

# Social media and deliberation in the period of COVID-19 crisis: transforming political interaction between citizens and Russian authorities in the digital sphere

Daniil Volkovskii <sup>a\*</sup>, Olga Filatova <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, Paris, France, [daniil.volkovskii@etu.univ-paris1.fr](mailto:daniil.volkovskii@etu.univ-paris1.fr), 0000-0002-2674-5794

<sup>b</sup> ITMO University, Saint-Petersburg, Russian Federation, 0000-0001-9568-1002

Submitted: 31 January 2025, Revised: 26 March 2025, Accepted: 21 April 2025, Published: 21 May 2025

**Abstract.** Deliberation is a basic term about reaching a decision through balanced discussion, which openly raises the issues of consensus and its achievement through communication. The current article aims at studying the quality of online deliberation between citizens and Russian authorities on social media in the conditions of global health crisis COVID-19. Indeed, the quality of online deliberation between citizens and authorities on public policy issues is traditionally explored in periods of social certainty and mainly in democratic contexts. However, when this problem is considered in times of crisis and out of democratic societies, there is a huge gap in political science. Indeed, studying the quality of deliberation in online sphere becomes more significant and simultaneously complicated in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. To evaluate the quality of deliberation, we propose a methodology of content analysis based on the theories of democratic deliberation and cumulative deliberation as well. Also, we employ a medium-size case dedicated to discussing state measures of quarantine and self-isolation in the social network VK.com during March-May 2020 in Russia. These conversations were conducted on the state VK.com platform Stopcoronavirus.rf, which is the official information resource of the Russian Government on coronavirus control issues. In total, 5215 comments of both citizens and authorities were analyzed. As a result, the quality of social media deliberation between Russian authorities and citizens is described and assessed in such categories as participatory activity, (ir)rationality, argumentation, constructive politics, interactivity, (in)civility, (dis)agreement and striving for consensus. Generally, the paper contributes to a better understanding the phenomenon of deliberation in non-democratic societies like Russia, going beyond the Western liberal democracies where deliberation is investigated as one of the most important components in the process of making legitimate decisions. Also, our work shows how the digital interaction can be implemented in the conditions of COVID-19 crisis and whether the results of political dialogue between state officials and people on social media can be taken into consideration in the real process of public policymaking in non-democratic societies.

**Keywords.** Social media, online deliberation, deliberative quality, political interaction, civic engagement, COVID-19, Russia.

**Research paper, DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.59490/dgo.2025.988>

## 1. Introduction

One of the constructive and effective forms of digital interaction between citizens and authorities in democratic societies is online deliberation, which represents a process of public, mutual, purposeful, rational, reasoned, respectful, equal discussion with the predominance of dialogic form of communication and the use of information and communication technologies (ICT), aimed at solving common problems and achieving consensus/cooperation

(Volkovskii & Filatova, 2022). Deliberation both between citizens and with authorities on public policy issues can take place on various digital platforms. Recently, the attention of researchers in the field of political communication and e-participation has been focused on social media as spaces where political discussions between citizens and with authorities are actively taking place (Alarabiat, Soares, & Estevez, 2016; Bolgov, Filatova, & Volkovskii, 2024). Research confirms that social media acts as a catalyst for online deliberation (Halpern & Gibbs, 2013), contributes to increasing citizens' involvement in politics (Haro-de-Rosario, Sáez-Martín, & del Carmen Caba-Pérez, 2018), allows to rapidly address current social issues to government structures and involve authorities into communications with different actors of public sphere (Volkovskii, Filatova, Bodrunova, & Bolgov, 2024). To understand how citizens communicate among themselves and with authorities in social media deliberation and how they reach consensus and overcome differences, it is necessary to analyze the quality of deliberation.

The quality of online deliberation between citizens and with authorities on public policy issues is traditionally studied in periods of social certainty (Volkovskii, Filatova, & Bolgov, 2023). However, when this problem is considered in times of crisis (war, terrorism, pandemic), i.e. "a threat that is somehow perceived as existential" (Boin't Hart, & Kuipers, 2018), especially in hybrid and non-democratic countries as China, Singapore, Russia, Belorussia, there is a huge gap in political science. Indeed, studying the quality of deliberation in online sphere becomes more significant and simultaneously complicated in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. First, the COVID-19 crisis markedly changed the model and content of political communication in general as (1) political leaders, scientific experts became the main figures of communication and key actors in policy responses, while citizens' communications became less considerable for decision-makers; (2) the influence of media increased as they gained more control and power to construct and manipulate the agenda and public opinion; (3) the negative role of social networks associated with dissemination of fake news, myths, conspiracy theories, boosted (Lilleker, Coman, Gregor, & Novelli, 2021). Whereas it is impossible to confirm whether false information was an acute problem or a major result of the raised use of social media, there were, nevertheless, public clashes between political factions, low political trust in government (Lilleker, Coman, Gregor, & Novelli, 2021). Secondly, the COVID-19 pandemic was, definitely, an existential threat that caused a colossal number of human deaths. One of the central roles in leveling the negative impact on people's lives and society's activity was played by the political communication of authorities with citizens, which should have been reduced to the following principle: 'the right message at the right time from the right person can save lives' (Reynolds & Quinn, 2008). Social media allowed the authorities to interact directly and in a deliberative way with people during the COVID-19 pandemic, which could lead to a clearer understanding of the problems people faced and, ultimately, to greater trust in state institutions. In addition to timely and reliable public information spread by government, deliberation between citizens and authorities on social media was also relevant as people could present their problems, propose solutions, and give feedback on certain policy initiatives. Consequently, it becomes highly demanding to study not only the models and methods of political communication between authorities and citizens in times of crisis, but also the quality of deliberation, ways to reach consensus and overcome disagreements. The reason is that they can affect the level of political trust, the quality of digital interaction in general and the resolution of the crisis or the prolongation, aggravation of its impact. Thirdly, some studies on authoritarianism confirm that when citizens face crises that pose a great personal threat, they prefer to trade their democratic rights and freedom for personal security (Altemeyer, 1996; Amat, Arenas, Falcó-Gimeno, & Munoz, 2020). In the face of threat, ruling elites propose certain strategies and implement various methods, including deliberative ones, to restore security and order, which may contribute to the activation and stabilization of authoritarianism (Filsinger & Freitag, 2022). Accordingly, it is important to examine how countries without a long liberal-democratic tradition use deliberation in the digital environment to strengthen the regime, overcome conflicts, and address dissent and the actors expressing it in times of crisis.

