

# Democratic political regime in development context of online network communities

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**Abstract.** The purpose of this work is to identify the potential and limitations of online network communities to strengthen the position of the democratic political regime. The study was conducted using the example of Internet communications in the USA and France. The principles of comparative analysis and quantitative content analysis were used as a methodological basis. Additional methodological optics were elements of SWOT analysis. The analysis showed that the American and French democratic political regimes actively use online network communities to strengthen their positions in society. At the same time, it is revealed that the largest online political communities are groups of leaders, which is interpreted by the authors as a general pattern in the two studied countries – the growth of populism. The increasing role of populism is associated with the phenomenon of mediocracy – the dependence of the modern political process on media corporations and media platforms, including online ones, which establish a specific format of media journalism for political actors. The strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of online communities for preserving democracy are also identified.

## 1 Introduction

For a comprehensive analysis of the adaptation of political actors to the conditions of a network society, it is no longer sufficient to appeal only to the definition of the State. The reason is that the state is one of the political institutions. Therefore, this paper will use the more versatile term "political regime". The political regime is the procedure of functioning of the political system, which implies different techniques of influence of the subject of governance (elite, political leaders) on consciousness and behavior of the object of control (groups of citizens) [1-2]. As a rule, the political regime stabilizes any, including the democratic political system, by controlling its institutions [3] - the State, pro-government parties, Parliament and loyal political leaders. If the elite does not control the listed institutions through its political regime, the political system becomes unsustainable and the elite loses power over it. The greatest risks to the political regime now arise in the context of the development of online network communities, discovering great opportunities for citizens to communicate, bypassing censorship filters. The term "online network

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communities" in this work refers to network groups based on Internet platforms, allowing users to exchange information, organize communication, create content, as well as solve their other tasks, including political ones. Online network communities, unlike real communities, necessarily involve computer-mediated group communication. The network principle of organizing such communities means their preference for horizontal rather than traditional, hierarchical power-controlled communication. The research problem is that the growing popularity of Internet communications among the people of different countries creates a contradictory situation for elites and their political regimes: on the one hand, online network communities form risks of mass protests by the opposition and organizing coups d'état by radicals, on the other - allow the authorities to collect a large amount of data from Internet users, as well as to try to influence their electoral attitudes. The paradoxical combination of these two sides of social media forces the elite to constantly modify their political regime, given the process of digitalization. Hence, the purpose of the paper will be to identify the capacities and limitations of online network communities to strengthen the position of the democratic political regime.

Researchers have different assessments of the degree of influence of communications on the political consciousness and behavior of citizens. In 1940 to 1950, American political science was dominated by the point of view according to which such an impact on critical citizens can only be minimal [4-5]. In modern political science studies, this point of view is gradually being revised. K. Ruygrok in his article showed that online social networks pose a threat to authoritarian regimes for the following interrelated reasons: emotionally meaningful images and videos are disseminated; alternative information is provided and public opinion changes; the opposition reduces its costs and risks for anti-government actions; information uncertainty for potential protesters is reduced, which pushes them to political activity [6]. A number of authors agree with this position [7], others believe that the destructive aspects of the Internet, on the contrary, are mitigated by developed democratic traditions and practices, and form a more perfect political communication between citizens and their government [8]. But, according to S. Coleman, this is possible only if the democratic regime encourages each citizen to develop the following deliberative competencies: readiness for a deep and non-superficial reflection of the political process; openness to exchanging arguments; individual's ability to be perceived as meaningful; ability to make a significant contribution [9]. Such a thesis retains its weight, as it is known from certain studies that not all authoritarian regimes impede the development of the Internet [10]. It is also important to take into account current trends in the development of Internet communications; therefore, it is convenient to study the communities of online social networks through the theory of echo chambers of C. Sunstein [11]. The theory of echo chambers allows you to consider the main features of virtual party, leadership, governmental and parliamentary communities, which become functional elements of the political regime. Among these features, one can single out: relative consensus of community members on different political issues, ignoring news and issues that are not favorable for the regime, preferring not an argumentative but discursive communication model [12], intolerant criticism (stigmatization) of the Internet users which opposed to the regime [13]. In addition, the echo chambers model is a good complement to the functional approach to the political regime described above - within its framework, the administrators of virtual communities and active users loyal to them can be defined as subjects of political governance, while the bulk of community members are regarded as objects of political governance.

