Political participation of Russian youth in the context of virtualization of modern processes: cognitive foundations and behavioral manifestations

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Abstract. The article presents the results of an empirical study aimed at studying the features of virtual political participation of modern Russian youth. The author's technique for diagnosing virtual political participation, developed on the basis of a cognitive approach to political behaviour, is described. The relationship between the characteristics of media use, the socio-political participation of young people and their political beliefs are revealed. The assumption is tested that the peculiarities of interaction of young people with media resources are determined by the abilities and skills of working with information – respondents with a high level of media competence are more active in introducing themselves to the virtual political agenda and expressing their own position in the online space, while less media competent people deliberately distance themselves from expanding the information base related to politics and have specific political beliefs. It was found that the preference for certain types of virtual political participation is associated with subjective ideas about the nature of political processes, as well as the level of media competence.

1 Introduction

The topic of political participation is of particular relevance in connection with the mediatization and virtualization of modern processes [1, 2]. One of the key arguments in favor of studying the phenomenon of political participation is the expansion of the sphere of social interaction and its impact on the potential mobilization of citizens [3-5]. We shall note that when conducting modern scientific research, it is especially important to take into account the general background and situational variables of socio-political attitudes in the country and in the world. The trends in the formation of virtual social groups and the complication of online forms of socio-political communication may intensify as a result of changes in the social life of citizens due to the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic. Networking creates a new reality, into which discussions on topical political issues are gradually moving [6, 7].
    In Russia, the process of mediatization of politics is also intensifying, indicating that the Internet is becoming a new environment for the political activity of young people [8-12]. The

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political behavior of young people is traditionally studied within the framework of sociological, socio-psychological and psychological models. The most frequently studied psychological variables are the needs of the individual and the group participating in the activity, the motives that guide the subject, attitudes, values, orientations, beliefs and goals of the subject, personality characteristics of the role, style of decision-making, style of interpersonal relations, cognitive style, etc.

Studies are being actively conducted to compare the peculiarities of political participation of young people and representative of the older generation [13]. The characteristics of young people differ significantly from the usual, well-established political practices of adults. As a socio-age group, young people have the hallmarks of collective subjectivity: interconnectedness, joint activity and group self-reflexivity. In December 2020, the State Duma of the Russian Federation adopted a law on youth policy in Russia, which raises the age of young people to 35 years old inclusive.

In modern science, the development and testing of new methodological tools for identifying the reasons for involving ordinary citizens in politics, including using advanced digital technologies, is relevant [14]. There is a need to expand the methodological tools in this area, there is growing interest in analyzing the impact of mass and political communication using methods such as correlation studies, content analysis, discourse analysis, etc.

In early 2021, the authors of this article conducted an empirical study aimed at studying the features of the virtual political participation of modern Russian youth. We assumed that the peculiarities of interaction with electronic media resources are determined by the abilities and skills of working with information – respondents with a high level of media competence are more active in introducing themselves to the virtual political agenda and expressing their own position in the online space. The preference for certain types of virtual political participation may be associated with subjective ideas about the nature of political processes.

2 Materials and Methods

The main research method was a questionnaire, which includes methods for assessing virtual political participation, political beliefs and the level of media competence. Study sample: young people aged 18 to 35 (average age – 27) living in the northwestern part of Russia (St. Petersburg and the Leningrad region). Total: 111 people, including 89 women and 22 men, 80% have higher education, 12% - incomplete higher education, 5% - specialized secondary education, 3% - secondary (school) education.

The study was conducted remotely in February 2021 using special forms created and posted on the Internet (Google Forms). Participants were attracted through a link to the study on one of the social networks or disseminated by the authors of this article through a network of personal contacts. Participation was voluntary and did not involve payment of remuneration to respondents. The average time to fill out all forms was 10-15 minutes. The data were processed using the methods of mathematical statistics included in the Microsoft Excel 2019 and IBM SPSS Statistics 22.0.0 software (primary statistics, analysis of variance ANOVA, Pearson correlation analysis).

Empirical data were obtained during the "second wave" of the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic, as well as during the protest actions in Russia in support of Alexey Navalny, a representative of the opposition political organization "Russia of the Future", who was arrested by Russian law enforcement agencies in January 2021 after his return to Russia. This, in our opinion, on the one hand, made it possible to obtain a certain cross-section of the public sentiments of young people on the eve of the start of the election campaign to the State Duma of the Russian Federation, and on the other hand, could also affect the peculiarities of interaction with media resources and the formation of certain political beliefs.