Thus, the current article aims at studying the quality of online deliberation between citizens and Russian authorities on social media in the conditions of the COVID-19 crisis. The paper contributes to a better comprehending the phenomenon of deliberation in hybrid/non-democratic regimes, going beyond the Western liberal democracies where deliberation is studied as one of the most considerable components in the process of making a legitimate and balanced decision. Also, our study shows how the digital interaction can be implemented in the conditions of the COVID-19 crisis and whether the results of political dialogue between state officials and people can be taken into consideration in the real process of public policymaking in non-democratic contexts. In order to evaluate the quality of deliberation, we propose a methodology of content analysis based on the theories of democratic deliberation (Habermas, 1996) and cumulative deliberation (Bodrunova, 2021). Deliberation is a basic term about reaching a decision through balanced discussion, which openly raises the issues of consensus and its achievement through communication. S. Bodrunova's concept contradicts J. Habermas's concept only in the way, in which communication participants search for consensus and how public opinion is formed in the online environment: in a cumulative way where participants can express themselves in a free manner without observing the normative principles laid down in the theory of deliberation, or according to the principle of a round table where everyone expresses his/her opinion in compliance with all the principles and rules of deliberation. As a result, we set three dimensions of empirically assessed parameters: (1) participatory (in)equality; (2) (ir)rationality: on/off-topic talk, presence/absence of argumentation, and elements of constructive politics; (3) (non-)dialogicity: interactivity, (in)civility, and (dis)agreement patterns. For this research, we employ a medium-

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size case dedicated to discussing measures of quarantine and self-isolation in the social network VK.com during March-May 2020 in Russia. These conversations were conducted on the state VK.com platform Stopcoronavirus.rf, which is the official information resource of the Russian Government on coronavirus control issues. In total, 5215 comments of both citizens and authorities were analyzed.

**Research question:** What are the characteristics regarding the quality of deliberation between citizens and Russian authorities on public policy measures on social media in the period of the COVID-19 pandemic?

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: Section “Theoretical Background” provides a review of theoretical works on online deliberation as a form of e-participation of citizens in politics and usage of social networks in the period of various crises, including both democratic and authoritarian contexts. Section “Empirical Data” describes sampling and its principles, while Section “Methodological Approach” sheds light on the methods. Section “Results” provides the findings according to the RQ. Section “Discussion and Conclusion” summarizes the paper by discussing the results, limitations of research, and future avenues for studies in the field of online deliberation in the conditions of crises.

## 2. Theoretical Background

### 2.1 Digital interaction between citizens and authorities via social networks

Overall, there is a wealth of research showing that social networks have led to profound changes in the way people and organizations communicate and share information. A solid overview of research on social media usage by government bodies is presented in the work of N. DePaula and E. Dincelli (2018). It says that early work on social media usage by state authorities saw social networks as “tools for transparency” and “anti-corruption tools” [200], which could be used for “civic co-production” and “mass collaboration” (Linders, 2012; Mossberger, Wu, & Crawford, 2013). The distributed nature of these technologies and their adoption by the general public has shown that social media can be used to disseminate important information about state activities (Bertot, Jaeger, & Grimes, 2010), to maintain a dialogue with citizens (Bonsón, Torres, Royo, & Flores, 2012) and, in general, to enable communication functions that contribute to the public good (Lee & Kwak, 2012). Also, social media are increasingly used in crisis communication (DePaula & Dincelli, 2018), which is more outlined in the section 2.4.

As using social media becomes more popular and necessary among the global population, government agencies are making extensive use of these platforms in their digital activity (DePaula & Dincelli, 2018). Social media have become tools that enable to accomplish the goals of transparency, participation, and collaboration, despite the problems correlating with rise of disinformation on social media, “echo chambers,” proliferation of ‘algorithmic control’, etc. In academic literature, unjustifiably little attention has been paid to the multifaceted nature of state communication and research on how the interaction between government and society takes place in social networks. It happens due to the fact that governments serve more as disseminators of information and are highly regulated bodies, and their approach to social media is determined by political guidelines. However, there are still some studies arguing that social media are not only tools for democratic transparency and citizen participation, but also tools for self-presentation, exchange of symbolic gestures and marketing of products and services. Therefore, most of governments uses social media for symbolic and presentational purposes. The articles by N. DePaul and E. Dincelli (2018) discuss the nature of social media interaction in a governmental context. Considering the recent literature on affective nature of social media and affective nature of politics more broadly, the authors find that reactions on social media are skewed towards affective and symbolic content and, thus, potentially unsuitable for deliberative or rationalized discussions and interactions. However, some research indicate that social media may become a potential platform for deliberative interaction between citizens and government bodies (Nigmatullina, Bodrunova, Rodosky, & Nepiyushchikh, 2023; Volkovskii, Filatova, Bodrunova, & Bolgov, 2024), although there are many factors influencing the quality of deliberation.

