

Conference Paper

Efficiency Analysis of Russian Regional Authorities on Social Networks

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Abstract

Nowadays it is hardly possible to overestimate the role of digital technologies in the work of Russian politicians. One of the effective means that gives new opportunities for modern politicians is social media. The phenomenon of social media has no longer been just entertainment, it has become a powerful tool of influencing public opinion. If used properly social media can help both shape the image of a politician and increase the electorate trust and loyalty. Social networks appear to be the most accessible and popular type of social media for politicians. This article covers the topic of maintaining social network profiles by the heads of several Russian regions, moreover, the authors assess the impact on perception of politicians by the politically active population. To achieve this goal we conducted an analysis of the politician activity on the popular Russian social network VKontakte over a certain period using a special technical tool — a social media multi-factor monitoring and analyzing system developed by Russian company “Kribrum”. It contains various analysis methods, as well as linguo-semantic and psychological behavioral models. It was found that maintaining accounts on social networks contributes to the increase of public confidence in the authorities. However, the potential of this tool is not exploited to the full scale: in some cases, the heads of regions do not pay sufficient attention to maintaining their own pages on the Internet. They cannot cope with technical tools or ignore them, do not work with citizens through social networks, which eventually leads to the lack of credibility. In the modern conditions, with the federal government recognizing the importance of social media and taking into account transparency and public acknowledgement of regional authorities, the tendency towards intensifying work with citizens on virtual networks is likely to increase.

Keywords: digitalization, social networks, credibility of authorities, key performance indicators (KPI)

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1. Introduction

The phenomenon of digital technology ubiquitous spread is widely discussed today in the context of different scientific fields. The sphere of public administration is not an exception, where the word digitalization sounds more often than elsewhere. However,

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this is not only a trend, but also a digitalization of the public administration sphere itself. It turns out that the proper use of digital tools by politicians causes serious difficulties.

We may claim that credibility of the government and the careers of its members depend on successful work with social networks. Their tasks on these platforms may be as follows: to report on the work done, to communicate with the residents of the region, to discuss social and economic issues with citizens. It is no coincidence that one of the performance indicators pointed out in the Decree of the Russian President of 2019 No. 193 “On evaluating the performance of senior officials...” is credibility of the authorities on the Internet [3]. Taking into account the fact that the positions of politicians are elective, one of the primary tasks of a politician is to form a positive image and to gain the trust of the electorate. One of the ways to implement this mission is to use the simplest digital tool — social networks.

The purpose of the article is to define whether social networks as a digital tool are effective for politicians in terms of enhancing credibility of the authorities.

The Spanish sociologist M. Castells is one of the first who described trends of digitalization in a cultural context. He argues that the current period of technology dominance could be called “geographic separation”, in which virtuality impacts on reality rather than reality on virtuality. He calls the relationship of social life and the Internet real virtuality. Networks have individualized the communication of people, made it personal and interactive [1]. G. Jenkins shares this position: he introduced the concept of transmedia technology, which means blurring between reality and virtuality [6].

At the beginning of the XXI century, the American public speaker and educational consultant M. Prensky popularized the theory of a split in society as a result of digital technology spread. The terms “digital natives” and “digital immigrants” were implemented, where the first one are those who grew up in the era of digital technology, and in the latter got acquainted with them being already adult [10].

With the development of digital technology, a new active power elite group has appeared in society, which consisted of ordinary users of digital technology. It has significantly changed the composition of the electorate. Today, the millennials with technology as an inherent part of their life are coming of age. They held already smartphones and tablets in their hands as children and social networks were their main channel of communication as they were teenagers, while YouTube replaced them a TV. Environment of gadgets is normal for them. According to the reports of WeAreSocial and Hootsuite in 2019, there are 5.11 billion unique mobile users in the world, which is 100 million (2%) more than in 2018. 3.48 billion users are registered on social networks. This figure has increased by 288 million (9%) in comparison to the one early last year.

Currently, this active age group of the country's population is becoming a full-fledged participant in political life and is vested with universal suffrage [4].

