

**A CONCEPT NOTE FOR THE MAIN PRESIDENCY TOPIC**  
**FOR 2021-2023**

**Topic:** Living in the Online Age: Looming Challenges and Urge for Solutions

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In the 21st century, new rapidly developing information and communication technologies have made it possible to achieve tremendous changes in all spheres of human life. The Internet has become the main driving force behind globalization, and the digitalization accompanying its widespread adoption and improvement has affected every person and over the past decades has gradually changed our way of life. It is impossible to imagine the life of a modern person without access to social networks and the Internet. The Internet successfully builds bridges between different countries and cultures. Thanks to the Internet, it has become possible to unite the efforts of people around the world, aimed at creating a new reality, achieving common goals for the benefit of humanity.

And yet, at this stage, the world is not fully aware of all effects, including the negative ones, of technological progress and the introduction of new digital technologies into our daily lives.

According to the eUN experts, in the coming years it is the Internet that will play an essential role in achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals. However, not all strata of society have been able to adapt with equal success to such high-tech changes. The transition to the digital space has affected the well-being of social groups in different states in radically different ways, which has led to the emergence of the so-called “digital divide.” Today, about 3.6 billion people around the world are denied access to the Internet, of which more than 80% live in the 47 least developed countries of the world.

However, having become a single information space for billions of people, the Internet also poses threats of a very different nature. The Internet highlights social inequalities, exposing a huge gap in living standards. There is also a concern of advances in artificial intelligence being used to spy on and manipulate human behavior, plant increasingly targeted and intrusive advertising, and manipulate voters and suppress dissent. The increase in the number of different digital platforms requiring the provision of personal data raises the risks of information leakage and breaches of privacy online.

The spread of illegal content and extremist ideologies on the Internet poses a serious threat as well. Children are the most vulnerable group in the online environment, who usually do not have enough experience to critically perceive

information. They are the ones who are vulnerable to influence and can become easy victims of cybercriminals.

Illegal content in social networks and on the Internet, the selective use of age restrictions endanger children's psychological health. Finally, it is on the Internet that new walls and barriers are being raised in the 21st century. The Internet has become a new arena for political conflict, cyberwarfare, attacks, and harassment that undermine the achievements of openness and globalization.

The answers to these challenges depend on the ability of countries to overcome differences and develop a unified approach to common challenges, as well as to cope with both unintended negative consequences of information and communication development and malicious actions in this sphere.

Since the role of civil society institutions is largely to draw the attention of society and government to the most pressing problems and to find solutions to these problems, the Civic Chamber of the Russian Federation proposed the main theme “Living in the Online Age: Looming Challenges and Urge for Solutions” as the agenda for the new AICESIS Presidency in 2021-2023. A series of online round tables on each aspect of the theme is scheduled. At the end of the two years of the Russian presidency, a final forum is planned in which recommendations will be made by civil society for overcoming existing and emerging challenges.

The main theme put forward by the Civic Chamber focuses on the following issues and problems: digital inequality as a factor hindering the development of society; protection of human rights from IT giants; digitalization and the global pandemic as triggers of a radical transformation of labor relations; online education: accessibility for everyone and the decline in quality; ethical problems of the use of digital technologies: socio-economic consequences; development of a strategy for public counteraction to cybercrime and extremism on the Internet; democratic and civic institutions in the new informational and socio-cultural reality.

1) **Digital inequality as a factor hindering the development of society.** With the introduction of business and government services online, along with the development of social media, online commerce and online education, it is almost impossible to imagine business activity and social communications without access to the Internet. This factor was especially evident during the COVID-19 pandemic when maintaining individual economic and social activity largely depended on each individual's access to a quality Internet connection.

As a result, several countries and regions with a less developed Internet have fared worse than countries with well-developed Internet infrastructure.

**Conclusions.** At the civil society level, promote UN SDG 9: “Build resilient infrastructure, promote sustainable industrialization and foster innovation” to ensure equal opportunities for Internet access in all countries, and to provide people in need with the means to access and obtain services via the Internet.

2) **Digital sovereignty as a protection of human rights from the IT giants**

Digitalization today affects most of the world's population. The increase in the number of different digital platforms requiring the provision of personal data increases the risks of information leakage and breaches of privacy online. In this situation, the issue of privacy, confidentiality of private life in the online age, and the need to improve digital literacy of Internet users come into sharp focus.

Concern is caused by the concentration in the hands of IT monopolies of a huge array of personal data of users, as well as nontransparent mechanisms for using this data. The monopolization of the Internet space by American IT giants such as Google, Amazon and Facebook is clear today. These corporations have at their disposal users' personal data, consumer and other preferences and more. Recently, the world has been facing the problem of nontransparent content moderation and outright censorship on Internet platforms for the benefit of certain corporate and political interests. IT giants often assume quasi-governmental functions by blocking the social media accounts of media outlets, politicians and opinion leaders; any post by any user can be deleted under the pretext that the content does not comply with company policy, even if the user has not violated the laws of his country.

