Negative consequences of risks of digitalisation for consolidation of urban communities

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Abstract. The purpose of the article is to assess the impact of digitalisation of the urban environment on the consolidation processes taking place in urban communities. The authors emphasize that digital technologies and services, social networks and messengers integrated into the urban space contribute to the development of alternative types of sociality, solidarity, subjectivity and consolidation of urban communities. The empirical basis of the article is the data of the sociological study "Social consolidation of urban communities: opportunities and limitations in the conditions of digitalisation of the urbanised environment", conducted by a team of authors of the Belgorod State National Research University in 2022. As part of the study, N=1500 residents of the cities of Belgorod, Voronezh and Kursk regions were interviewed. To gain in-depth knowledge about the subject of the study, an expert survey was conducted (N=50), as well as a series of focus group interviews among 6 social groups: entrepreneurs, pensioners, municipal employees, youth, state employees and the unemployed. The total number of focus group participants is 57 people, the age range is 18-69 years, the gender composition is 34 women and 23 men. The theoretical analysis carried out, as well as the empirical data obtained, allowed us to identify some of the most significant risks of digitalisation that have negative consequences for social consolidation in an urbanised space: digital inequality, blurring of identity boundaries, multiplication of social statuses, technostress, increasing the possibility of controlling the private lives of citizens, loss of live communication, expansion of manipulative practices (dissemination of misinformation, unreliable rumors, post-truth or half-truth).

1 Introduction

The relevance of the task of social consolidation in the last 2-3 years has been increasingly justified in sociological, political science, and philosophical studies.

For example, K. V. Vodenko and S.A. Lyausheva note that "In the conditions of external and internal challenges, there is no alternative to the transition of society to a state of stable social mobilisation, readiness at the level of interaction between society and the state to find adequate and effective solutions to urgent social problems. It is possible to solve this problem only through social consolidation" [1]. V.Ya. Leshchenko and A.A.

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Lisovtsov considers consolidation along with the state of culture and spiritual health as "the most important indicators of the state's ability to withstand very likely violent confrontations and wars, as it has happened more than once in our history" [2]. At the same time, there is no unity in the scientific discourse regarding the essence of this phenomenon. Largely because social consolidation, representing a complex and multilevel process, has been analysed by domestic and foreign researchers from various positions.

Within the framework of this work, we consider consolidation *as a process and result of reaching agreement between various social groups and communities on the basis of unity of values and interests, establishing relations of mutual trust, solidarity in order to achieve common (conscious and supported by the majority of their members) goals. It is a form of social conjunction.*

Social consolidation can have different scales and capture both the entire nation and its individual constituent groups. These include urban communities, which are residents of cities united by common interests and having an orderly structure. Despite the fact that the prerequisites for consolidation are laid in the very foundations of the joint life of citizens, its real implementation depends on a complex of long-term and situational factors. Movement along the "consolidation route" may weaken or become more active under the influence of development trends with conjunctive or disjunctive potential, or more or less organically combining them. Among such trends today, undoubtedly, is the digitalisation of urban space, which is a consequence of the mass introduction of digital technologies. Moreover, it has become the dominant factor in the evolution of social reality.

E.V. Lebedeva emphasizes: "Manifestations of digital transformation: miniaturisation of technical devices, their interoperability (the ability to interact with other products or systems), an increase in the volume of digital information led to the emergence of an all-encompassing network and dynamic infrastructure that influenced people's lifestyle and communication with each other, it changed their attitude to the environment" [3]. E.A. Stukalenko writes that "Digital technologies, which have become ubiquitous in our daily lives, have radically changed the way we work, communicate, and consume in a short period of time. They affect all components of the quality of life: well-being, work, health, education, social ties, environmental quality, the possibility of participation and management of civil society, etc." [4]

In the context of widespread digitalisation, human relationships are also undergoing transformation, which is recorded by various studies. S.A. Grishaeva, T.A. Beregovskaya, A.V. Kvachko note that "…The digital environment forms a new social reality, the structure of society is changing, the principles of formation and functioning of social groups are changing, identity is "blurring", the labor market, education, and consumption are changing" [5]. In these conditions, according to L.A. Vasilenko, N. Meshcheryakova, V. Zotov, "only those institutions that are able to process the effects of "normal anomie" will survive" [6]. Social consolidation is one of the ways of such "processing".

