

Psychology. Journal of the Higher School of Economics



# ПСИХОЛОГИЯ

ЖУРНАЛ ВЫСШЕЙ ШКОЛЫ ЭКОНОМИКИ

В НОМЕРЕ

COVID-19 Pandemic and  
Accelerated Digitalization

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Оценка стресса детьми

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Измерение негативного  
прайминг-эффекта

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# HOW CAN DIGITALIZATION ACCOMPANYING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AFFECT ATTITUDES TOWARDS POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS? THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN INTERNET USAGE ACTIVITY AND INSTITUTIONAL TRUST

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## Как влияет цифровизация на фоне пандемии COVID-19 на отношение к политическим институтам? Взаимосвязь активности использования Интернета и институционального доверия

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### Abstract

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, people began to use the Internet more actively. Accordingly, the question arises of how the accelerated digitalization, which became one of the results of the pandemic, has affected various aspects of our lives, including our attitude to the political power institutions. This article discusses the relation of Internet usage activity and the trust toward the political institutions in European countries. There

### Резюме

Пандемия COVID-19 способствовала более активному использованию Интернета. Соответственно, возникает вопрос о том, как ускоренная цифровизация, ставшая одним из результатов пандемии, повлияла на разные аспекты нашей жизни, в том числе на отношение к институтам политической власти. Данная статья исследует взаимосвязь активности использования Интернета и доверия к политическим институтам в Европе. В литературе существуют противоречивые данные относительно связи институ-

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are contradicting data in the literature regarding the relationship between institutional trust and the activity of using the Internet. We assumed that the direction of relationship is associated with the efficiency of the state power institutions. Based on the government effectiveness index, we have chosen five European countries with the highest government efficiency and five countries with the lowest. To assess the activity of using the Internet, we used data from the European Social Survey (ESS) that show the average frequency of Internet use during the month and the average duration of its use during the day. The dependent variables were respondents' assessments of their own trust in the different political institutions. Next, using multiple regression analysis, we assessed the relationship between two indicators of Internet use activity and trust in each of the institutions. The results of the regression analysis demonstrated that in the countries with low government efficiency, the activity of Internet usage is negatively associated with trust in various political institutions. In countries with high government efficiency, we found a positive relationship between Internet usage activity and institutional trust.

*Keywords:* pandemic, digitalization, Internet usage, institutional trust, government effectiveness index.

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ционального доверия и активности использования Интернета. Одни исследования показали, что данная связь положительна, другие исследования обнаруживают отрицательную связь. Мы предположили, что направление связи сопряжено с эффективностью работы институтов государственной власти. Основываясь на индексе эффективности правительства, нами было отобрано по пять европейских стран, имеющих наиболее высокий и наиболее низкий индекс эффективности правительства. Для оценки активности использования Интернета использовали данные из базы ESS, показывающие среднюю частоту использования Интернета в течение месяца и среднюю продолжительность его использования в течение дня (в часах). Зависимыми переменными были оценки респондентами их собственного доверия к следующим институтам: парламенту страны, системе правосудия, полиции, политикам, политическим партиям, Европейскому парламенту и ООН. Далее, при помощи множественного регрессионного анализа были оценены связи двух показателей активности использования Интернета с доверием каждому из институтов. Результаты регрессионного анализа четко показали, что в странах с низкой эффективностью правительства активность использования Интернета связана с институциональным доверием отрицательно, а в странах с высокой эффективностью правительства эта взаимосвязь положительна.

*Ключевые слова:* пандемия, цифровизация, использование Интернета, институциональное доверие, индекс правительственной эффективности.

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## Introduction

The development of scientific and technological progress acted as a catalyst for the onset of the era of digitalization. If in the 20th century, due to the high cost of access to the Internet, only a few were active users, then in the modern world the Internet is available due to the emergence of a large number of gadgets and increasing and improving the areas of coverage. The Internet is an integral part of people's lives, and its role has grown rapidly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Digital society retains such types of trust as interpersonal, generalized and institutional, but under the influence of new digital technologies, the forms of their expression are significantly changing (Sannikova & Kharitonova, 2019). Interpersonal trust in the digital space will be based not only on personal experience of interacting with the subject, but also on the information available about it on the Internet. At the same time, an important role is given to methods of identification and authentication of subjects. The process of generating generalized trust in a digital environment is based on feedback on the Internet that forms the reputation of the subject.