At the same time, according to Reuter's measurements, the average age of all politicians and officials is 55.5 years [13]. This means that a lot of people in power began to learn the language of numbers being adult, in other words it is not "native" for them. M. Prensky calls them "digital immigrants". He writes that despite the fact that immigrants try to hide their origin, their accent will always give them away, as it is expressed in the inept use of modern technology. The agenda is to mutually inculcate the traditional culture in "digital natives" and modern one in "digital immigrants". In order to maintain credibility on the part of young electorate, politicians should follow trend and not only declare digitalization, but also to be full-fledged participants in this process.

Although the classification of M. Prensky was challenged, and later replaced with the concepts of "digital guest" and "digital resident", they have been relevant for almost twenty years [2]. Efficient use of social networks is one of the indicators that can demonstrate the success of politicians in harnessing the benefits of digitalization.

In November 2018, the Administration of President resumed the idea of introduction of KPI in internal policy. The KPI method is widely applicable in the business environment, although it appears in the assessment of any activities. The introduction of KPI as a kind of "road map" for officials has been on the agenda since 2012. Last time, the initiative was launched by the coordinator of the internal political department S. Kiriyyenko: "the work in accordance with key performance indicators should establish a base of an objective assessment of the activities of the internal policy department".

The initiative of S. Kiriyyenko was reflected in the Decree of the President dated April 25, 2019 No. 193 "On evaluating the performance of the activities of the constituent entities of the Russian Federation senior officials (heads of the highest executive bodies of state power) and the activities of executive bodies of the constituent entities of the Russian Federation" [3]. The first indicator of the effectiveness of politicians pointed out in the decree is the credibility of a politician. We suppose that fulfillment of this indicator is related to the politician activity on the Internet.

This article attempts to assess the use of social networks by several heads of constituent entities of the Russian Federation and the impact of this activity on the level of public confidence in a politician. O. Kryshtanovskaya [8], A. Gubanov [5], I. Shchekina [14] have already took attempts to assess the effectiveness of the work of public servants in social networks.

2. Methodology and Methods

The activity of the heads of regions was analyzed according to the open data of their pages in social networks. We chose politicians who were declared the most successful in terms of KPI — credibility in the authorities, in November 2019 by the Administration of President. These are R. Kadyrov (Chechen Republic), R. Khabirov (Bashkortostan Republic), R. Starovoit (Kursk region), A. Dyumin (Tula region). Furthermore, those with unsatisfactory key performance indicators were chosen: I. Orlov (Arkhangelsk region), S. Gaplikov (Komi Republic), A. Levintal (Jewish Autonomous Region), V. Ilyukhin (Kamchatka Krai) [12]. The most popular social network in Russia VKontakte was selected for analysis with the Russian audience approximately 39.6 million per month according to the analytical company Mediascope. [9].

While working methods of Kribrum multi-factor monitoring and analysis system were applied: content analysis method — analysis of text material and products of communication activities; a method for studying qualitative and quantitative indicators of communicative behavior; comparative analysis method — comparing two or more objects; methods of quantitative analysis — for describing and transforming research data based on the use of mathematical and statistical tools; critical discourse analysis — study of changes in discourse, conclusions concerning the prevailing modality of communicative behavior and the dominating topics of discourse. In addition, linguistic and psychological behavioral models adapted for the platform were used. The analyzed period is from November 1 to November 14, 2019.

3. Results and Discussion

The accounts of every chosen politician were analyzed separately with the help of Kribrum system. The data received in the analysis are presented in Table 1 and Table 2 and described in this part of the article.

Ramzan Kadyrov (head of the Chechen Republic) — <https://vk.com/ramzan>. The head of the Chechen Republic, R. Kadyrov, is one of the leaders in terms of credibility. Activities of R. Kadyrov on social networks, as well as his audience, confirm this fact even at first glance before analysis with specialized systems. A study of R. Kadyrov's page on VKontakte in November 1–14, 2019 shows that the user has 19 friends, 644 thousand followers. Access to sending personal messages to R. Kadyrov is limited with privacy settings, but commenting on his publications is free. R. Kadyrov published 31 posts, from one to five were made daily, except for 02.11, 04.11 and 07.11. 60% of publications

were made in the daytime, 35% in the evening. The most exciting topics of the posts were holidays, incidents, health and medicine, culture, work and education, sports. The issues raised by R. Kadyrov provoked users' interest: they commented on placed posts, and also made reposts: all in all, 1240 comments and 202 reposts were made; 626 users showed activity. R. Kadyrov himself was not active on the pages of other users.