2.1 Diagnostics of virtual political participation

The methodology "Virtual political participation" was developed by the authors of this article (2020) based on an analysis of trends in the development of the information space and modern practices of media use [8, 11, 12, 14]. The methodology is aimed at identifying the features of the respondents' use of modern Internet resources and includes 2 main parts that diagnose the cognitive foundations and behavioral manifestations of virtual political participation (10 statements in total, 5 statements in each part). The names of the indicators and the wording of the methodology statements are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Cognitive foundations and behavioral manifestations of virtual political participation.

Indicators	Methodology statements
I. Cognitive foundations of virtual political participation	
Virtual Search	1. I am looking for additional information about political events on various Internet resources (websites, blogs, groups, communities, social networks, etc.).
Virtual Resourcing	2. I follow some political channels and communities on various Internet resources (Telegram, Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, VKontakte, Instagram, TikTok, etc.).
Virtual Creativity	3. I am the author or moderator of an Internet resource with a political orientation (website, blog, chat, forum, online newspaper, magazine, channel, community, etc.): I post my own materials or moderate messages on the topic of politics.
Virtual Innovation	4. I believe that electronic resources provide an opportunity to show new political activity (share political news, join various political communities, discuss current political events, find like-minded people, initiate new political projects and events, etc.).
Virtual Reality	5. It seems to me that the Internet is an environment where people can show real political activity: express their attitude to politics, influence political processes, political decision-making, development and implementation of political programmes and projects.
II. Behavioral manifestations of virtual political participation	
Virtual Retranslation	6. I post on my personal page (on my channel, in my account, etc.) materials about the authorship policy of other users: links, hypertext, reposts, etc.
Virtual Discussion	7. I participate in discussing and commenting on political events on the Internet (in various chats, groups, blogs, channels, communities, forums, etc.).
Virtual Activism	8. I take part in various political campaigns on the Internet, on various electronic resources: for collecting signatures, supporting petitions, writing letters to government bodies, drafting political decisions, political programmes, legislative initiatives, local budgets, online political voting.
Virtual Symbolism	9. I take part in various political flash mobs or actions on the Internet (I change my avatar for various pictures, flags, repost about significant events, distribute hashtags, thematic inscriptions, including about national holidays, historical dates, etc.).
Virtual Expression	10. I express on the Internet my own disagreement, assessment, feelings, attitude towards some political events, politicians and their followers (I click "like" and "dislike", post memes, pictures, cartoons on political topics, videos or materials exposing the actions of some political forces, criticizing specific political actions, someone's political position, participate in online rallies, protests).

The method uses a 5-point scale assessment of the degree of agreement with statements. When analyzing the data, both the individual average values obtained for each indicator and the total average amount for each of the two blocks are taken into account. Since in the rating scale, in addition to agreement or disagreement with the statements, there was an option "I find it difficult to answer", in addition to the average values, the final percentage of positive and negative answers was also calculated. This made it possible to more clearly depict the results obtained. The assessment of the internal consistency of the methodology indicates good agreement (Cronbach's alpha (α)=0.831). The indicators of consistency between the two parts of the methodology are acceptable for each of the two blocks ("cognitive foundations" α=0.717; "behavioral manifestations" α=0.761).

2.2 Diagnostics of media competence

The level of media competence was measured using a methodology developed by K. K. Bakuleva based on the analysis of theoretical data on this phenomenon [15-18]. The methodology diagnoses the degree of emotional involvement in the perception of media messages (affective component), the propensity to analyze and interpret media information (cognitive component), the frequency of contacts with the media (operational component). The final indicator of media competence varies from 24 to 120 points and allows the respondents to be divided into three groups, depending on the scores obtained. Indicators not exceeding 60 points are assessed as low (MC low score); falling within the range from 61 to 80 points – as medium (MC medium score); exceeding 81 points – as high (MC high score). The assessment of the internal consistency of the methodology indicates good agreement (Cronbach $(\alpha)=0.897$). The indicators of consistency of the three parts of the methodology are high for each of the three factors ("cognitive" $\alpha=0.826$; "affective" $\alpha=0.799$; "operational" $\alpha=0.791$).