The scientific literature contains conflicting data on how the Internet affects such a crucial aspect of society's social capital as institutional trust (Huang et al., 2020). On the one hand, Internet technologies contribute to the growth of knowledge, facilitate interaction, and form communities. Some studies have shown that in democratic countries, Internet users are more satisfied with the activities of the state than people of the same countries who do not use the Internet. According to other figures, the use of e-government websites has a positive impact on government confidence.



However, quite a lot of research indicates the opposite effect of the Internet in relation to institutional trust. The negative impact of the Internet on institutional trust occurs, first of all, due to critical or inaccurate information that is contained there, and this undermines public confidence in institutions. Internet culture strengthens the values associated with individual freedom and self-expression, which can contribute to a strong desire to act independently of perceived restrictions. Accordingly, the socialization of citizens through the use of the Internet develops into political cynicism and reduces the levels of institutional trust. In addition, due to the vast amount and variety of online news that exists outside institutional control, citizens who often use the Internet tend to show a more negative attitude towards public institutions and are less satisfied with democracy, which leads to a decrease in institutional trust (Newton & Norris, 2000).

An article by Welch and colleagues asked how Internet use, citizens' satisfaction with electronic government, and citizens' trust in government in the United States are intertwined (Welch et al., 2005). It examines how various factors affecting trust can be linked to aspects of e-government that affect citizens, including transactions, information provision and bilateral interaction. The results of the study showed that age, gender and employment characteristics, as well as the extent of overall internet use, are all related to the use of government sites. Interestingly, satisfaction with the provision of information and dissatisfaction with citizens' own participation in government also stimulate the use of these services. People with a great desire to interact with the government visit government websites; however, once they start using them, they become disillusioned. The results show that those people who are more satisfied with e-government and government websites are also more likely to trust the government, and those people who trust the government more are also more likely to be satisfied with e-government.

An interesting situation with trust and the role of the media is developing in China, where there is a strong gap in confidence of the national and local institutions (Yang et al., 2014). The fact is that in China, journalists cannot speak negatively about the central government, especially the State Council, the Chinese Communist Party and other institutions of great political importance ("high-ranking institutions"). For these institutions, the media still serve as a propaganda tool, portraying them as righteous and benevolent. On the contrary, journalists can conduct any investigations against local authorities and make criticisms. The results of the empirical study demonstrate a definite picture of the impact of media use on institutional trust. The media influence the trust of political institutions in different ways. On the one hand, news coverage in the media has a positive impact on trust in national institutions; on the other hand, they negatively affect trust in local institutions.

Thus, different ways of reporting news about these two types of institutions shape public opinion in different directions.

A study conducted in Kosovo examined the role of the media in democratization in this post-conflict transitional society of South-Eastern Europe. The study analyzes the implications of the influence of new types of media on political culture in Southeast Europe. The results of existing studies have shown that the media informs citizens about current events in transitional societies, increases self-efficacy

and support for democracy, and inspires citizens to actively participate (Tworzecki & Semetko, 2010). The Camaj (2014) study analyzes the relationship between media use and political trust. This article empirically tests assumptions about media failure in mobilization in non-Western countries, and also emphasizes the role of media content as a mediator between media consumption (media use) and trust. It also extends the empirical horizon beyond the impact of negative news and strategic framing (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997), exploring how news's emphasis on institutional attributes and institutional activities influences political trust in transitional societies.

The results of this study suggest that the more people prefer newspapers and radio news, the more likely they are to agree with the media on the attributes of the country's political institutions, while people who pay attention to Internet news are less likely to do so. Beyond that, people paying attention to internet news are more likely to rely on the positive tone of news when assessing institutional performance. It is likely that people who pay attention to the positive attributes of institutions from the media are more likely to positively assess institutional effectiveness. The same study confirmed a hypothesis predicting a positive relationship between media use and political trust and overall institutional trust. These findings suggest that citizens who positively perceive institutional effectiveness from media reports are more likely to trust different institutions more. People who agree with media reports about the positive performance of various institutions are more likely to have higher levels of overall trust in institutions. So, this study supports the assumption that in societies undergoing political transition, the pluralistic media system can perform one of its main democratic functions: to inform people about institutional activities. Contrary to the concerns of skeptics, the results show that the media are useful for the democratization process, since they contribute to the formation of citizens' attitude towards political institutions, which is not necessarily exclusively negative.

