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**INTERNET AS A FACTOR OF NEGATIVE POLITICAL  
IDENTITY OF STUDENTS**

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**Abstract**

The article presents some of the results of a serial sociological study of student consciousness in the South of Russia, conducted at the universities of the Rostov region by the research team of the Southern Federal University in 2015, 2019 and 2021. Methodologically, the study included a series of free group interviews, questionnaires and focus groups. The analysis of the data obtained allows drawing conclusions about a significant shift in the sentiments of student youth towards greater opposition to the current government, as well as that the most irritating factor is the desire of the political elite to control the Internet. The reason for this irritation is the fact established because of the analysis: the communicative value of the Internet for student youth is at a much deeper level of the cognitive structures of consciousness than traditional political values. If the older generation perceives the Internet as one of the communication technologies, then for young people the Internet is becoming one of the most significant factors of political self-identification. Accordingly, the value of Internet freedom turns out to be one of the most basic for modern youth, comparable to such fundamental values as social connections, recognition, identity, etc. Moreover, the technology of Internet communication itself becomes a factor in the negative self-identification of student youth in relation to the current government, and in relation to Russian society.

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## 1. Introduction

One of the main problems in the study of political ideologies is mobility, polysemy, and “elusiveness” by means of traditional sociological tools of all the cognitive nuances of the interpretation by the public consciousness of basic and related ideological concepts, the meanings of which vary significantly depending on their peripheral environment (Freeden, 2006). A specific sociological study held in 2014-2016, devoted to the analysis of right-wing radical ideologemes in the minds of student youth in the Rostov region (Potseluev et al., 2016) revealed several important trends:

- ideologically, student consciousness includes contradictory elements that do not manifest themselves in a deactivated state;

- the apparent inconsistency of student consciousness is generated by the difference in interpretations of basic and related concepts of popular ideologies, the youth understanding of which is formed under the influence of current peripheral concepts spread by adherents of extremist ideologies on a network basis (first of all, using the Internet);

- the existing sociological means of monitoring the protest moods of young people are insufficient, since they do not solve the problem of the “spiral of silence” and “falsification of preferences”, and as a result, they represent the extremely distorted and opportunistic (politically correct) formulated by the respondent themselves, and therefore coincides in key moments with the existing social consensus value structure of his consciousness.

## 2. Problem Statement

In its most general form, this can be called the problem of explaining the transition from heterogeneous mass and/or group consciousness to systematized ideologies, and vice versa. The designated problem has repeatedly become the object of study by specialists in the field of political ideologies. Thus, a group of American sociologists led by Philippe Converse back in the middle of the 20th century revealed a discrepancy between the beliefs of the masses and the logically ordered ideological systems of which the intellectual elites are carriers and authors (Converse, 2006). In this regard, we can also mention the concepts of “vague ideologeme” and “floating signifiers”, which were widely used in the studies of the ideology of the second half of the 20th century (Potseluev et al., 2016).

However, until now, a satisfactory solution to this problem has not been found, in connection with which some experts proclaimed the need to restructure the entire field of the study of ideologies (Freeden, 2019), others tried to provide a methodological basis for the study of religions for the study of ideologies (Williams, 2017), and others believe that that ideologies themselves form the axiomatic basis of social representations, which are expressed in discourse, and the property of the latter - in fundamental polysemy (van Dijk & Lazar, 2020), which means recognition of the insurmountable gap between the discursive domain of mass consciousness and systematized ideologies. Finally, recent studies have exacerbated the problem by recording the crisis of ideologies themselves, noting the tendency to erode ideological systems into new formations, which Michael Frieden called “ideolonoids” (Freeden, 2018). In fact, it means recognizing the crisis in this area of research.

### **3. Research Questions**

Thus, one of the main problems in this area of research remains the conceptual plasticity and mobility of political ideologies (Blankenship et al., 2021), their “elusiveness” by traditional means of sociological research (Rice et al., 2020). Studying the mass consciousness, a sociologist discovers “traces” of the influence of various, often mutually exclusive ideologies, and consciousness itself appears in a “torn” form. For this reason, it is extremely difficult to study these concepts by means of social sciences - researchers each time have a feeling of discontinuity and heterogeneity of mass consciousness, the relevance of which to the concepts of “big” ideologies is often questioned. And therefore, the very possibility of studying the representation of systematized ideologies in a heterogeneous mass consciousness and conceptualizing both levels in a single theoretical and methodological model remains one of the main questions.