### 2.2 Deliberation between citizens and authorities in a (non-)democratic context

The concept of deliberation is about equality and avoidance of domination in expressing and sharing individual preferences (Gastil, Black, & Lawra, 2008; Jonga, 2012). It also comprises (1) transparency and accessibility of information flow that may help participants of deliberative process learn and better comprehend a situation and each other (Nabatchi, 2010); (2) adequacy and reliability of information presented in the forms of statistics, surveys, objective measurements that go beyond individual biases (Habermas, 1984). Hence, such characteristics of information and its types can make a discussion more effective for the process of making decisions (Gouran & Hirokawa, 1996). The inclusiveness and responsiveness are key conditions as they allow citizens to perform as both the authors and addressees of certain solutions or proposals. Interestingly, inclusion and mutual respect, on the one hand, are outcomes of deliberation and, on the other one, prerequisites for it (Beauvais, 2020). The core values of deliberation, according to Habermas, are communicative rationality and legitimacy (Habermas, 1984).

Many theorists and empirical researchers have recently joined the thought of aggregation of preferences and processes by which preferences and broader values that shape them are formed in public deliberation (Shapiro,

2003). It seems extremely necessary to highlight the relevance and benefits of deliberation for citizenry, society and government as well. Thanks to deliberating, community's social capital increases, since more people consider deliberation as a civic activity (Fishkin, 1995), constitutional order legitimacy explicitly grows as people have an opportunity to express their views and understand that order by exchanging their opinions (Chambers, 1996; Gutmann & Thompson, 1996), public actions and decisions made both individually and collectively have a greater supporting for responsive government representatives (Gastil, 2000). As a result, citizens become more enlightened about their own and others' needs and experiences, can better resolve deep conflicts and be more involved in political participation, which can be implemented digitally via social media.

Nowadays, enormous amount of research is concentrated on investigating online deliberation and its different aspects as design, technical affordances, results, process, effects. Our recent literature review on online deliberation allowed us to detect a few directions that certainly should be developed in the future (Volkovskii, Filatova, & Bolgov, 2023). The first one correlated with exploring online deliberation and its quality in the conditions various crises (pandemic, war, natural or technogenic catastrophes, ecological crisis). The second venue was about understanding what online deliberation represents and what negative effects it may have on citizens and civic engagement. Indeed, there is a tone of definitions, and the majority of researchers concentrates on studying good sides of online deliberation, while negative consequences are remaining unexplored enough. The third direction touched citizens' motivation and intentions to participate in online deliberation, tools and benefits proposed by government agencies to increase a level of civic engagement. One more direction can be correlated with studying the quality of online deliberation between citizens and government bodies towards valuable socio-political questions in non-democratic countries or hybrid regimes. As for Russia, there are some empirical works indicating on involvement of authorities into deliberation with citizens on social media (Nigmatullina, Bodrunova, Rodosky, & Nepiyushchikh, 2023; Volkovskii, Filatova, Bodrunova, & Bolgov, 2024). Some recent empirical results about authorities' responses to citizens' complaints or opposing positions towards the state in deliberative process reveal that a mechanical and bureaucratic way of communicating with citizens in comment sections significantly reduces the quality of deliberating as well as the level of civic trust towards government agencies and citizens' motivation to discuss particular problems and solutions with state authorities on social media (Enikeeva, Kulnazarova, Rafikov, & Shutman, 2023). Although some Russian studies show that discussions between citizens and authorities on the social media's state pages are more reasoned and polite compared to discussions on unofficial Internet forums or on the social media pages of Russian mass media (Filatova & Volkovskii, 2021; Volkovskii & Filatova, 2020, 2021, 2022; Volkovskii, Filatova, & Bolgov, 2022), it is not enough to understand the phenomenon of digital deliberation in a non-democratic context. In order to know what deliberation represents in countries without a long liberal-democratic tradition and why it is employed by authorities there, it is necessary to refer to the concept of authoritarian deliberation broadly elaborated in the Chinese political science.

Deliberative democracy theorists believe that deliberation is incompatible with authoritarian regimes because of imbalance in the distribution of power between civil society and ruling elites in governance and decision-making (He & Warren, 2011), but deliberation exists not only in democratic societies. This idea is reflected in the concept of deliberative authoritarianism, which presents a combination of deliberation and the permanence of power concentration (He & Warren, 2011). Thus, Baogang He introduced the term of authoritarian deliberation, referring to the Chinese political context as Chinese public discourse in decision-making is dominated by non-competitively elected leaders (He, 2006). Accordingly, the boundaries of political discourse are set by the state party, but this discourse is of deliberative nature, since citizens can collectively discuss problems, argue their positions, and propose solutions. Through deliberative practices, the government collects information about public discontent and political sentiment and uses it to build institutions for control and effective governance (Nathan, 2003). The combination of authoritarian governance and deliberative mechanisms has been studied and explored in detail in China where deliberation functions as an information resource through which authorities shape public policy and gain support from those they target, while having a monopoly on decision-making. In authoritarian regimes, it is the political elites that establish the subject and space for deliberative process. In China, for example, elites control discursive spheres and agendas, limiting public deliberation to pre-selected governance issues and avoiding non-approved venues and topics that could delegitimize the regime. In such a context, citizens have limited powers in specific areas of governance, ranging from negative powers of protest and obstruction to positive powers of some kinds of voice (in organized deliberative forums) (He & Warren, 2017). For the regime, too, this has consequences, namely there is a weakening of the autocrat's control over political discourse, but in exchange for other priorities – its own stability and survival.