In modern socio-economic research, the issue of the influence of digitalization on the behavior of people in society is increasingly becoming the subject of study. As can be seen from the analyzed literature, there is no single conclusion about the focus of the relationships between the use of the Internet and institutional trust. All the more poorly studied are these variables regarding the effectiveness of government in different countries. The study by the author's team of the relationship between involvement in the use of the Internet and trust in various institutions will make it possible to understand the orientation of this connection in relation to states with high and low government efficiency, and will give grounds for predicting the role of the Internet both in general and taking into account the characteristics of countries with different levels of trust in institutions, which seems very relevant and has both scientific and socio-political significance.

So, in summary, we can say that modern research does not provide a unified idea of how the activity of using the Internet is associated with institutional trust, positively or negatively? We assume that the focus of this connection may depend on how effective a government as a whole will be. Thus, we can formulate a general hypothesis of the study.

## Hypothesis

The positive or negative orientation of the connection between the activity of using the Internet and institutional trust is associated with the effectiveness of government. In countries with high government efficiency, the activity of using the Internet is positively associated with institutional trust, and in countries with low efficiency, the connection will be reversed.

## Methodology

### *Study Design*

This study is based on the European Social Survey database (ESS). We used the data obtained during the most recent Round 9, collected in 2018. For the analysis, we selected five European countries that had the highest values of the government effectiveness index (The Global Economy, 2020) and are presented in the ESS database. Similarly, five European countries with the lowest values of this index were selected. The first group included: Switzerland (N = 1542), Finland (N = 1755), Norway (N = 1406), Denmark (N = 1572), and the Netherlands (N = 1673). The second group included: Croatia (N = 1810), Poland (N = 1500), Serbia (N = 2043), Montenegro (N = 1200), and Bulgaria (N = 2198). All country samples are representative and balanced by gender, age, and education.

### *Variables*

#### **Independent Variables**

Two indicators of the Internet usage activity served as independent variables in the study.

a) Frequency of Internet use. The respondents were asked, “How often do you access the Internet, for work or personal purposes, regardless of what device you use – a computer, tablet, smartphone, or any other?” The answers were offered in the ascending order from *never* (1), *only occasionally* (2), *a few times a week* (3), *most days* (4), *to every day* (5).

b) Duration of Internet use (per day). The respondents were asked, “On a typical day, approximately how much time do you spend on the Internet, for work or personal purposes, regardless of what device you use – a computer, tablet, smartphone, or any other? Please give the answer in hours and minutes.” Thereafter, the time indicated by the respondents was converted into minutes.

#### **Dependent Variables**

The dependent variables were respondents’ assessments of their own confidence in the following institutions: Trust in the parliament of the country, Trust in the justice system, Trust in the police, Trust in politicians, Trust in political parties,

Trust in the European Parliament, and Trust in the UN. The respondents were asked to rate their own confidence in these institutions according to a scale from *no confidence at all* (0) to *absolute confidence* (10).

### Control Variables

The control variables selected for the study were the respondent's gender, age, and level of education.

### Data Processing

The data were processed using the method of multiple regression analysis. The significance of mean value disparity for all variables between countries with high and low government effectiveness was also assessed.

### Results

Table 1 presents the mean values and standard deviations of all variables for the countries in question. As can be seen from the table, all variables have statistically significant disparities between respondents from the two groups of countries. All indicators related to the activity of Internet use and all types of institutional trust are higher in the group of countries with high government effectiveness. It is important to note,

Table 1

#### Descriptive Statistics

Variables	High government Effectiveness (N = 6275)		Low government effectiveness (N = 8751)		t	Cohen's d
	M	SE	M	SE		
Frequency of Internet use (per week)	4.54	1.09	3.38	1.76	51.70***	0.78
Duration of Internet use (per day)	218.24	183.07	191.95	154.70	8.40***	0.15
Trust in the parliament of the country	6.21	2.09	3.22	2.75	78.23***	1.21
Trust in the justice system	7.15	2.02	3.51	2.73	97.02***	1.50
Trust in the police	7.63	1.83	4.88	2.87	74.10***	1.13
Trust in politicians	5.22	2.01	2.48	2.47	77.91***	1.21
Trust in political parties	5.27	1.96	2.49	2.43	80.26***	1.25
Trust in the European Parliament	5.22	2.19	3.83	2.80	34.18***	0.55
Trust in the UN	6.26	2.11	4.20	2.87	50.38***	0.82