2.3 Diagnostics of political beliefs

The diagnostics of political beliefs was carried out using a questionnaire developed by K.K. Bakuleva (2014) based on the operational code [19, 20]. The questionnaire consists of 9 questions with a bipolar scale of answers and a five-point scale. The names of political beliefs studied in this study are presented in Figures 3 and 4. The operational code is a set of basic principles that guide a particular subject in focusing, searching and assessing political information. The structure of the operational code consists of two groups of beliefs: philosophical and instrumental. These beliefs can be presented as "answers" (with a choice of two or more alternatives) to questions about the nature of political processes and possible ways to achieve political goals. The answers to philosophical questions are a "self-attribution" that describes an individual's attitude to the political universe (friendly or hostile, optimistic or pessimistic, with high or low control, etc.). The answers to the instrumental questions reveal the "personality handwriting" and the most preferred self-scripts (promises, threats, support, resistance, etc.). Taken together, these two types of codes act as heuristic, mediating or filtering mechanisms for processing information about a situation or political actors. Thus, the system of political beliefs allows a person to navigate in the surrounding reality of the world of political communications and choose appropriate interaction strategies for a given situation.

3 Results and Discussion

The analysis of the level of media competence of the respondents who took part in the study allowed them to be divided into three groups with low (N=20, M=51.3, SD=8.2), medium (N=56, M=72.4, SD=5.9) and high (N=35, M=89.2, SD=6.9) indicators, according to the key of the methodology.

Analyzing the cognitive foundations of the virtual political participation of young people, we can conclude that respondents with a high level of media competence are much more likely to look for additional information about political events on the Internet (p=0.000), subscribe to various political channels and communities (p=0.000), and also tend to believe that electronic resources provide an opportunity to show new political activity (p=0.022) and have a real impact on political processes (p=0.026) (Figure 1).

The analysis of behavioral manifestations of virtual political participation shows that respondents with a high level of media competence more often post materials about the authorship policy of other users on their personal page (p=0.000), more actively discuss political events on the Internet (p=0.018), and also participate in virtual political campaigns and flash mobs (p=0.017) (Figure 2). Also, young people with more developed abilities and skills in interacting with media resources are more likely to express their own attitude to certain political events, politicians and their followers on the Internet (p=0.031).
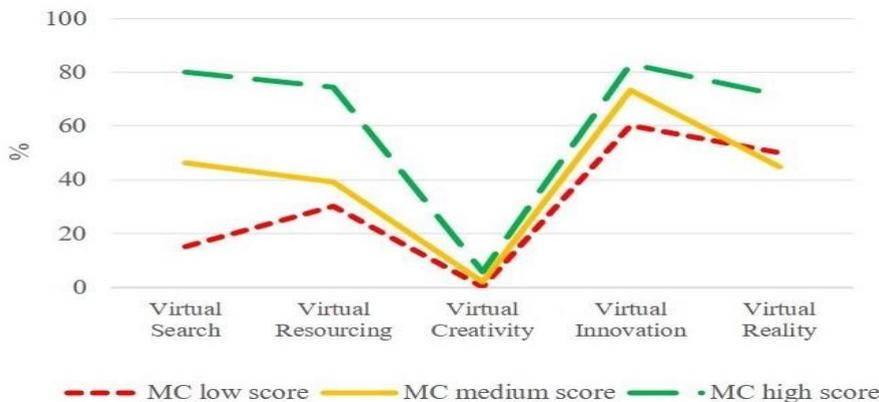

Fig. 1. Cognitive foundations of virtual political participation of respondents with different levels of media competence.

The obtained data can be explained by the fact that people with high media competence, as a rule, are interested in getting information about politics, tend to intensively use different media, show personal initiative in creating, comparing and discussing media content, and high emotional involvement. The respondents with a low level of media competence are characterized by a rare use of media resources, a weak interest in analyzing the content of information sources, and their low emotional significance. The medium level of media competence is inherent in respondents who often use the media, are emotionally involved and analyze media messages, but do not make efforts to purposefully search, compare and discuss information.
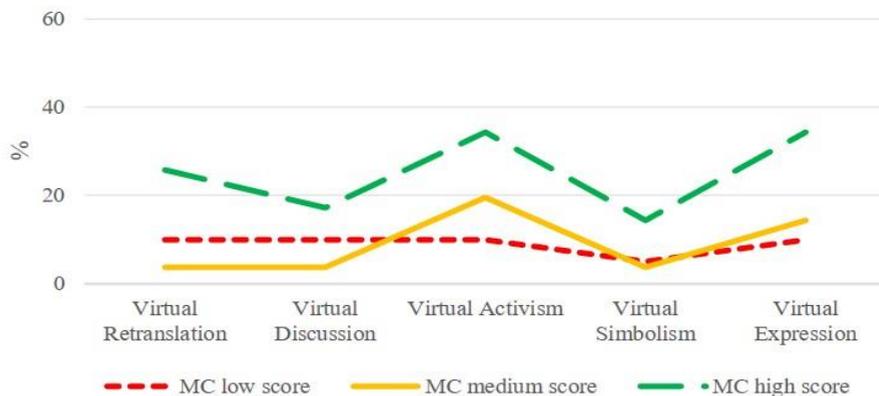