Sometimes, when analyzing online network communities, some authors prefer to divide them into a wide audience in the form of subscribers and the most active users. Such kind of posing the question seems fair, since even J. Habermas noted that it is ongoing communication that is capable of building up and supporting a community. Meanwhile, this

position does not solve all existing issues. Firstly, despite the fact that the majority of subscribers are not actively involved in discussions of online communities, do not put likes to the materials posted there, do not repost and do not leave comments, this does not remove the problem of the impact on their behavior of active users who control the building up of the political agenda. Secondly, the passivity of most members of online network communities is relative itself - it can be replaced by active discourse with appropriate mobilization or provocative actions by administrators or users of these groups. Thirdly, online communities simplify the procedure of friendliness – building up of a user’s own virtual network of contacts by other users, the most active of which can become real contacts. The total number of subscribers plays an important psychological role for new members to enter the online community. At the same time, there is competition between supporters and opponents of the political regime on all these community problems. Therefore, when analyzing online network communities, it’s logical not to completely discard passive subscribers and consider them as a potential object of political governance, which political actors (bloggers, online community and forum administrators) try to influence using the “power through the algorithm” effect [14], - stereotypes, models and rules of behavior repeated on social networks that are beneficial to the current political regime. Power algorithms reflect the phenomenon of post-hegemonic power - the transition of the subject of political governance into the process of everyday communication that occurs in online network communities. The effect of “power through the algorithm” implies the adaptation of any political regime to the network techniques of studying the preferences, habits and views of citizens, following the example of digital platforms such as Amazon, Google and Facebook. This is necessary for the elite to control opinions in society on issues of domestic and foreign policy.

The theoretical model of the echo chamber and the principles of the “power through the algorithm” effect draw the researcher’s attention to the inconsistency of online network communities in preserving the democratic essence of the political regime - the emerging opportunities for Internet communications pose serious risks for the elite to use mass consciousness manipulation techniques and the regime’s gradual transformation towards undemocratic forms. All online communities capable of supporting the political regime — governmental, party, and community of political leaders — can be called political for convenience. One of the authors of the paper (S. Fedorchenko) put forward a hypothesis according to which leadership and government are most developed among today’s online political communities of a number of countries. To test this hypothesis, it will be necessary to specify the scientific methodology and the procedure for applying the complex of methods.

## **2 Methods**

The United States and France were selected to analyze online network communities supporting democratic political regimes in their countries. Similar precedents of comparative analysis already existed. For example, some authors (I.A. Bykov [15]) rightly argue that the comparison of these two countries will be objective, as, first, the US is in fact the only presidential republic considered a liberal democratic regime, second, France is a European democratic regime, where the figure of the president still retains political importance. In both France and the United States, online communities are actively formed by various actors - political leaders, the government, parties, and different opposition groups - and are also used during election campaigning.

In order to empirically verify the hypothesis, put forward, it is important to clarify the design of the study and its methodological optics. For analysis, in January 2020, such popular social networks as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and Instagram were taken. In these

social networks, only the official American and French political online communities were selected - leaders (acting presidents), dominant parties, courts, government and departmental organizations. Firstly, a comparative analysis of such an indicator as the number of subscribers of online communities was carried out to identify the influence of network groups and their recognition on the Internet. Secondly, for the largest political online communities in the USA and France, an additional quantitative content analysis of materials was carried out on the social network Twitter: a) using the accessible statistical web resource Socialblade.com, the volume of units of measure - the posted materials (Tweets) and general trend of their growth; b) thanks to another accessible statistical web tool Tweetstats.com, the most commonly used hashtags were found in the communities - digital tags with the # sign, which help to search for information by keywords, acting as political messages and hyperlinks at the same time. Content analysis was carried out for the reason indicated above - not all authors agree that the number of subscribers can be considered the main indicator of the political significance of the online network community. Therefore, it was important to study other indicators of cohesion of the most popular online political groups - the dynamics of the distribution of materials and the nature of hashtags. Third, the final SWOT analysis of primary statistical indicators, which was used to better understand the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of online communities for the stability of the political regimes of selected countries, became auxiliary methodological optics. The SWOT analysis was used more in the conclusions to summarize the results.