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

however, that Cohen’s *d* for the Duration of Internet use indicator is 0.15, which means that the disparities are based on the statistical effect of large samples, with the *t*-test showing statistically significant disparities where there are actually none.

Next, the authors built six regression models with two predictors and three control variables (sex, age, and education). Table 2 demonstrates the results of the multiple regression analysis of respondents from both groups of countries and also shows the regression coefficients for the predictors. We do not present the regression coefficients for the control variables to save space, since their direction was similar in virtually all models for each of the two groups of countries, differing only in the level of significance and the size of the coefficients. We will only briefly delineate the role of control variables in the models for respondents from both types of countries.

In countries with high government effectiveness ratings, education was positively associated with all the types of institutional trust assessed in the study. The respondents’ age showed negative correlations with the exception of confidence in the police, in which the correlation was statistically insignificant. The respondents’ gender in this group of countries showed no significant correlation with confidence in the police, politicians, and political parties. In all other cases, women’s institutional trust proved to be higher.

In countries with low government effectiveness ratings, education and age correlated with institutional trust in the same fashion as in the group of countries with high government effectiveness ratings. Gender demonstrated a correlation only with confidence in the police. In contrast to countries with high government effectiveness, women in countries with low government effectiveness have more confidence in the police than men.

*Table 2*

**Relation between the Indicators of the Internet Usage Activity and Confidence in Various Institutions in Countries With High (N = 6275) and Low (N = 8751) Government Effectiveness**

Outcomes	High government effectiveness			Low government effectiveness		
	Frequency $\beta$	Duration $\beta$	$R^2$	Frequency $\beta$	Duration $\beta$	$R^2$
Trust in the parliament of the country	-.01	.03***	.017	-.07***	-.04***	.011
Trust in the justice system	.05***	.04**	.023	-.05***	-.01	.015
Trust in the police	.04***	.01	.010	.02	-.06**	.010
Trust in politicians	-.02	-.01	.008	-.08***	-.05**	.010
Trust in political parties	-.003	-.02	.001	-.07***	-.05**	.010
Trust in the European Parliament	.01	-.01	.001	.003	-.01	.000
Trust in the UN	.03*	.01	.020	.002	-.03*	.010

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

*Note.*  $\beta$  – standardized regression coefficient;  $R^2$  – percentage of explained variance of the dependent variable (control variables are gender, age, education).

Now we shall move on to the basic relationships in the models. In countries with high government effectiveness, a positive correlation between the frequency of Internet use (per week) and confidence in the justice system, the police, and one of the international institutions, the UN, can be observed. Duration (per day) is positively related to confidence in the parliament and justice system. Thus, the Internet use activity of respondents from countries with high government effectiveness is only positively related to confidence in various institutions.

In countries with low government effectiveness, the picture is exactly the opposite. What draws attention is the fact that there are many more connections. In particular, a statistically significant negative correlation was found between the frequency and duration of Internet use and confidence in the parliament, politicians, and political parties. In addition, the frequency of Internet use was negatively related to confidence in the justice system, and duration was negatively related to confidence in the police and confidence in the UN.

It is noteworthy that the connections identified in both countries are predominantly related to the political institutions that regulate the processes within the countries. Confidence in a pan-European political institution, the European Parliament, proved to be unrelated to institutional trust. Nevertheless, confidence in the UN turned out to be related to institutional trust, with the logic of the connection being similar to the logic of the connections concerning other institutions in this group of countries.

## Discussion

To begin, this study continues the direction of work dedicated to digitalization's impact on social capital. In particular, we looked at how active use of the Internet relates to institutional trust. It is important to note that previous studies showed either multidirectional connections or no connections at all. Macháčková and Tkaczyk (2020) grouped European countries by media use patterns, with the frequency of Internet use as part of other media characteristics. In seeking to scrutinize the impact of news consumption, they found no direct effect on institutional trust. We hypothesized that such inconsistent results are due to the existence of a third moderator variable, the effectiveness of national government.