Why might the development of deliberative interaction between citizens and with authorities be encouraged in authoritarian regimes? First, deliberation can co-opt political dissent and maintain social order. Second, deliberation can produce information about society and politics, allowing autocrats to avoid lapses in governance. Given the rapid development and innovation of the electronic sphere, authoritarian methods may become obsolete and conflict with the information resources needed for governance (He & Warren, 2017). Therefore, in this regard, more attention is paid to social networks that may function both as a catalyst for online deliberation and political disagreement (Volkovskii, Filatova, Bodrunova, & Bolgov, 2024). Thus, social media can be intensively utilized by authorities to monitor citizens' discontent and eliminate their dissents with government and its politics through

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different methods, including online deliberation. Third, public deliberative practices promote transparency, thereby protecting the bureaucratic sector from allegations of malfeasance or corruption. Officials can learn to use the transparency and inclusiveness in decision-making that deliberation affords them to avoid or, at least, refute claims against them when decisions are unpopular with the public and address the needs of elites rather than citizens (He & Warren, 2017). Fourth, the deliberative process implies collective responsibility when it comes to losses and managerial lapses. Thus, by shifting the responsibility for its political failure to other actors (citizens or oppositional forces), the leadership can avoid being blamed by population. Deliberation acts as a political cover for actors making decisions. Based on the mentioned theses, we can conclude that deliberation can generate such a politically important resource for hybrid or authoritarian regimes as legitimacy, allowing autocrats to cleverly avoid conflicts and formation of protest moods in society. These conclusions may refer to the Russian context as well explaining why and how deliberation on social media can be used, but more empirical research is required.

### **2.3 Deliberation and social media in the context of the COVID-19 crisis**

Social media are increasingly being used by authorities and health experts to disseminate health information to the public (Gough et al., 2017), especially during various health crises (Graham, Elizabeth, & Sejin, 2015). Given the speed at which information can be communicated to wide audiences, social media are particularly useful for rapid dissemination of data updates and warnings during crises (Eriksson & Olsson, 2016). Previous research on use of social media by authorities to raise public awareness of epidemics has been conducted in the context of the Zika fever outbreak (Vijaykumar, Meurzec, Jayasundar, Pagliari, & Fernandopulle, 2017), Ebola hemorrhagic fever (Strekalova, 2017), and the H1N1 swine flu pandemic (Liu & Kim, 2011). The COVID-19 pandemic was a major public health concern for policymakers and citizens around the world. Thus, the usage of social media by state officials reached unprecedented levels during the COVID-19 pandemic to maintain trust in scientific expertise (van Dijk & Alinejad, 2020). Although there is still insufficient knowledge about the extent to which the public trusts health experts and authorities, it is hypothesized that government communication during crises is most effective when it contains and broadcasts scientific and technical information (Herovic, Sellnow, & Sellnow, 2020). Social media platforms played a significant role in government communication with citizens as the pandemic led to a narrowing of the topical agenda on these platforms (Rauchfleisch, Vogler, & Eisenegger, 2021).

Social media generated a space for citizens, communities to interact and actively participate in sharing and refining relevant messages (Hyland-Wood, Gardner, Leask, & Ecker, 2021). Social media allowed public bodies to interact with people in a direct and deliberative way, which could lead to a clearer understanding of the issues people were facing and, ultimately, increased trust in government institutions. Rational and high-quality deliberation was essential for governments and administrations to effectively and legitimately address the extreme challenges posed by the COVID-19 crisis (Lavazza & Farina, 2020; Parry, Asenbaum, & Ercan, 2020). The policies, proposed by governments in response to the global health crisis, were based on assumptions about public opinion and constraints to which people must conform (Sibony, 2020). Although the COVID-19 pandemic increased reliance on scientific and technical expertise in problem solving and policymaking, such expertise could not resolve the moral and political dimensions of policymaking (Elstub et al., 2021). This could be done in a deliberative way (Brown, 2014). As citizens demanded quick action and decision making from authorities, the pandemic posed several challenges for online deliberation (Elstub et al., 2021): (1) whether digital environment was suitable for online deliberation or not; (2) predominance of emotional aspect over rational one; (3) growing incivility vs decreasing civility and tolerance between deliberators. Considering these challenges, it becomes clearer that reaching consensus in such conditions was more than ever a harsh task.

