaya - Mayor of Ryazan, 96th place in the Medialogia ranking, VKontakte (<https://vk.com/y.rokotyanskaya>), Instagram ([https://www.instagram.com/rokotyanskaya\\_julia/?hl=ru](https://www.instagram.com/rokotyanskaya_julia/?hl=ru)) and Facebook

(<https://m.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100006614981411&refsrc=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.facebook.com%2Fprofile.php>): 186 posts, 510 photos and more than 250 comments.

## **6. Findings**

Discursive topics of posts:

- A. Lokot is an active user of social networks, he regularly posts on various topics in 4 social networks. The posts on construction topics followed by social issues predominate; the least number of posts are associated with congratulations on the holidays. Spheres such as politics and economics are

almost not popular in his accounts. The mayor pays little attention to the topic of the coronavirus. The mayor duplicates most of his posts, however, he publishes more information on Odnoklassniki. This may indicate the predominance of the older category of citizens among the electorate of the politician;

- N. Kotova is known by posts on the social sphere, the development of urban infrastructure as well as congratulations on the holidays. A special feature is that during the chosen period, the mayor has never covered the topics of coronavirus, leisure and economy;

- I. Khadzhimuradov maintains only an Instagram account and most often, instead of photos for posts, he makes lifestyle videos in which the mayor walks around the city (or morning runs), answers subscribers' questions, talks about the city and shares his impressions of the events. On the 2nd place are posts with congratulations. The least attention is paid to the issues of infrastructure, economics and health care. The account of this mayor is closest to a personal blog due to lifestyle content.

- the largest number of posts in the accounts of Y.Rokotyanskaya is devoted to congratulations on various holidays (both state and professional, and anniversaries of residents, political parties and the university). The Mayor of Ryazan is on the 2nd place for posts about the economy (improvement of the city, the city budget, tax control) and the social sphere (assistance to victims and large families); on the 3rd place is the topic of coronavirus (meeting with volunteers, helping doctors and patients, preventing the spread of infection).

Visual component:

- A. Lokot is most often presented against the background of urban objects (existing and under construction institutions, kindergartens, gymnasiums, parks); a special place is occupied by photographs from the matches of the Novosibirsk hockey team "Siberia" surrounded by fans; photos from the city's festive events (Teacher's Day and Mother's Day); coronavirus topics (medical centers, anti-virus exhibition);

- in photographs for N. Kotova's posts, he is most often located against the background of urban objects (social buildings (schools, hospitals), parks, embankments, opening of new urban objects); in group photos, always in the foreground, surrounded by colleagues or city dwellers (doctors, athletes, families and children);

- many photographs and videos of I.Khadzhimuradov are taken with the front camera of a smartphone: most often the mayor himself is in close-up on the move surrounded by residents or with famous persons. This format of interaction erases the line separating the authorities from the residents of Grozny;

- the vast majority of photographs by Y.Rokotyanskaya show her surrounded by city dwellers (festive events); on the second place there are meetings and working sessions in the administration (business events); the topic of coronavirus (surrounded by medical workers) and assistance to socially unprotected segments of the population

The analysis of comments:

- feedback to A. Lokot: about 2500 comments out of 4000 are devoted to criticism of the mayor's activities in the field of construction and reconstruction of city objects and roads, problems with heating and hot water in apartments. The social sphere is on the second place in discussion, 1200 comments: 60% of positive markers (thanks to the mayor for the new city objects), 20 neutral (good city) and 20%

negative (garbage on the city streets). About 300 comments are related to the coronavirus: 80% of them are characterized by negative markers (mayor without a mask, lack of drugs in pharmacies and medical institutions);

- feedback to N. Kotova: urban infrastructure is most actively commented on by subscribers. Approximately 600 comments out of 1,500 comments are devoted to this topic: 70% of them are strongly negative in nature (negative markers are associated with road problems, footpaths, green areas and fences); 30% of comments are positive (mostly thanks of users to the mayor for the work) and neutral (users impersonally note the beauty and improvements in the city). The social sphere is on the second place in terms of the thematic popularity of comments – 500 comments: 80% of them are characterized by positive markers and 20% by negative markers. About 200 comments are related to the topic of coronavirus: 50% of them are related to criticism of the mayor not wearing a medical mask at public events and 50% are neutral and related to questions about the mask regime in the city. Despite the fact that accounts are completely duplicated in two social networks, we note that the audience on Instagram is more positively disposed, while on VKontakte there are comments with obscene language and insults to the entire administration of the city of Chelyabinsk;

- in the comments to the posts of I. Khadzhimuradov, regional specificity is clearly expressed – the use of the Chechen language. 95% of comments carry positive markers, including congratulations, words of gratitude to the mayor for the work as well as graphic illustrations in the form of “smiles”;

- there are far fewer comments to the posts of Y. Rokotyanskaya: 70% of all comments are characterized by positive markers and are associated with reciprocal congratulations on the holidays and praise for the mayor's work. 20% constitutes negative comments, markers of which are aimed at dissatisfaction with the fact that the mayor is in the photographs without a mask and the there are emergency buildings in the city. 10% of neutral markers are related to stories of city residents and are not directed to the mayor. The work of the editors with comments is very noticeable.

## **7. Conclusion**

The mayors of the selected Russian cities interpret and broadcast the agenda in completely different ways. Not only do they report on their own work and activities within the framework of joint activities with the city administration but they also publish various photo and video content about the events of the city taking place in real time. Speaking about the distinctive characteristics of the accounts, we have noted that within the framework of the discursive component, the posts of mayors are completely diverse and take into account local and regional specifics. Of the general features we can mention that mayors write about the construction of roads, buildings and structures, about the reconstruction of parks and squares, as well as about the social sphere, including publications about schools, kindergartens and many other social facilities. We should also pay attention to the fact that the topic of coronavirus is the most relevant in 2020-2021, but the analysis showed that all the city heads under study paid little attention to coverage of topics related to the pandemic. In many photos, politicians are surrounded by people without personal protective equipment which leads to a large number of comments under the corresponding posts with negative markers.

The main conclusion of our study is that there is a parallel process of shaping the digital agenda within which the authorities, including mayors, not only form the political agenda but also reflect in their official accounts the public discourse set by other people: users / residents of the city and other politicians of the local level. Thus, mayors need to more carefully consider issues that are relevant among the population of their cities since most people in the online space can listen to opinion leaders who are able to broadcast information that will not always satisfy the position of the politician himself.

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