In this regard, the study of the impact of digitalisation of the urbanised environment on the consolidation processes taking place in urban communities is of undoubted scientific interest. At the same time, the study of the risks of consolidation of urbanised spaces deserves special attention.

2 Materials and methods

The methodological basis of the study was the concept of digitalisation of social reality, considered in the works of O.N. Yanitskiy through the prism of a risk-based approach, according to which "in a modern open society, risk always spreads faster than treatment for it. This is especially true for mutants, that is, still unknown risks, both biological and social" [7]. According to O.N. Yanitskiy, in the modern social reality, the spontaneously

changing way of risk production dominates, in response to the change of which constant reflection of their possible ambivalent consequences is necessary.

The empirical basis of the article is the data of the sociological study "Social Consolidation of Urban Communities: Opportunities and Limitations in the Conditions of Digitalisation of the Urbanised Environment", conducted by a team of authors of the Belgorod State National Research University in 2022. Among others, one of the objectives of the study was to analyse the attitude of the population to the development of digital technologies, including the perception by citizens of its costs, which cause negative assessments and frustrations. As part of the study, N=1500 residents of the cities of Belgorod, Voronezh, and Kursk regions were interviewed. To gain in-depth knowledge about the subject of the study, an expert survey was conducted (N=50), as well as a series of focus group interviews among six social groups: entrepreneurs, pensioners, municipal employees, youth, state employees, and the unemployed. The total number of focus group participants is 57 people, the age range is 18-69 years, the gender composition is 34 women and 23 men.

3 Results and discussion

In modern studies related to the digitalisation of the urbanised environment, its ambivalent impact on the process of consolidation of urban communities is noted in different forms. However, there are not so many comprehensive empirical studies justifying this position. In particular, the specifics of consolidation risks in the conditions of digitalisation of the urbanised environment are only touched upon in general works on this issue. Thus, a number of authors note that virtualisation and digitalisation of social life contain an element of threat to social cohesion [8]. Works of A.E. Konkova, E.V. Batovrina, O.V. Mikhailova are devoted to the study of the main risks and barriers of civil solidarity in the conditions of digitalisation [10].

G.A. Malysheva and O.M. Mikhaylenok note: "Digitalisation of the social sphere requires verified steps at every stage of its implementation so that total digital control does not lead to restriction of the basic democratic rights and freedoms of citizens. The digital revolution should not become a destructive injection for society; it is designed to logically continue and enrich the development of the already established socio-economic structure. It is necessary to have a clear understanding that digitalisation and reformatting of mass consciousness in a universalist way has a powerful corrosive potential that poses a threat to social and cultural space" [11].

Foreign researchers also record the negative impact of digitalisation on social processes. Thus, the Italian sociologists R. Palumbo, E. Casprini, R. Montera [11] analyse the psychosocial risks arising during this process. Destructive consequences of digitalisation are investigated in the works of such foreign researchers as L. Sundsgaard [12], U. A. Tuncer [13], K. Schade [14]. At the same time, despite the ambivalence of the phenomenon of risk, which contains, along with dangers and threats, new opportunities for the development of the subject, researchers, as a rule, pay attention to its negative impact on people and communities. This emphasis is quite understandable, since in practice it is this aspect of risks that most worries citizens, especially in conditions of unstable development of modern cities. It is this property of risks that can create barriers to the consolidation of urban communities.

The theoretical analysis carried out, as well as the empirical data obtained, allowed us to identify some of the most significant risks of digitalisation that have negative consequences for the implementation of the "consolidation route" in an urbanised space.

1. Digital inequality. Among the most pressing problems caused by the large-scale introduction of digital technologies into the lives of urban residents, researchers note *digital inequality*. It is often characterised as "a gap between people depending on the degree of

access to information, resulting from differences in digital skills and abilities to use digital products and services, a gap between people associated with the ability to convert the use of digital technologies into civic participation, a gap in the motivation of citizens and readiness for continuous retraining" [15].