## **3. Empirical Data**

### **3.1 The description of chosen case and period**

On March 29, 2020, the Government of Moscow introduced a self-isolation regime due to the threat of rapid spread of coronavirus. By March 31, the authorities of 67 subjects of the Russian Federation decided to introduce a self-isolation regime for all residents on the territory of the regions. Self-isolation was defined as a strict recommendation to every Russian not to leave home for no particular reason, while emergency and quarantine regimes were not introduced. Air travel with other countries, including land checkpoints, was completely closed, except for flights to take people out. On April 15, e-passes for travel within a city were introduced in Moscow and in Moscow region: 1) working pass (issued once for the entire duration of restrictions), 2) for travel to medical institutions (one pass for each trip without restrictions), 3) one-time pass (for personal travel for one day not more than twice a week). However, on the very first day of the passes' validity, colossal queues were formed at the entrance to the subway, those standing in them did not observe any social distance, which caused mass dissatisfaction of Moscow citizens with the measures taken. On the other hand, all the above-mentioned measures made it possible to reduce the rate of spread of the virus and to prepare for the treatment of a large number of sick people. During the period of self-isolation, an overwhelming number of medical facilities throughout the country were adapted to treat patients with the infection, and doctors were retrained. Russia's closed-door schedule was extended until May 11 and lifted on May 12. In terms of the strength and severity of the COVID-19 crisis, it was one of the most severe phases of the crisis for Russian society as it was characterized by the most radical and high-

profile measures to combat the epidemic in Russia.

Social networks and the Internet became the main platforms where many people could publicly express their opinions and arguments, spreading them to a mass audience, familiarize themselves with various positions, including those different from the official one, and find both like-minded and opposing supporters. Many COVID-19 dissidents appeared who did not believe in the existence of COVID-19 and tried to convince the public otherwise, spreading myths and conspiracy theories, claiming that the crisis was created in the interests of WHO, billionaires and large pharmaceutical companies. In parallel, a group of COVID-19 alarmists emerged. They, on the contrary, declared all actions of the Russian authorities insufficient, incompetent and demanded a “Chinese version” with a complete ban on leaving the house for everyone and stopping of public transportation. Incivility and dissent existed not only in the online sphere, but also in public places, as cases of violence were recorded both against those who refused to wear a mask and those who demanded that others observe the measures.

### **3.2 The description of selected platform and discussions**

Due to the problem of spreading fakes in mid-March 2020, the State Center for informing citizens about the situation with COVID-19 in Russia offered an official online resource for the public on the coronavirus pandemic (Stopcoronavirus.rf). In our work, we selected VK.com social network as it is more popular among Russians and more employed by Russian authorities than other networks. The platform Stopcoronavirus.rf in the social network VK.com was founded on March 16, 2020 by the Russian Government to inform citizens about coronavirus situation in Russia and measures proposed by authorities and experts to combat it. This group became the most popular government platform on COVID-19 in VK.com since the crisis began. Its number of subscribers amounted to about 502 thousand users from different regions of Russia and other countries. Since its founding, government bodies published posts about the coronavirus, offering citizens open access to commenting, so that people could communicate with Russian authorities online throughout all the period of COVID-19. The first post about COVID-19 in the community was published on March 16, 2020.

Online conversations were selected for empirical analysis based on the following factors: (1) they were conducted on a state platforms in VK.com between March 30, 2020 and May 11, 2021; (2) they dealt with COVID-19 pandemic issues, including regulatory measures; (3) open access to commenting on posts by both citizens and authorities; (4) the presence of responses (feedback) from Russian authorities to citizens' comments in online discussions; (5) the presence of at least one expression of dissent from citizens or authorities; (6) the number of comments in one discussion was at least 100 as they were automatically gathered. Totally, 5215 comments collected via programme software were manually analysed by two coders to determine the quality of online deliberation in this period.

It is worth noting that the community prescribed the rules of citizens' communication in the group, non-compliance with which was sanctioned by deleting the comment or blocking the user for repeated violations. In turn, moderation and proposed rules influenced the results of the deliberative analysis: mainly on such parameters as uncivil communication in relation to citizens and authorities, citizens' disagreement with state measures and authorities in general.

## **4. Methodological Approach**

The study employs several approaches to assess the deliberative quality of online discussions. First, the Discourse Quality Index, widely used in modern deliberative research, which includes such criteria as participation, level of argumentation, argumentation content, respect, counterarguments, and constructive politics (Steenbergen, Bächtiger, Spörndli, et al., 2003). Second, an analytical approach to assessing discourse quality created by Yu. G. Misnikov (2011) who described seven thematically different discursive parameters to guide the coding of online discussion posts: participatory equality, argumentation, communication culture, assertion efficacy, interactivity, dialogicity, and thematic diversity. Thirdly, the concept of cumulative deliberation proposed by Russian professor S. Bodrunova (2021). This conceptual framework points to several non-deliberative features of user communication such as irrationality, simultaneity (and lack of order), non-dialogicity, potential inequality, permissible emotionality and even uncivil (within the law) speech, and non-consensual goal setting. Besides mentioned discourse analysis approaches, J. Stromer-Galley's approach is used to analyse agreement, disagreement and their types in the categories of argumentation and (in)civility (2007, 2009, 2015). These methodological approaches are combined to comprehensively assess the quality of deliberation. As a result, three dimensions are identified: 1) (non-)equal participation; 2) (ir)rationality: discourse on/off-topic; presence/absence and type of argumentation; elements of constructive politics; 3) (non-)dialogicity: interactivity; (in)civility and (dis)agreement.