This situation leads to the disintegration of the global Internet community and the isolation of certain segments of the Internet, as significant number of countries seek digital and Internet sovereignty out of well-founded concerns about national security. Around the world, legislation of varying degrees of strictness concerning the regulation and restriction of foreign IT companies has already been adopted or is being prepared for adoption. We can see that contradictions between governments and company management are escalating into conflicts and attempts to block the services of these companies in some countries.

**Conclusions.** The world faces the challenge of ensuring user privacy and ensuring that the World Wide Web protects human rights as it does in real life. There is a clear need to improve the digital literacy of the population, to develop international standards for the regulation of social networks, and to work together with the global community to limit unfair competition and politically motivated rejection of foreign IT products. We are also faced with the task of developing transparent mechanisms and norms at the national level, allowing each individual state to regulate the operations of international IT corporations.

### **3) Digitalization and the global pandemic as triggers of a radical transformation of labor relations.**

The COVID-19 pandemic, which has forced a massive shift of people to remote work, has further increased the dependence of business on ICT. Trying to maintain the efficiency of the business in modern conditions, both workers and employers faced problems such as the development of skills and digital competencies necessary to perform various tasks in the new realities, providing personnel with access to the necessary resources, databases, software and other conditions, required for effective work remotely, as well as maintaining a balance

between the increased demands of employers and labour legislation protecting the rights of workers.

**Conclusions.** It is necessary to consolidate the efforts of the state, employers and trade unions, and public organizations to develop the necessary legal norms and mechanisms that will protect the rights of workers. We should also stimulate the development of the necessary infrastructure that will allow as wide a range of professionals as possible to switch to remote work without compromising the quality of their work activities and their comfort.

#### **4) Online education: accessibility for everyone and the decline in quality.**

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the situation in the field of education has also worsened. On the one hand, online education provides undeniable advantages, making the process of gaining knowledge more accessible to those who are deprived of the opportunity to study in person. Also, using the Internet facilitates access to the resources of foreign educational institutions, simplifies the procedure of obtaining international certificates, and makes it possible to participate in online conferences.

However, the forced transition to online learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic has raised the question of the feasibility of a complete transition to distance learning. Despite the fact that the trend for online education has existed for a long time, in general, the education system in most countries has proved unprepared for such a stress. Many countries are affected by the lack of computer equipment, poor Internet quality. For various reasons, many teachers and students proved unprepared to use the software required for videoconferencing. As it turned out, the online format is far from being optimal for teaching a whole range of disciplines. In addition, many teachers and psychologists point to the need for personal contact between the teacher and the student (especially in the early grades), as well as the lack of socialization of students during distance learning. Many students and teachers complain about a decrease in the quality of the educational process.

**Conclusions.** It is necessary to identify problems in the education system in the context of the intensification of online learning and to develop a common vision and proposals for a balanced development of the educational process in the member countries of the Association.

#### **5) Ethical problems of the use of digital technologies: socio-economic consequences**

The development of IT technologies leads to the creation of artificial intelligence, further robotization, and the creation of digital ecosystems, along with the narrowing of areas in which an individual can do something without leaving his or her digital footprint. These processes imply an increasing dependence on technology, as well as the vulnerability of human personal data to cybercriminals or service companies that have access to all personal data of their clients.

**Conclusions:** This raises the question of the place of technology in human life, the role of artificial intelligence, and the boundaries within which the synthesis of humans and new technologies (Digital Human) can take place.

**6) Development of a strategy for public counteraction to cybercrime and extremism on the Internet.**

Having vastly expanded the information space and access to information for billions of people, the Internet has also become a channel for threats of all kinds, including the spread of extremist ideologies. Countering the spread of extremism on the Internet requires not only the efforts of IT companies, but also an international consensus on which groups and ideologies pose a threat to humanity.

Thus, this issue belongs to the sphere of international public diplomacy, as only the common efforts of the world community, aiming at peaceful coexistence will allow defeating aggression and ignorance, underlying any extremist ideology. In this aspect, it is also proposed to consider the threats to young Internet users, in particular the non-restrictive posting of content without age limits, the promotion of violence, the actions of abusers in social networks, the activation of communities aimed at minors, promoting anti-social and destructive values.

**Conclusions.** Make efforts within the AICESIS to develop a public strategy for countering international extremism, the spread of illegal content, and the challenges posed by threats to the psychological health and safety of juvenile Internet users. Hold webinars on intercultural and interreligious dialogue within the framework of AICESIS.

**7) Democratic and civic institutions in the new informational and socio-cultural reality**

The development of digital technology has not only greatly expanded access to information, but has also increased the involvement of the population in all socio-political processes. Political agitation is also increasingly moving to an online format. Traditional democratic institutions can no longer fully meet the demands of the times and timely respond to the challenges and demands of the population. There is a long-standing crisis of representative democracy, which is escalating against the backdrop of increasing mobility of the population, the blurring of cultural, ethnic, class and caste distinctions and the migration of people to major cities. Trust and interest in traditional political institutions and elections is falling, especially among young people.

**Conclusions.** All this points to the need for political systems and democratic institutions to accept the new information and socio-cultural reality. Reforms and projects aimed at increasing direct participation and opportunities for the expression of the will of every citizen using digital technologies are called for and are already being implemented.