### 3 Results

Since the names of online network communities of the same political actors (leaders, departments, parties) in different social networks were slightly different from each other, it was decided to indicate in the tables their common names in order to avoid an increase in statistical material.

A comparative analysis, the results of which are presented in Table 1 and Table 2, confirmed the hypothesis, showing that the largest political communities are groups of leaders and government structures. Leadership communities of D. Trump and E. Macron are the most attractive for new participants. American and French presidents have the most massive online communities on social networks Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. In second place are government communities - network groups of presidential residences (American The White House, French Élysée), as well as American departments (NASA, US Department of State). The smallest community by all actors were identified on YouTube. The French government community, the Gendarmerie nationale, also dominates the network, second only to the party online group on YouTube.

There are some parallels in the party communities of countries, which, in fact, are in third place in popularity among the population. So, party American communities are larger than the parliamentary Library of Congress (with the exception of the YouTube community). The virtual group of the French party La République en Marche! second only to the two parliamentary communities of their country on Twitter. The similarities between the two countries can be seen in the extremely small interest of citizens in the judicial communities (United States Courts, Cour de cassation). Moreover, in a number of social networks there are no judicial communities at all (the biggest problems with this are on Instagram, although this social network is increasingly gaining popularity among citizens because of its simplicity and convenient format for transmitting visual content).

But apart from general patterns, there are disparities in the representation of political players on social media. Imbalances are localized both at the level of a single country and when comparing American and French network groups. For example, Republican and

Democratic Party communities dominate only on Twitter, whereas the rest of social media is dominated by U.S. Army military communities. The French government community Gouvernement in 2 out of 4 networks is inferior in number to the party group La République en Marche!

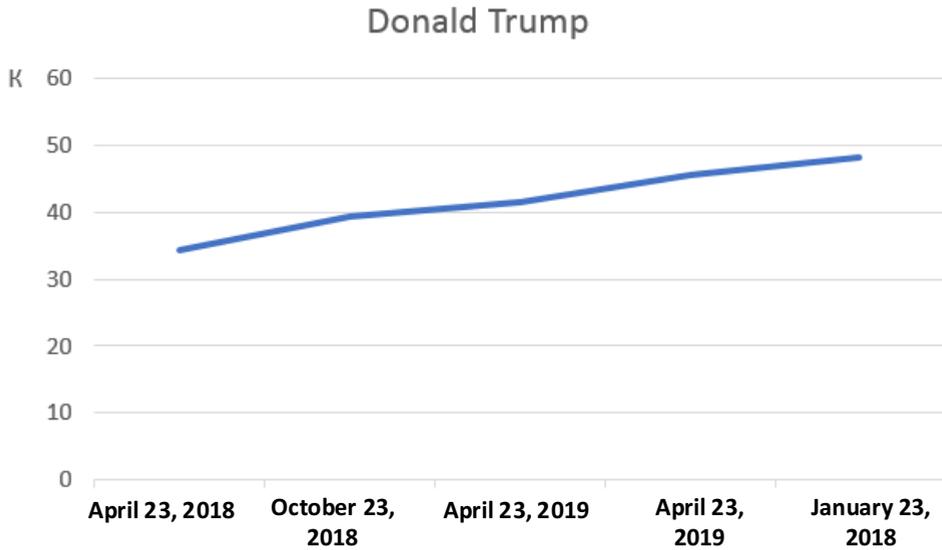
**Table 1.** Online communities of USA.

	Twitter	Facebook	YouTube	Instagram
Donald Trump	71.7 mil	27.3 mil	262 k	17.2 mil
NASA	34.9 mil	22.4 mil	5 mil	53.5 mil
The White House	20 mil	9.1 mil	1.29 mil	5.5 mil
US Department of State	5.6 mil	2 mil	106 k	384 k
Republican Party	2.2 mil	2.1 mil	70.9 k	845 k
Democratic Party	1.7 mil	1.5 mil	14.3 k	210 k
U.S. Army	1.5 mil	4.7 mil	110 k	2 mil
Library of Congress	1.2 mil	417.9 k	115 k	61.5 k
United States Courts	6.7 k	-	7.6 k	-