**(Un)equal participation.** This parameter contains several coding categories describing the number of comments left by participants in a discussion thread. These were formulated based on the experience of previous studies (Filatova & Volkovskii, 2020, 2021): inactive (1 post), moderately active (2-3), active (4-5), very active (6-9) and hyperactive (10 or more).

**(Ir)rationality.** On/off-topic comments reflex whether communicators follow the topic determined in the beginning of talk or prefer discussing other themes out of the main one. The category of argumentation is borrowed from the work of Fischer and co-authors (2021), where several types of arguments were described and empirically

applied (see Table 1). This approach fits well with this work because it allows to establish an explicit difference in the types of arguments offered by the government corpus and ordinary citizens (inductive, deductive, casual, analogical reasoning, expressing uncertainty, questioning).

**Table 1.** Argumentation and its categories proposed by Fischer and his colleagues (2021)

Category	Description
Inductive	Personal examples, experiences, stories, and hypothetical examples can be used to inductively make a point
Deductive	Evoking expertise, statistics, or authoritative texts from one side, often to challenge the reasoning of another side
Casual	The reasoning is not always sound in the 'if/then' relationships in causal arguments: many participants may rely on a correlational relationship, not an actual cause-effect relationship. Correlational relationships imply an association, but with multiple potential causes
Analogy	Analogies compare two targets towards one context
Expressing uncertainty	The expression of uncertainty is a central source of pressure for participants undecided on the measure. Expressing uncertainty means that the reasoning is unauthoritative in nature as the group came to a decision
Question	A common communicative tactic participants use to express reasoning. Questions about evidence allow participants to add their opinion to the discourse in a nonthreatening, though sometimes confrontational, way

The measurement of constructive politics is of high relevance as it gives an opportunity to discover who constructs the political discourse and who proposes constructive solutions to tackle the issues and build consensus. The authors of DQI (2003) capture three codes which are also implemented in our research: (1) positional politics which means no compromise or consensus building between speakers who strongly belong to their own positions; (2) alternative proposal which does not cover the current agenda but fits another one; (3) mediating proposal that fits the current agenda.

**(Non-)dialogicity.** Interactivity means an interaction between users, which can be marked by two indicators (Filatova & Volkovskii, 2020): 1) mentioning one participant by another in a conversation (either by name or a link to a comment), 2) without mentioning the name of individual, but only by reference to the comment. The category of (in)civility is adopted from works of Misnikov as it has been successfully tested in our several recent works (Volkovskii & Bodrunova, 2023; Volkovskii & Filatova, 2023). The characteristics are distributed in two categories as we analyze comments of both government and citizenry. If we consider DQI (2003), there is a category of respect that can be similar to term of civility. However, there are three general codes (no respect; implicit respect; explicit respect) that make analysis of communication culture very narrow and unrepresentable.

The categories close to constructive politics are agreement and disagreement. The works by Stromer-Galley (2007, 2009) proposed a systematic way to measure what happens during discussions. The article presented a simple procedure for coding and analyzing agreement and disagreement. Agreement was understood as a signal of support with something said by a previous speaker. Agreement includes a comment containing explicit or implicit agreement with the statements of other users. Disagreement is understood as a statement that signals a contradiction with something said by a previous speaker, including a moderator. Messages are encoded as disagreement when they (1) diverge from general tone of discussion (considering a previous message in topic as a basic one), which indicates a heterogeneity in the topic; (2) clearly diverge from another commentator in the form of a name tag or response. Therefore, disagreement is encoded if at least one of two conditions is seen.

The methodology may contain the following components of analysis of agreement and disagreement, which are presented below:

- (1) analyzing the presence and absence of agreement and disagreement, their frequency;
- (2) the actor who expresses agreement or disagreement (citizens, authorities);
- (3) the subject/object towards which agreement or disagreement is expressed (person, authority, policy measure);
- (4) analyzing a type of disagreement in terms of two categories:
  - argumentation (justified or unjustified);
  - communication culture (civil (soft and bold) or uncivil).

Also, we distinguish different categories of agreement and disagreement based on components 2 and 3:

- (1) (dis)agreement of citizens with citizens;
- (2) (dis)agreement of citizens with authorities;
- (3) (dis)agreement of citizens with policy measures;

- (4) (dis)agreement of citizens with a topic of post and information;
- (5) abstract disagreement of citizens (with citizens, authorities, world, etc.).
- (6) (dis)agreement of authorities with citizens.

## 5. Results

**(Un)equal participation.** Analyzing participation of Russian authorities in communication with citizens, a colossally low number of comments was recorded (16 out of 5215, which was 0.31%). At the same time, a number of citizens' comments deleted by community moderators without explaining a specific reason (1.5%) was higher than a number of comments left by authorities. In turn, these comments could contain elements of disrespectful attitude towards authorities and disagreements about self-isolation and quarantine regime. This result indicates that Russian authorities preferred to solve problems in a non-deliberative way, removing user comments that could undermine the image of the authorities. It can be a trait of authoritarian deliberative practice.

**(Ir)rationality.** Overall, there was a low rate in the parameter of comments on topic, which was only 25.1%. However, not only the percentage of comments on topic was low, but also the overall level of arguments in discussions, which amounted to 9.11% (see Table 2). At the same time, arguments were predominantly made by citizens rather than by state officials. Thus, 9.03% was left by citizens, of which mostly were arguments of inductive character, i.e. personal examples, situations from life, reflections (6.44%). After inductive arguments, deductive arguments were used, i.e. references to statistics, normative-legal documents, studies of scientists, media and expert interviews (0.91%). The authorities used only deductive argumentation in their answers to citizens' comments (0.08%). The use of other types of argumentation was not recorded.