As a result, it can be stated that R. Kadyrov is maintaining his account on VKontakte social network, the issues raised by him attract the attention of his audience. Nevertheless, he only sets the direction for discussion, but does not participate in the further development of topics.

Radiy Khabirov (Head of the Republic of Bashkortostan) — <https://vk.com/radiyhabirov>. In accordance with the results summarized by S. Kiriyyenko, the head of the Republic of Bashkortostan R. Khabirov exceeded the KPI of credibility. An analysis of the activity of R. Khabirov on VKontakte for the period in November 1–14, 2019 revealed 159 thousand followers, while friendly connections were inaccessible. R. Khabirov published 12 posts: one publication a day except November 4 (National Unity Day) and November 11. The majority of publications were made in working hours. Linguo-semantic analysis of user's publications allows us to identify the main topics covered: incidents, family, social problems, sports, politics, culture, education, holidays, health and medicine. Social network users are involved in discussions raised by R. Khabirov. 4298 comments and 624 reposts were made — more than 2200 users performed these actions. At the same time, Mr. Khabirov does not respond to comments.

The activity of R. Khabirov can be characterized as intense, he touches on a wide range of topics, his publications evoke the response of the audience, and however, he is not involved in the further discussion.

Roman Starovoit (Governor of the Kursk Region) — <https://vk.com/gubernator46>. He took one of the leading positions in the implementation of KPI. His activity on social network is ambiguous. He does not show increased activity, but his page seems attractive to users. According to the analysis, in November 1–14, 2019 on VKontakte Mr. Starovoit had 36 thousand followers, but the Friends section on his page is hidden. Access to commenting on his posts is free, as well as to personal messages. This feature distinguishes the page of the governor against the background of the others ones. The governor of the Kursk region made one post and one comment for the analyzed period. These actions were performed on Wednesday November, 6. Among the topics covered were family, society, work and education, culture, health and beauty, leisure time. His post attracted 288 users of the social network. A total of 719 comments and 62 reposts were made. At the same time, Mr. Starovoit did not participate in further discussions.

Thus, despite low activity and lack of regular publications, the governor's page is attractive to his audience. A distinctive feature of the page is open access to personal messages, which can be considered as a mechanism to improve feedback from the population.

Igor Orlov (Governor of the Arkhangelsk Region) — https://vk.com/igororlov_29. Mr. Orlov failed to fulfill KPI in terms of population confidence. An analysis of Orlov's activity on social networks, as well as the attractiveness of his page for the audience, cannot be commended. During the period November 1–14, 2019, 10 thousand subscribers followed his page on the social network VKontakte. Restrictions on sending private messages and commenting on his posts affected the audience engagement. Mr. Orlov published 6 posts, while there is no consistency in time and number of publications: on some days several posts were published, followed by a long pause. It is noteworthy that on November 4, on holiday, two posts were made. Linguo-semantic analysis showed that the governor pays attention to such topics as incidents, family, society, work and education, culture, health, leisure. Mr. Orlov's audience hardly responds to his posts. Mr. Orlov's posts were reposted 24 times and 20 authors were involved in this activity for the indicated period.

The activity of I. Orlov can be assessed as low and irregular, while the author touches on relevant public topics in his few posts. However, the author's page settings and his desire to limit the activity of other users on his page result in a decrease in audience engagement.