In modern research, digital inequality is understood not only and not so much as a quality of personality, but rather as categorical differences between groups of people. At the same time, "the unit of reference is not an individual, but positions and relationships between methodologically distinguished categories of the population" [16]. "M.A. Yudina identifies three levels of digital inequality.

– the first level is physical or material and economic inequality in terms of the level and quality of access to ICT;

– the second level is inequality in skills, i.e. in the ability to independently create content, to carry out meaningful communication for this social group;

– the third level is the features of the use of ICT (frequency and variety of goals, motivation)" [16].

The significance of the problems of digital inequality is confirmed to a certain extent by the data of our sociological research. In particular, 26% of experts indicated a negative impact on the consolidation process (Figure 1).
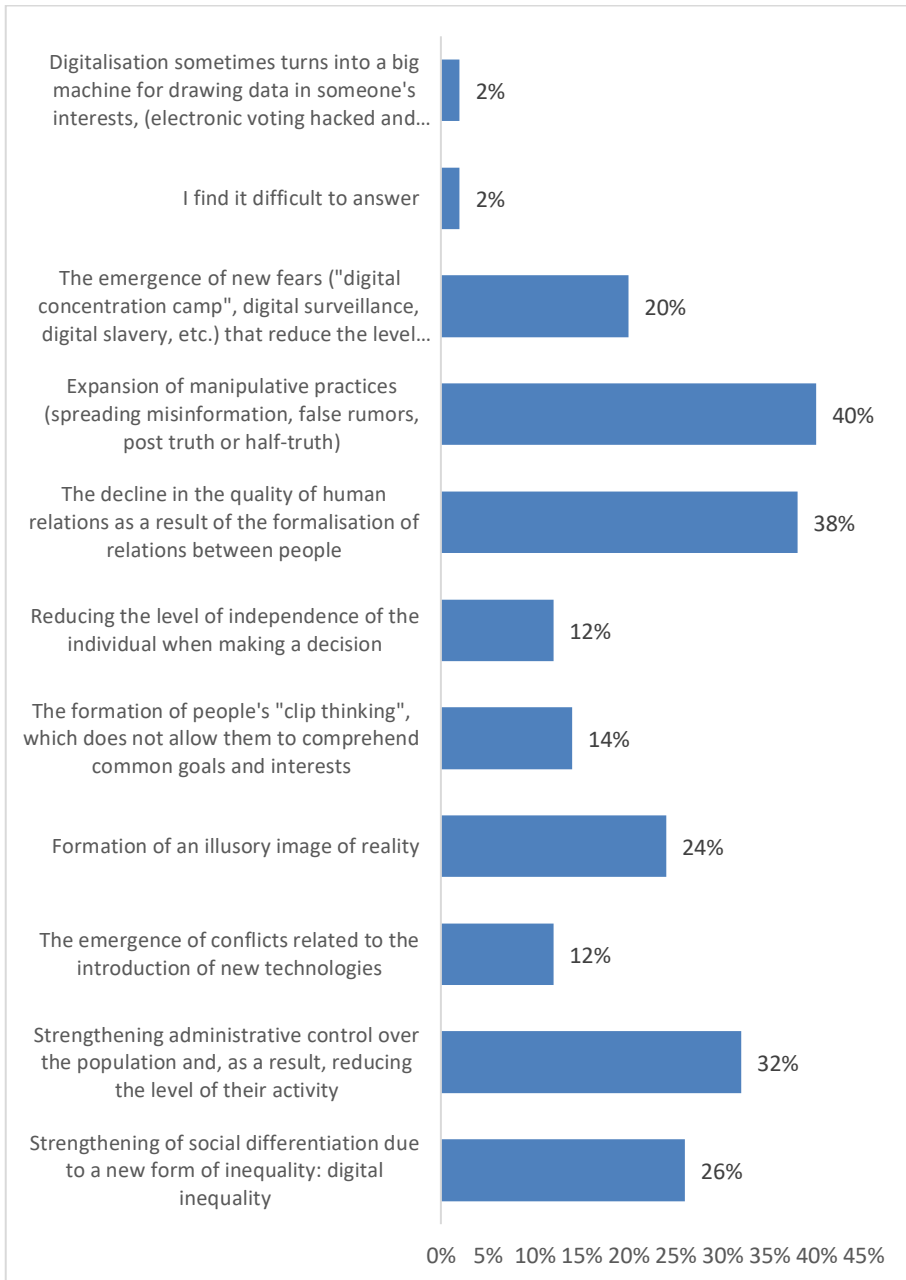
Fig. 1. Distribution of experts to the question "What may be the main negative consequences of digitalisation of the urban environment for the prospects of social consolidation? Specify no more than three possible answers».