Fig. 2. Behavioral manifestations of virtual political participation of respondents with different levels of media competence.

Additional analysis showed that the overall indicator of the cognitive foundations of virtual political participation of young people is almost twice as high as the overall indicator of its behavioral manifestations, regardless of the level of media competence. This means

that despite the perception of electronic forms of communication as a significant platform that can have a real impact on the political process, representatives of Russian youth are still more in the role of observers than acting political actors. Separately, we note that the overall indicator of media competence turned out to be associated with all indicators of virtual political participation ($p<0.01$), except for "virtual reality" and "virtual creativity". This suggests that the level of media competence can induce young people not only to more actively saturate themselves with political information from the Internet but also to demonstrate various options for behaviour in the media space.

The analysis of the philosophical political beliefs of the respondents showed that in all three groups, when answering the question about the nature of the world of politics, opinions were almost equally divided: one part of the respondents believes that politics is more of a conflict in nature, the other believes that cooperation is more common in politics (Figure 3). Also, regardless of the level of media competence, respondents are convinced that real political goals are achievable, and the political situation can be controlled. Respondents with a low level of media competence are more confident in the high predictability of the political future ($p=0.027$), and more media competent youth are more confident in the high role of chance in politics ($p=0.008$).
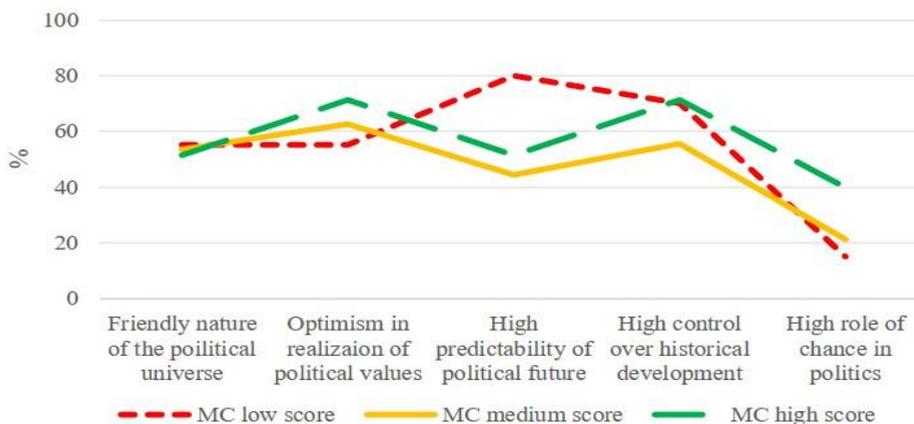

Fig. 3. Philosophical political beliefs of respondents with different levels of media competence.

The analysis of the instrumental political beliefs of the study participants showed that respondents with a high level of media competence are more convinced that the leading means of achieving political goals is interaction ($p=0.006$). Less media-competent youth believe that risky actions in politics are unacceptable ($p=0.015$) (Figure 4). It should be noted that representatives of all three groups perceive politics as the result of teamwork rather than individual work, recognizing the need for political strategy to change over time.