This study confirmed our assumption: in countries with high government effectiveness, the activity of using the Internet is positively related to institutional trust, and in countries with low effectiveness, this correlation is negative. The most important question that arises in this connection is the issue of the psychological mechanisms underlying this phenomenon. We have two explanations thereof.

Firstly, when using the Internet, people select the information that is most consistent with their ideas regarding institutions. This is similar to such socio-psychological phenomena as group polarization (Moscovici, 1992) or group shift (Forsyth, 2018). What this means is that under the influence of any external opinions encountered on the Internet, the individual shifts even more to the pole (opinion or risk) to which they previously gravitated. For instance, if an individual who has a negative perception of institutions sees information designed to change their



perception in a positive direction, they will only further strengthen their opinion, considering this information to be propaganda.

The second explanation for this phenomenon could be that the individual, seeking cognitive conformity and avoiding cognitive dissonance (Harmon-Jones, 2019), selects the information that is most consistent with the attitudes towards political institutions that they already have. These attitudes are formed on the basis of everyday observation and social discourse. Accordingly, in societies with low government effectiveness, the individual selects information from the Internet that confirms the ineffectiveness of their country's political system. As a result, the more time they spend on the Internet, the more such information they see, with their confidence in political institutions continuing to decrease. As a result, we get a negative correlation between Internet activity and institutional trust in societies with low government effectiveness. These processes are opposite in countries with high government effectiveness. Individuals select information that supports their positive attitudes toward political institutions, and as a result, we find a positive correlation between Internet activity and institutional trust.

On the other hand, European countries initially differ in the levels of institutional trust. Historically, the highest level of institutional trust in the European space is observed in the countries of Northern Europe, while the lowest is characteristic of Southern and Central Europe (Boda & Medve-Balint, 2014; van der Meer, 2017; Sarracino & Mikucka, 2017). The level of institutional trust is certainly correlated with government effectiveness. We shall note that the group of countries with high government effectiveness used for our study included Switzerland, Finland, Norway, Denmark, and the Netherlands. The second group included Croatia, Poland, Serbia, Montenegro, and Bulgaria. Thus, these countries originally had different levels of institutional trust, which was higher in the countries of the first group. Therefore, our explanation of the directional mechanism of the correlation between Internet use activity and institutional trust is confirmed. In countries with inherently low institutional trust, the Internet can further reduce this type of trust, and the processes will be opposite in countries with high trust.

## **Conclusion**

Our analysis showed that the activity of using the Internet does indeed contribute to institutional trust in a given society. At the same time, the direction of communication is paired with the level of government effectiveness. In the case of low government effectiveness, the activity of using the Internet can have a negative effect on institutional trust, while in the case of high effectiveness the effect will be opposite.

Therefore, it seems that governments whose effectiveness is generally perceived low by the public find it challenging to “break the vicious circle of distrust.” Moreover, representatives of the Russian political elite note, in private conversations, that despite the effective political and economic measures and an objective improvement in the quality of life for most Russians, institutional trust is not growing.

How can countries with poorly performing institutions break this “vicious circle of distrust”? How can we make institutions more trusted and more effective? One possible option (in addition to the desire for objective government effectiveness) could be a reduction in the distance of power through increasing the availability of contact with government representatives for ordinary people – for example, through forums or “electronic reception rooms.” Reducing the distance of power and increasing egalitarianism will also help to build confidence in government representatives. This, combined with the increased objective effectiveness of power, will contribute to increased institutional trust.

While we were working on this paper, a military conflict occurred between Russia and Ukraine. We can see that the Internet media and channels reflecting the Russian viewpoint on this issue are blocked in Western countries, while the Internet media reflecting the Western viewpoint are blocked symmetrically in Russia. What can we make of these mutual blockages in light of our study? Indeed, based on the results of our study, we can assume that in this emotionally charged situation, people will also seek and consume information that correlates with their initially held attitudes. Accordingly, this will intensify the division and polarization in Russian society. Therefore, as a practical matter, it is necessary to look for ways to reduce the rate of this polarization, including the use of the Internet.

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