Sergey Gaplikov (head of the Komi Republic) — <https://vk.com/gaplikovkomi>. S. Gaplikov was among those who failed to show satisfactory KPI results. An analysis of his page on VKontakte social network for the period November 1–14 2019 demonstrates the author's high activity and a significant response of the audience although it is not big in size. Mr. Gaplikov has 6407 friends, and 124 followers. Despite the fact that Mr. Gaplikov adds everyone to his friends list, access to commenting on his posts, as well as sending private messages is restricted by privacy settings. He made 23 posts and 5 reposts for the analyzed period. Mr. Gaplikov's activity is regular; the author writes from one to four posts every day. Most publications were made on weekdays, only 37% of the whole activity was on weekends. With the help of linguo-semantic analysis, it was found that the head of the republic showed interest in such topics as family, work, education, culture, health, leisure. User actions on Mr. Gaplikov's page are limited, therefore, the audience may just repost his publications: 183 reposts with 123 users participating in this, while Mr. Gaplikov communicates with two users on a reciprocal basis.

As a result, we note that S. Gaplikov is highly active in VKontakte social network, has a little audience, and does not segment it, adding most users to friends list. At the same time, Mr. Gaplikov constrains commenting on his posts, as well as sending personal messages. The audience is involved so that it could make reposts. Nevertheless, the head of the Komi Republic happened to make several comments, which also demonstrates his involvement.

A. Dyumin (Governor of the Tula Region) <https://gubernator.tularegion.ru/>. The Tula region appeared among the leading regions according to KPI with Governor A. Dyumin having no pages on social networks. Online interaction with the head of the region is carried out through a personal website, where a significant amount of new materials is presented. The interactive section of the site “Write a Letter” consists of a massive description of the rules for contacting the Government of the Tula Region and an electronic form for filling out an application in an electronic reception. In addition, the governor’s website contains links to social networks, blogs and the YouTube channel, which lead to accounts and communities related to the activities of the executive power of the Tula region. However, they are not personalized and not dedicated to the direct activity of the governor.

There are also the heads of the Jewish Autonomous Oblast (A. Levintal) and the Kamchatka Territory (V. Ilyukhin) among those who are at the bottom of the KPI implementation ranking. They both do not have accounts on social media.

It is worth noting that the region headed by A. Levintal (until December 2019) occupies a consistently low position in terms of credibility of the authorities. According to sociological studies in May 2019, the largest number of residents of the Jewish Autonomous Oblast supported the removal of the governor. Thus, the region entered the top-10 regions with the request for changing the head [11].

V. Ilyukhin, the governor of the Kamchatka Territory, announced his plans to create an account on social networks and take part in maintaining the pages personally in July 2019. He added that he can easily get addicted and it would not be easy for him to restrain himself in heated debates with opponents and to put up with unfair critics on social networks. Nevertheless, the head of the region admitted that the potential for interacting with citizens is not exploited completely. He added that social networks were likely to improve the situation, therefore, he considers this step necessary and positive [7]. A presumptive page of Governor V. Ilyukhin has already appeared on VKontakte social network — <https://vk.com/kamgubernator>. However, there is no information except the date of birth (as at January 2020).

TABLE 1: Information on the heads of regions accounts on VKontakte social network

Name	Region	Information on Profile			
		Link	Number of Friends	Number of Followers	Free Access to Commenting / Messaging
R. Kadyrov	Chechen Republic	https://vk.com/ramzan	19	644 K	yes/no
R. Starovoit	Kursk Region	https://vk.com/gubernator46	hidden	36 K	yes/yes
R. Khabirov	Republic of Bashkortostan	https://vk.com/radiyhbirov	hidden	159 K	yes/no
I. Orlov	Arkhangelsk Region	https://vk.com/igororlov_29	hidden	10 K	no/no
S. Gaplikov	Komi Republic	https://vk.com/gaplikovkomi	6407	124	no/no
V. Ilyukhin	Kamchatka Territory	https://vk.com/kamgubernator	hidden	55	no/yes

TABLE 2: Information on the heads of regions accounts activity and other users activity on their pages on VKontakte social network