The correlation analysis for the entire sample (N=111) made it possible to establish the presence of multiple relationships between the philosophical and instrumental political beliefs of the respondents with various indicators of their virtual political participation and media competence. Thus, the belief that interaction is the leading means of achieving political goals has a positive relationship with almost all indicators of virtual political participation ($p<0.01$), except for virtual creativity and virtual discussion. This means that commenting on political events and creating their own political content in the Internet space are today regarded by the respondents who took part in this study as insufficiently relevant and effective. The intensification of virtual discussion can occur as the belief in the high degree of conflict in politics decreases and the confidence in its cooperative nature increases

(p<0.05, r=0.223), as well as when the belief in the high role of chance in politics is strengthened (p<0.01, r=-294).
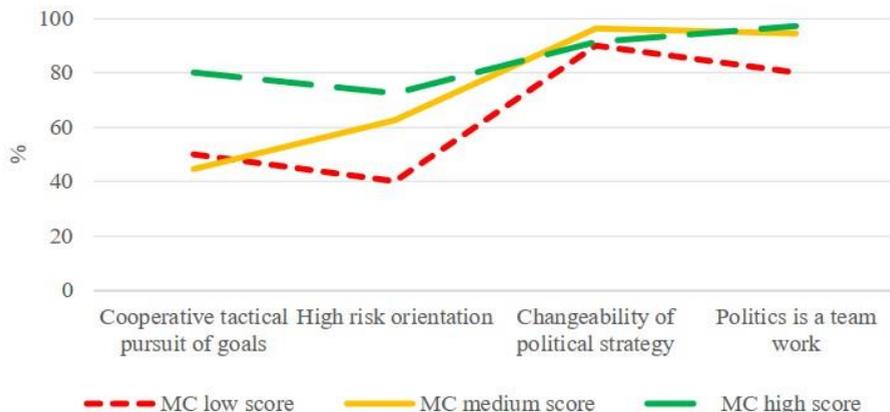

Fig. 4. Instrumental political beliefs of respondents with different levels of media competence.

The belief in the possibility of achieving real political goals is associated with the perception of the Internet as an environment where people can show real political activity: express their attitude to politics, influence political processes, political decision-making, development and implementation of political programmes and projects (p<0.05, r=0.288). Respondents with this belief more often subscribe to various political resources (p<0.05, r=0.222), take a more active part in political campaigns on the Internet (p<0.05, r=0.191) and more often post symbolic materials (replacing an avatar with various pictures, flags, distribution of hashtags, thematic inscriptions, including national holidays, historical dates, etc.) (p<0.05, r=0.233).

The belief about the high role of the case in politics is associated with the posting on the personal Internet page of materials about the policy of authorship of other users (p<0.05, r=-195) and the manifestation of emotional reactions to politics (p<0.01, r=-239). The belief that risky actions are acceptable in politics is interconnected with the presence of a subscription to political Internet resources (p<0.01, r=0.294), and the belief that it is necessary to change the political strategy over time – with the desire to search for additional information about political events on the Internet (p<0.05, r=0.199).

5 Conclusion

The study made it possible to establish that the preference for certain types of virtual political participation is associated with subjective ideas about the nature of political processes, as well as the level of media competence. Representatives of Russian youth perceive the Internet as a new and real way of influencing the course of modern political processes. Behaviour in the network space is determined by the cognitive foundations of virtual political participation – search activity, resource availability, a high assessment of the potential effectiveness of online platforms for expressing their own position.

The degree of involvement in political Internet communication is related to the level of media competence of respondents. Developed abilities and skills of interaction with socio-political information can encourage young people not only to more actively saturate themselves with information but also to demonstrate various options for behaviour in the media space: relay messages on the topic of politics, express their own attitude towards politicians and their representatives, participate in various political campaigns online, discuss and comment on political events on the Internet. The overall indicator of the cognitive

foundations of virtual political participation of young people is almost twice as high as the overall indicator of its behavioral manifestations, regardless of the level of media competence. This may indicate that network behavior can be determined not so much by the developed ability to interact with information, but by other psychological indicators.

Regardless of the level of media competence, the nature of politics is perceived ambiguously – both as a conflict and as cooperation. Young people are convinced that real political goals are achievable and the political situation can be controlled. Politics is the result of teamwork rather than individual work, and political strategy should change over time. Respondents with a low level of media competence are more confident in the high predictability of the political future and the inadmissibility of risky actions, while more media competent young people believe that the leading means of achieving political goals is interaction, and the role of chance in politics is high.

The trends in the behavior of young people identified in this study in the context of virtualization of modern processes suggest the need to develop a strategy for presenting political information in modern media, aimed at representatives of the younger generation. It is also interesting to conduct further scientific research on the contribution of the level of media competence and ideas about politics to the phenomenology of modern political participation.

6 Acknowledgments

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