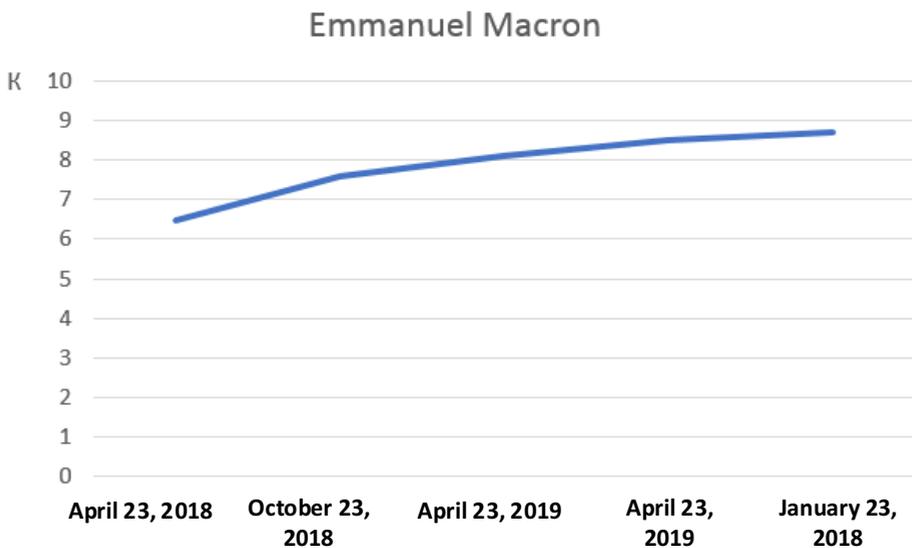
**Table 2.** Online communities of France.

	Twitter	Facebook	YouTube	Instagram
Emmanuel Macron	4.5 mil	2.5 mil	51.7 k	1.6 mil
Élysée	2.4 mil	557 k	20 k	133 k
Gouvernement	629.3 mil	340.4 k	8.08 k	36 k
Gendarmerie nationale	446.9 mil	772.6 k	15.7 k	127 k
Sénat de la France	427.2 mil	79 k	188	35.6 k
Assemblée nationale	277.5 k	113.7 k	-	21.2 k
La République en Marche!	273.4 k	251 k	24.4 k	72.2 k
Cour de cassation	114 k	5.4 k	1.22 k	-

The most popular online network communities of political leaders on Twitter - American and French presidents - identified in the initial comparative analysis were further analyzed using the Socialblade.com web resource. Quantitative content analysis showed that the Trump and Macron communities increased not only their subscribers from 2018 to 2020, but also increased the submission of the materials themselves (Figure 1, Figure 2).



**Fig. 1.** Total Tweets Posted for Donald Trump community (K – one thousand materials).



**Fig. 2.** Total Tweets Posted for Emmanuel Macron community (K – one thousand materials).

Finally, quantitative content analysis conducted with the help of statistical web resource Tweetstats.com revealed five popular hashtags used all the time in the Trump community: #trump2016, #makeamericagreatagain, #celebapprentise, #maga, #1. Whereas the following five hashtags were most used in the Macron community: #2017ledébat, #macronprésident, #bourdirite, #mediapartlive, #ensemble.

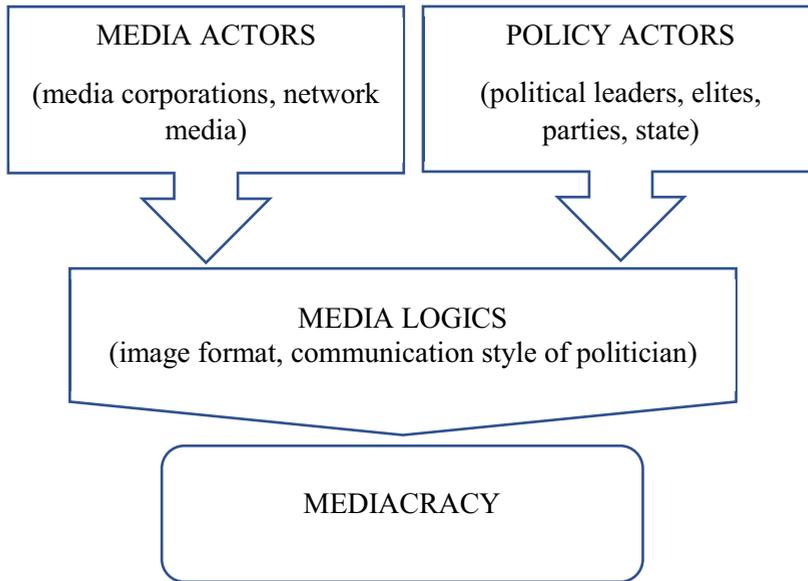
## 4 Discussion

When discussing the results, it is necessary to interpret the identified popularity of online communities of political leaders. In many ways, this can be explained by similar natural processes of development of democratic political regimes of the USA and France - a