### **4. Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this work is to test the author’s concept of cognitive-ideological matrices on specific empirical material, which connects the level of formation of proto-ideological elements in the mass consciousness with the level of systematized ideologies.

### **5. Research Methods**

The authors decided to turn to the study of that level of group consciousness at which ideology is still in a latent and amorphous state (Freeden, 2021), in the form of unreflected ideologemes that are practically unrelated to each other to solve the problem described above. At this pre-reflective level of group political consciousness, ideologies are just beginning to form through the crystallization of “vague ideologemes” into ideological concepts (Lukichev et al., 2019). One of the key characteristics of these proto-ideological concepts is their “shimmering” nature: they manifest themselves only in specific socio-political conditions and situations, and their manifestation is very short-lived and excessive (Potseluev et al., 2020). This is the “zero level” of ideology, in which ideological “protoplasm” arises through the formation of a person's inclination to one or another, and more often to several ideologies at once (Potseluev et al., 2020).

In terms of methodology, the study included a series of free group interviews, a questionnaire survey and focus groups. In 2015, the sample consisted of 718 people (350 boys and 368 girls; standard deviation for the whole sample is  $\pm 3.7\%$ ); in 2019 - 816 respondents (435 boys and 381 girls; standard deviation is  $\pm 3.4\%$ ); in 2021 - 785 respondents (457 boys and 328 girls; standard deviation is  $\pm 3,5\%$ ).

### **6. Findings**

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 respondents (60.6%) believed that radical changes in Russia are impossible, then in 2019-21 more than two thirds of respondents expect serious shocks associated with the growth of public discontent (72.8% in 2019 and

64.7% in 2021, respectively). At the same time, the number of young people who believe that revolutionary events like the Ukrainian Maidan are necessary in Russia has grown from 4.6% in 2015 to 12.0% in 2021. Another third (29.3%) in 2021 admit the possibility of such events, but do not consider them useful for the country. Students name socio-economic (42.4%) and internal political (50.0%) among the main reasons for the growing tension in Russian society. These factors, according to respondents, increase the likelihood of a political crisis and mass protests.

Against this background, the lowest level of legitimacy of the authorities was recorded in the student mind in 2021. It is sufficient to mention that 83.0% of respondents expressed sympathy for the current President of the Russian Federation in 2015, and only 21.7% in 2021. This is due to both extremely low assessments of the effectiveness of power (from the highest 36.0% positive assessments of the effectiveness of the President of the Russian Federation to the lowest 17.3% positive assessments of the effectiveness of the State Duma of the Russian Federation), and the growing feeling that things in Russia are going in the wrong direction, that the country was in deep social, economic, and political crises. Even more can be said: students have doubts about the very civilizational choice of Russia, which is manifested in a sharp shift (from 43.0% in 2015 to 20.0% in 2021) in positive assessments of the imperial character of Russian civilization towards greater recognition of the need for Russia to integrate into European civilization (6.4% in 2015 to 19.0% in 2021) or to accept and recognize itself as a third world country (2.8% in 2015 to 18.7% in 2021).

The noted increase in the general feeling of tension cannot be explained by objective crisis trends in Russian society. The fact is that students feel the socio-economic consequences of the crisis very indirectly: with rare exceptions, they are not active agents of economic relations, being dependent on their parents; in addition, students' self-assessment of their own financial situation has remained practically unchanged since 2015. So, 23.5% called their financial situation poor in 2015, 20.0% in 2019, 18.7% in 2021, and 1.3%, 4.8% and 5.1%, respectively. The dynamics over the years barely exceeded the statistical error and could not be the cause of the identified value shifts.

Meanwhile, there have been significant changes in the ideological self-representations of students. From 2015 to 2021, a shift in the reflective youth consciousness towards the left-liberal ideology was recorded. At the same time, ideological self-representation is quite correlated with the values declared by students when answering other questions of the questionnaire. It was not possible to record any "left shift" or "right bias", which many researchers predicted in the situation of the socio-economic crisis. Thus, neither material self-esteem nor the ideological factor can be considered independent variables when explaining the growing irritation and alienation from the authorities in the youth environment.