Although this is only a quarter of the total number of respondents, which we associate with the still insufficient actualisation of the digital factor of social differentiation, this risk is among the very significant in the long term. Its negative impact on the implementation of the "consolidation route" is quite obvious and is explained by the fact that it is extremely difficult to unite people at different levels of the social hierarchy, even if there are common problems for them.

2. Blurring the boundaries of identity. S.A. Grishaeva, T.A. Beregovskaya, A.V. Kvachko rightly emphasize that it stimulates "the variability of the social environment ("the unity of the world is replaced by fragments, multipolarity, the existence of phantoms that have no confirmation in reality")" [5]. Indeed, in the course of our study, 24% of experts indicated that an illusory image of reality is being formed in the digital space, which cannot serve as a reliable basis for personal self-identification. However, it is precisely this that is a necessary condition for integration, since a person can voluntarily unite with counterparties only if he has a clear idea of having clear ideas about himself and his belonging to the group.

3. Multiplication of social statuses. One of the negative consequences of digitalisation is the multiplicity of statuses of each, which has increased significantly due to positioning in a virtual environment. By no means "the offline and online statuses of an individual do not always coincide (moreover, there can also be arbitrarily many offline statuses, coinciding with online statuses and fictional ones)" [17]. At the same time, many individuals are aware of themselves more as carriers of the status of a virtual environment than a real one. For example, according to the study "Transformation of social activity of youth in the context of virtualisation of the social environment", conducted in 2021 by scientists of the Ufa FICRAN, "virtual communication among young people begins to dominate compared to real 34% of respondents usually spend their free time chatting with friends off-line, and 55% of respondents communicate with friends online" [18]. But consolidation, if it is considered as a real process based on mutual trust, initially rejects the idea of simulacra statuses and personality animation, since mutual loyalty presupposes certainty and responsibility as necessary conditions for fulfilling the requirements formulated in relation to each other.

4. Technostress, which is a "negative psychological state associated with the use of information and communication technologies or the threat of their use in the future. This condition is caused by the perception of inconsistency of requirements and resources associated with the use of ICT, causing a high level of psychophysiological activation, discomfort and the development of a negative attitude to information technology. The prerequisite of technostress is sometimes called elementary distrust of the introduction of technical innovations into everyday life (for example, the widespread use of online services and social networks) [5]. However, in reality it has many sources, which can be traced in the responses of respondents to focus group interviews within the framework of the study. Their participants pointed this out in one way or another, noting the lack of information as stress factors *(Victoria, an entrepreneur: "Digitalisation scares me. Someone erased the information – and there is no person"); fear of surveillance (Andrey, an entrepreneur: "All these technologies control everything I buy, where I go, what kind of transport I use, I'm afraid of it, I feel that I am being watched and my freedom is being restricted"); a feeling of insecurity (Victor, a teacher: "Digitalisation is very dangerous. How many of these hackers no one is protected from! This is often overlooked. What if your passport or apartment data is deleted? What to do next?").*

Since fear usually deprives a person of the ability to act rationally, it cannot serve as a basis for genuine solidarity, at best producing its ersatz forms.

5. Increasing the possibility of monitoring the private life of citizens. "The functionality of big data creates the basis for the complete loss of anonymity, for the construction of electronic identity based on the "digital footprint", the concept of the private sphere is gradually being lost, and the identification process becomes a continuous narrative auto project" [19].