Name	Region	Information on account activity and on other users activity on the page				
		His activity	Audience reactions	Write to him	He writes	Mutually
R. Kadyrov	Chechen Republic	31 posts	1240 comments, 202 reposts	626	0	0
R. Starovoit	Kursk Region	1 post, 1 comment	719 comments, 62 reposts	288	0	0
R. Khabirov	Republic of Bashkortostan	12 posts	4298 comments, 624 reposts	2227	0	0
I. Orlov	Arkhangelsk Region	6 posts	24 reposts	20	0	0
S. Gaplikov	Komi Republic	23 posts, 5 reposts	183 reposts	123	2	2
V. Ilyukhin	Kamchatka Territory	no	no	0	0	0

The next step of the research was to assess the engagement of the audience of each governor in order to assess the involvement of electorate in political activity on the Internet (Table 3). We applied audience engagement rate which seemed the most appropriate for social media analysis. In its most general form, the equation for calculating the rate looks as follows: the reaction of the audience (in this case, comments and reposts) divided by the size of the audience (the sum of friends and followers). According to the calculations, the head of the Republic of Bashkortostan, R. Khabirov has the most involved audience with engagement rate exceeding 3%. The rate of S. Gaplikov and R. Starovoit is more than 2%. R. Kadyrov, who is the leader in terms of indicators studied earlier, has a low engagement rate. One should not, however,

overlook the nominal values, for example, the R. Kadyrov's audience engagement rate is blurred due to the significant size of his audience (644 thousand followers). S. Gaplikov got into the top-3 due to the small number of followers and friends, yet, his position on this list demonstrates the potential for further promotion of the account on social network.

TABLE 3: Audience engagement rate of the heads of regions accounts on VKontakte social network

Name	Region	Audience Engagement Rate (audience reactions / friends + followers)
R. Khabirov	Republic of Bashkortostan	3.096%
S. Gaplikov	Komi Republic	2.802%
R. Starovoit	Kursk Region	2,169%
I. Orlov	Arkhangelsk Region	0.240%
R. Kadyrov	Chechen Republic	0.224%
V. Ilyukhin	Kamchatka Territory	0.000%

4. Conclusions

To conclude, it can be stated that performing of key performance indicator for credibility of a politician depends on his activity on social networks. There are several explanations for this. Firstly, personal pages of regional leaders on social networks reflect the general attitude and openness of the politician to dialogue with citizens.

Secondly, sociological surveys and inside information on domestic political shifts indicate that those who are likely to be dismissed either do not have pages on social networks, or do not maintain them. Not only the politician himself is represented through social networks but also the region he leads. It provides ordinary users with an insight into processes in the entire government of the subject. Moreover, it reflects a willingness to solve social and socio-economic problems of the region.

Thirdly, the interaction between government and society becomes more rapid through social networks. If an account is maintained by the press office, complaints and letters of citizens are sent to responsible persons in the regional government. Eventually, it allows regional government to receive information on the needs of the population directly — bypassing the numerous bureaucratic structures.

With the help of Kribrum system, we found out that the heads of three leading regions according to KPI rate (R. Kadyrov, R. Khabirov, R. Starovoit) publish their posts on a regular basis: 1–2 posts per day, with one or two days off. The citizens observe that the leader is maintaining the page, he is not indifferent to the fate of the region since he

answers in the comments, writes posts about the work of the services in the region. At the same time, his life is not separated from the problems of ordinary people. His electorate witnesses real work, concern for his residents, confidence in the future and stability.

The leaders of the regions (R. Kadyrov, R. Khabirov, R. Starovoit), who entered the top-3, all the three report on the work already done and upload their personal materials. The top-3 outsiders of our ranking (I. Orlov, S. Gaplikov, V. Ilyukhin) either do not have pages on social networks or do not regularly and actively maintain them. It finally results in negative attitude of residents who spend much time online. Furthermore, it affects positive regional news which start to be perceived adversely, as well as the whole image of a leader who seems to neglect the regional problems.

To sum up, social networks provide politicians with significant potential to interact with their electorate. Maintaining accounts on social networks either by politician himself or by his press office helps to enhance credibility of the authorities, thus, it is worth paying more attention to this digital tool.

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