marked growth of populism. Populist political leaders usually emerge because of the growing dissatisfaction of citizens with the functioning of democratic institutions, promising them to solve current problems in easy ways. Most citizens expect democratic regimes to simultaneously achieve high rates of economic growth, social equity and security. However, economic and political reforms are not always combined with the stability of the political regime, which is what populists enjoy. Populism is not the only but most important reason for revitalizing leadership communities. There is another reason - the transformation of democracy towards the so-called "media-oriented democracy," when due to the development of new network media (The emergence of digital television, video loggers) the representation of political leaders, parties and even the state became dependent on specific media logics - the technological format of modern mass communication media, focusing not on long party programs and ideological texts, as before, but on telegenic, short political messages, the model of "show politics," visual and computer effects when designing a recognizable political image. If a modern politician is not embedded in the format of media logics - clear criteria of short speech, video, image, corresponding to expectations of his target audience, he may have difficulties in communicating the political message of the message to the electorate. The development of media-oriented democracy is largely influenced by established large media companies. Media corporations manage network mass media, which in turn establish media logics. As a result, in the context of a democratic political regime, a mediocracy is formed (Figure 3). If political actors (parties, political leaders, the state, elites) accept the conditions of media logics, they can participate in communication with various social groups and individuals.

Mediocracy as a modern form of a democratic political regime implies serious changes in fundamental political processes. If earlier there was a high role for political parties, "party democracy", when the mass media had to follow the political process so that citizens could come to some definite opinion, now, on the contrary, political leaders are watching the media for the best presentations of one's own activity, one's recognizable image in the ocean of information. Strictly speaking, in a democratic regime, the previous triangle of power "society - parties - state" was replaced by a new triangle of power "leading political players - media - populist strategies" [16]. The emergence of mediocracy means that political discussions are heavily dependent on media corporations and their commercial interests. Some citizens are turning into passive observers of the ongoing political show. New mass media such as social networks are also interfering in this process.

Owners of online platforms that host social networks (Twitter, Facebook) and their communities create an interface that is convenient for themselves, a mechanism for exchanging information and forming a news agenda, establish rules for interfering in communication and apply censorship elements. However, such trends are not the result of a corporate conspiracy, researchers are trying to explain the prerequisites for the emergence of mediocracy as a complex process of market marketing [17], when public policy becomes a political market, the image of political leaders and party brands are transformed into political goods, political consultants and their firms acquire status political sellers, and voters are political buyers in this system. It is important to emphasize that the growing popularity of network communications by communities strengthens the process of marketing the political sphere. Thus, mediocracy means a close interweaving of actors of the political regime (political leaders, elites, parties, the state) with actors of network mass media (media corporations, social networks) in the field of communication, news agenda and mutually beneficial interests. For the formation of media logic, not only media actors are important, but also the adoption by existing political actors of these rules of communication, image representation. Otherwise, a different form of political regime may arise.



**Fig. 3.** Mediocracy Shaping Mechanism under Democratic Political Regime.

In this environment of media-oriented democracy, Trump and Macron began pragmatically developing virtual networking communities, largely using their echo-chamber principles to reach their supporters and sympathizers more. The significance of this observation is that network communities do not necessarily promote democracy. Rather, on the contrary, populist rhetoric, skillfully organized on social media, replaces democratic discussion of real problems. With the help of network communities, populist leaders primitivize the very idea of a democratic regime. Populism is more objectively viewed not as a special ideology, but as a discursive frame supported by virtual communities - a ready-made template, an interpretation scheme that allows Internet users to more easily perceive complex information in a dense stream of news [18]. Populist leaders have a wide range of topics that they affect in Internet communications, hence some studies [19] highlight the authoritarian, libertarian, anti-pluralist, xenophobic, electoral and nostalgic type of populism.