Exploring the social challenges and risks of digitalisation, A.V. Koneva and A.A. Lisenkova point out that "thanks to Big Data technology, which has qualitatively changed approaches to collecting and analysing large heterogeneous arrays of information, it has

become possible not only to accumulate data on all digital operations and transactions, but also to identify and track all atypical objects and actions, leaving digital footprints. Thus, in combination with blockchain technology, which allows recording all changes in information on an infinite number of carriers, with the help of distributed registries, conditions are created for absolute transparency of all actions of members of the digital world" [20].

The threat of invasion of a person's privacy scares every fifth respondent (21%) who participated in the study. These are people who clearly feel that a "hacked person" (I. Shnurenko) cannot be a reliable partner and ally, especially in extreme situations, and therefore solidarity with him is a kind of fiction. Of course, the negative consequences of this risk for consolidation should not be exaggerated. Only 17% of respondents confirmed in our study that they feel threatened by the creation of a system of a kind of "digital slavery" that excludes voluntary integration. But it is impossible not to reckon with her because of the danger of such a prospect.

6. Loss of live communication. Digital technologies do not imply "live communication", which does not bind the participants of the interaction with reliable grounds. The researchers emphasize: "Communication with the help of special programs deprives us of the need for live communication. In this regard, some dialogues unfold "online". There is no longer a need to communicate live with sellers, taxi drivers and even colleagues. It is enough to go to the website, to the application or to the general chat. In fact, a person uses a live dialogue only if he does not have the opportunity to use digital technologies. The latter, in turn, are introduced everywhere" [21].

The participants of the focus group interviews also point to the lack of offline communication:

Irina (municipal employee): "Unfortunately, people are gradually forgetting how to communicate. They stop finding a common language. People are afraid to talk. They just sit in the phones. People stop communicating with each other personally because of digitalisation."

Svetlana (individual entrepreneur): "Maybe it's all comfortable and convenient, but digitalisation allows us losing the unity of our society, because there is no collective, it is lost."

Igor (municipal employee): "The lack of personal communications is a problem of modern society. Look at the children! Their nervous system is disrupted due to the effects of remote communication. They don't communicate with each other. Same as adults, they are less likely to meet in person. Now, in the conditions of digitalisation, there is a high pace of life, and because of this we have lost our original face."

Marina (pensioner): "It seems to me that this digitalisation should be banned! Everywhere! Especially for children under 14 years old. You won't find children on the street, everyone is on their phones. It's a big problem!".

It is quite natural that 38% of the experts we interviewed identified "a decrease in the quality of human relations as a result of their formalisation" as one of the main negative consequences of the digitalisation of the urban environment, detrimental to the prospects of social consolidation.

6. Expansion of manipulative practices (dissemination of misinformation, false rumors, post-truth or half-truth). As L.A. Vasilenko and N.N. Meshcheryakova reasonably note, "instead of using new technologies to expand cooperation with civil society in the development of management decisions, to establish feedback with the population, there is an increase in control, violation of the rights to confidentiality and anonymity, manipulation of public consciousness with the help of special technologies" [6]. In relation to consolidation, manipulation acts as one of the most significant social destructions. In the course of the study, more than 40% of the experts surveyed agreed with this. They linked

the intensification of manipulative practices (the spread of misinformation, false rumors, post-truth or half-truth) with the digital transformation of society (Fig. 1).

The expansion of manipulative opportunities is expressed in the replacement of real consolidation practices with imitation forms, which discredit the very idea of a regulated social conjunction.

4 Conclusion

Under the influence of digitalisation, cognitive and identification processes are transformed, cultural and symbolic codes that determine human behavior in an urban environment are changing. Digital technologies and services, social networks and messengers integrated into the urban space contribute to the development of alternative types of sociality, solidarity, subjectivity and consolidation of urban communities. At the same time, their implementation stimulates the emergence of a complex of risks that have a negative impact on the consolidation of city residents, including digital inequality, blurring of identity boundaries, multiplication of social statuses, technostress, increasing the possibility of controlling the private lives of citizens, expansion of manipulative practices (dissemination of misinformation, false rumors, post-truth or half-truth).

The significance of these risks requires their systematic research, allowing the city authorities and civil society institutions to move to the practice of "smart management" of risk genesis, which involves minimising its negative consequences and using the opportunities that it opens.

Acknowledgments

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