**Table 2.** Argumentation expressed by citizens and Russian authorities in online discussions (%)

Category	%	Types of arguments					
		Inductive	Deductive	Causal	Analogical	Expressing uncertainty	Questioning
General figures	9,11	6,44	1	0,59	0,58	0,19	0,31
Government's argumentation	0,08	0	0,08	0	0	0	0
Citizens' argumentation	9,03	6,44	0,92	0,59	0,58	0,19	0,31

As for constructive politics, Russian authorities preferred to keep silent and did not give practically any suggestions for solving problematic situations (0.04%), while, in comparison with authorities, citizens were very active in policy construction (3.22%) (see Table 3). The mediated suggestions that received the most from citizens were the ones that addressed the problems related to self-isolation and quarantine (1.78%). The number of alternative proposals that did not address the main topic of discussion was 1.44%. Only mediated proposals were recorded from authorities.

**Table 3.** Constructive politics in online discussions between citizens and Russian authorities (%)

Category	Types of constructive politics	
	Alternative politics	Mediating politics
General figures	1,44	1,82
Government	0	0,04
Citizenry	1,44	1,78

**(Non-)dialogicity.** The overall level of interactivity was quite high and amounted to 74.86%. However, the level of civility was not as high as the level of interaction of participants. The level of civility was only 0.21% and only towards other citizens (see Table 4). At the same time, the general level of uncivil attitude in the discussions was higher than the civil one. The rudest statements and insults from citizens (2.12%) were recorded in relation to other people (1.02%), then to the Russian authorities (0.33%), then in relation to the measures taken (0.1%) (see Table 4). In addition, citizens spoke negatively about other issues that could concern those who came from abroad and brought the infection (0.67%). It is important to note that this intolerant communication was abstract and indirectly addressed as this category of citizens was not present in the discussions. The authorities responded to citizens' comments in a neutral tone. In general, taking into account our previous research (Volkovskii & Bodrunova, 2023; Volkovskii & Filatova, 2023), rather low levels of disrespectful communication of citizens were recorded on the platform, since the rules of communication were prescribed in the community, comments were moderated by administrators, and the open presence of bots and trolls was not detected by citizens. This result indicates that moderation and rules of communication matter and may influence a deliberative process.



**Table 4.** Civility and incivility in online discussions between citizens and Russian authorities (%)

Category	%	Types			
		Towards topic	Towards citizens	Towards authorities	Towards other issues
General figures for civility	0,21	0	0,21	0	0
Civil tone of government	0	0	0	0	0
Civil tone of citizens	0,21	0	0,21	0	0
General figures for incivility	2,12	0,2	1,03	0,33	0,67
Uncivil tone of government	0	0	0	0	0
Uncivil tone of citizens	2,12	0,1	1,02	0,33	0,67

Regarding agreement and disagreement, the overall level of agreement (2.64%) was higher than the level of disagreement (0.36%) in the discussions (see Table 5). Most of the citizens agreed with each other (2.49%), while some agreed with the measures taken by government (0.15%). Agreement of citizens with authorities was not detected, whereas agreement of authorities with citizens was observed. It may reveal that authorities tried to raise their level of legitimacy and citizens' trust by confirming the views and arguments of people. As for disagreement, citizens mostly disagreed with each other (0.21%), while the level of citizens' disagreement with measures was the same as the level of other citizens' agreement with measures (0.15%). This may indicate that there were different views on these measures in society, but we cannot know the authentic indicators as they may be distorted. It was already mentioned earlier that Russian authorities deleted 78 comments from 5215 citizens, although these comments could have disagreements of citizens with other citizens, policy or authorities, which, in turn, could affect the interpretation of results. There was no direct disagreement between citizens and authorities, as well as no open disagreement between authorities and citizens. As for types of disagreement expressed by citizens, we detected a common communication pattern: unjustified, neutral/civil, bold disagreement (see Table 6).

**Table 5.** Agreement and disagreement in online discussions between citizens and Russian authorities (%)

Category of agreement	(%)	Category of disagreement	(%)
Agreement of citizens with measures	0,15	Disagreement of citizens with measures	0,15
Agreement of citizens with authorities	0	Disagreement of citizens with authorities	0
Agreement of citizens with citizens	<b>2,49</b>	Disagreement of citizens with citizens	<b>0,21</b>
Agreement of authorities with citizens	0,04	Disagreement of authorities with citizens	0
General figures	<b>2,64</b>	General figures	<b>0,36</b>

**Table 6.** Type of disagreement in online discussions between citizens and Russian authorities (%)

Type of disagreement	(%)
Justified	0,12
Unjustified	<b>0,25</b>
Neutral/civil	<b>0,35</b>
Uncivil	0,02
Soft	0,06
Bold	<b>0,29</b>

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

The results of current analysis showed that during one of the most acute phases of the COVID-19 crisis, Russian authorities preferred to delete citizens' comments by implementing automatic moderation rather than responding to them. In other words, the priority was given to a non-deliberative strategy that may be close to censorship measures rather than a deliberative approach, which may indicate a tendency towards authoritarian practices of control over public sphere and deliberative process rather than a democratic one. This is a curious observation that motivates to continue conducting studies on ways, in which Russian authorities control deliberative process and public sphere in the digital environment, especially in social networks where they communicate directly with citizens. If we consider the problem in a global context, it is important to understand what practices of authoritarian control are used by non-democratic regimes in the online milieu and how they affect construction of

the digital public sphere both in times of crisis and social stability. Research in this area is mainly presented in Chinese political science where the concepts of authoritarian deliberation, consultative authoritarianism and deliberative authoritarianism are studied in detail (He, 2014; He & Warren, 2011, 2017). As for Russian research, there is still no empirical evidence based on the concept of authoritarian deliberation. Our study tries to analyze the modern deliberative process in Russia through prism of this concept, however, more theoretical review and empirical results are necessary to confirm the authoritarian character of deliberation in Russia.