As a result of the analysis, variables were identified that allow explaining value shifts in youth consciousness. They turned out to be such significant concepts for the student's life world, as freedom of the Internet, independence of thought and action, freedom of movement, human rights (interpreted quite broadly), etc. Group interviews showed that series of laws adopted in Russia on control over the Internet became the key factor of irritation for the students. The questionnaire survey that followed these interviews showed a very high willingness of students to defend Internet freedom even through participation in protests not sanctioned by the authorities (39.7% in 2019). The analysis carried out based on the survey showed that the Internet for students ceases to be a political value, gradually acquiring a

more fundamental character of the communicative value, which is at a much deeper level of the cognitive structures of student consciousness than traditional political values.

In addition, significant changes are taking place in the methods and referents of student self-identification. So, in 2015, among the most significant values, 60.4% of students already chose “universal human values”, but the second and third places were also given to “the traditions of my family” (29.6%) and “my personal values” (27.9%). However, in 2021, in response to a request to rank according to the descending degree of the community “We are ...”, 60.6% of respondents gave first place to “People who share my views on life”; in second place was political identity (28.9% indicated “People close to me in political views”), and in third place - parochial (30.2% chose “Residents of my city”). All-Russian identity was only in the fourth place (31.6%), national, religious, and linguistic - in the fifth, sixth and seventh ranks, respectively. Eighth place was taken by the position "Inhabitants of the Whole Earth", pushing cultural identity to the ninth place. It is extremely curious that only 2.0%, 2.5%, 1.0% and 0.4%, respectively, gave the first place to ethnic, religious, linguistic, and cultural identity! This already suggests that students prefer group identity based on interests to more stable self-identifications based on class, civilizational, cultural, religious, ethnic, and other once dominant characteristics.

This method of identification has already generated several consequences, both already described in the literature, and quite new ones. First, self-identification “by interests” using instant technologies of electronic networks has already led to the emergence of a phenomenon called “scattered” or “floating” identity (Iakovleva et al., 2019; Mitchell, 2003) due to its instability, variability depending on from internet trends and movements. Moreover, the very forms of Internet communication are changing. As it was revealed in focus groups and confirmed with the help of questionnaires, Instagram, Telegram, Tik-Tok and other Internet resources are becoming increasingly important in youth communication and differ from the latter that largely reproduced networks of contacts in the real, physical world (Odnoklassniki, Vkontakte, Facebook, etc.). A feature of “Telegram” and “Tik-Tok” is the dominance of “instant” content, which changes kaleidoscopically in front of the consumer, without tying him to any social groups and their Internet surrogates or analogs.

The blurring of traditional forms of identity was unexpectedly confirmed by a research failure that the authors faced in 2019 and reproduced in 2021. The fact is that the questionnaire contained several questions that “worked” to identify referents of identity through correlation with popular movie heroes, a traditional and usually well-functioning technique for examining the consciousness of past generations. However, for the current generation of young people, this method has turned out to be useless: most respondents preferred the option “Difficult to answer”, even though the list of movie characters was compiled based on preliminary group interviews. But as it turned out, students no longer identify themselves with movie characters, these images are too stable and limited for them. They prefer fleeting identities with popular bloggers and Tiktokers. The most stable self-identification turns out to be “negative” identity, which works not on the principle of identifying oneself with some group, but on the principle of opposing oneself to some generalized “Other” (Gudkov, 2004).

If we take the concept of “negative identity” as a basis for the analysis, which is formed in the process of Internet communication according to the principle of momentary associations “against someone” and not “with someone,” then many of the data obtained in the process of questionnaires

receive their own explanation. For example, the aforementioned preference by the respondents of interest groups on the Internet, with a parallel emerging alienation not only from the authorities, but also from Russian society as a whole, speaks more of a negative attitude towards current Russian reality, a desire to distance from it, an attempt to “emigrate to Internet” from urgent problems that young people are not able to solve. Sufficiently tight correlation links are also found between the growing alienation in the student mind and the declared attitudes towards emigration from Russia (26.7% directly declare such intentions, and another 38.5% say they will look according to the circumstances). However, analysis shows that these attitudes are very vague, they have no specifics. Rather, it is a “look to the side”, the opposite of what appears before the eyes in Russia, an attempt to escape reality on the Internet, where you can easily find like-minded people and momentary comrades.

## 7. Conclusion

The cycle of sociological research carried out was aimed at practical testing and correction based on the obtained empirical material of the author’s concept of cognitive-ideological matrices. In general, the heuristic potential of this concept was confirmed: it not only made it possible to identify the value specifics of Internet communication in the youth environment, but also to determine the features of the negative self-identification of student youth in relation to the authorities and society in Russia.

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