Summarizing our results, we can see that the quality of online deliberation on the Stopcoronavirus.rf platform was clearly low: a low percentage of comments on topic, a low percentage of argumentation, a low percentage of civility, a high percentage of incivility, and a low percentage of striving for consensus. This outcome is confirmed by our previous studies on the quality of deliberation in social networks (Filatova & Volkovskii, 2021; Volkovskii & Filatova, 2021, 2022; Volkovskii, Filatova, & Bolgov, 2022), as well as by literature that we used in the theoretical part (Elstub et al., 2021). Indeed, the levels of rationality, argumentation, and polite communication are falling, while the levels of intolerance and irrationality are rising. However, the issue of growing disagreements between citizens and authorities during the crisis remains controversial as our research has not detected this. We can assume that the political context influences the degree and form of disagreement expressed by citizens regarding authorities and their policies. To better understand this issue, it is worth referring to the concept of authoritarian publics proposed by F. Toepfl (2020), who distinguishes three types of publics: uncritical publics, policy-critical publics, leadership-critical publics. One of his studies, which deals with exploring authoritarian public sphere in various undemocratic countries, reveals what types of publics exist (Toepfl & Litvinenko, 2021). In Russia, all three types of publics are present, but uncritical public prevails over two others. In contrast, in China, two types of publics are identified (uncritical and policy-critical), while, in North Korea, only one type of public is determined (uncritical). Based on these data, it is possible to assume that, after all, the crisis has a lesser effect on the level of political disagreement in society than the political context, in which this society finds itself. On the one hand, our results can facilitate the development of Toepfl's concept as we determine different types of disagreement and, accordingly, various types of criticizing publics showing the ways how disagreement can be publicly expressed and worked by state officials. On the other hand, this encourages us to conduct research involving various cultural and political contexts.

There is a significant question raised by our research: is online deliberation with Russian authorities real or is it an imitation of deliberation controlled by the authorities to monitor public opinion? The answer is ambiguous as it depends on a theoretical context, through which we get the answer. From positions of democratic deliberation and deliberative democracy, the deliberative process on the platform of the Russian Government in the social network VK.com can be described as symbolic, that is, online deliberation is imitative in nature and is aimed at fulfilling the tasks and testimony required by the authorities, not citizens, although deliberation is a citizen-oriented process (Abdullah & Rahman, 2015). In our empirical analysis, the imitation nature of deliberation was indicated by the parameter of constructive policy: citizens offered more solutions, both alternative and mediated, and also sought consensus more actively than Russian authorities. Online discussions did not capture the true desire of authorities to solve the problems of Russian population as communication of Russian authorities was aimed at calming and distracting citizens. It is obvious that the proposals of citizens regarding self-isolation and quarantine measures were not taken into account by Russian authorities when developing the policy. However, from positions of authoritarian deliberation and deliberative authoritarianism explaining the objectives that can be accomplished by authorities thanks to deliberation, we cannot indicate on symbolism of deliberative practice as it potentially may satisfy the goals Russian authorities may pursue: cooptation of people expressing disagreement or elimination of public complaints, stabilizing the regime and legitimizing the public policy in the period of the COVID-19 crisis. Definitely, more research has to be conducted in order to continue this discussion.

As for limitations of our research, we can list a few of them. First, we take one country case, although the practice of deliberation exists in other countries, both authoritarian and democratic ones. Secondly, the discussions in only one Russian social network VK.com are analyzed, although deliberative process took place in other Russian social networks (Odnoklassniki) and messengers (Telegram). In this regard, it is hard to generalize the data obtained and formulate the general theoretical principles, which could be used in subsequent studies. Nevertheless, in our opinion, this study has an important applied sense for Russian political science and for the field of deliberative studies in a global context, especially in times of authoritarian renaissance. Thirdly, the number of platforms could be expanded to understand which authorities communicated with citizens and how. Fourth, research methodology. The number of parameters for analyzing the deliberative quality of discussions can be expanded, and their characteristics can be detailed. The data analysis was carried out manually, although it can be automated and performed by a computer program or with the help of artificial intelligence in the future. Research in this area is already underway by scientists (Shin & Rask, 2021), including our efforts (Filatova, Volkovskii, & Begen, 2020). This will speed up the process of data collection and analysis, letting avoid human errors and false interpretations.

## Acknowledgement

- **Funding or Grant:** The research was supported by the Russian Science Foundation and St. Petersburg Science Foundation Grant No. 23-18-20079 “The Social Efficacy of Electronic Interaction between Citizens and the Government: The Case of Urban Digital Services in St. Petersburg”.
- **Conflict Of Interest (COI)\*:** There is no conflict of interest.

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