However, with the application of populist practices on social networks, everything is not so clear. On the one hand, it is no longer only the number of subscribers that plays a major role in mobilizing supporters of political leaders. Modern social media has been changed from the early 2000s. Now on social networks are introduced algorithms mic news feeds, which take into account how the Internet user responds to content - materials, comments. The output of news to the user is adjusted to his views, likes, comments and repost of various materials. On the other hand, the very psychological effect of a large number of subscribers retains its mobilization role, so communities are not in a hurry to abandon tactics to increase the number of their passive users. You should not forget the echo-chamber effect - the more users see the same news, comments, the more likely they are to make their repost, put a likes or comment on the material.

Social media communities are becoming convenient communication platforms, where populists can widely apply the principles of the "power through the algorithm" effect to form a discursive frame that benefits them. This explains the use of digital tags - hashtags - in political leaders' communities. For example, Trump began to use the actor's pattern of behavior more early in the development of his community, putting on the hashtag #celebrity, which sent fans of politics to the show "The Celebrity Apprentice." The

hashtags #trump2016, #makeamericagreatagain and #maga are unequivocally linked by his election campaign in the 2016 presidential election and the name of his support group. Similar techniques are observed in the Macron community, which has been actively developing it since its 2017 presidential campaign, as confirmed by the hashtags #2017ledébat and #macronprésident. The discovered practice of using hashtags is quite consistent with earlier studies showing their function of political informing the public [20]. It can be assumed that modern hashtags become an analogue of political slogans, while being hyperlinks on which the user can find political material on similar topics. Thus, there is not disappearance, but a kind of digitalization of elements of the previous political ideology.

As with the Trump community, the Macron community began to increase the amount of material posted from the campaign. As a subject of political governance, leaders try to influence the electoral behavior of users of their online communities by constantly recalling their own activism. The analysis showed that with these goals not only in leadership, but also in party, government and parliamentary communities hashtags with political meaning, as well as emoticons - stylized symbols and smiley, drawing the attention of users to the materials of virtual groups not in arguments, but in an emotional way. The hashtag mechanism has a consolidating function in virtual communities that is understandable within G. Blumer 's model of symbolic interactivity. This concept involves three assumptions: (a) people act on the meaning of things; B) values arise during social interaction; C) values may vary during the interpretation process [21]. Thematic hashtags, materials, repost, commentary, emoticons create and entrench an echo chamber effect in leadership, government and party virtual communities, which provides additional support to the political regime through political leaders loyal to it and its principles. The impact on the electoral behavior of users through the arm of connected virtual communities, as confirmed by the latest research [22], is much more effective than censorship of Internet communications by the political regime.

Another trait brings together all the communities analyzed - their users use hyperlinks to additional materials to argue their opinions less often than the same emoticons, likes, repost, so they can be generally defined as discursive rather than arguing. Hashtags, of course, can also be diverted to other materials, but in the absence of appropriate context and reasoned practice of discussing political problems, this has no meaningful effect. Hashtags have a more informative function than a meaningful one. The importance of this observation is determined by the fact that the absence of a reasoned tradition of political debate cannot contribute to the strengthening of the democratic regime. The observation is related to previous studies, which conclude that Internet communications are not sufficient to preserve democratic practices [23]. The social networks studied allow the publication of long materials, but Twitter limits this possibility to 280 printed characters, although it hosts the most popular political online communities.

The populism factor explains why leadership communities have more subscribers than groups of collective actors of political governance such as parties and parliaments. The principles of charisma and celebrity, a political celebrity whose lives citizens seek to learn about through social media, are more applicable in leadership communities. The fact that government and departmental virtual networking communities are also popular among users of the United States and France can be explained for three reasons. First, their information activity is directly related to the regular activities of American and French presidents. Second, the growth of the audience of government communities is facilitated by the principle of continuity - presidents can change, but the charisma and activity of a series of leaders of countries positively affects the filling of American virtual groups The White House, US Department of State, NASA and French virtual groups Élysée, Gouvernement. Thirdly, Government communities cannot be considered merely groups benefiting from the

successes of Presidents. In the past decade, government agencies and law enforcement agencies themselves have tried to create their own communities on social media for several purposes: (a) to create their positive recognizable image in the public; B) regular coverage of their work as part of the implementation of the e-government concept. Such observation can claim certain implications in political science, namely, learning from the successful experiences of government virtual communities can help scientists develop a package of recommendations for parliamentary and judicial virtual communities to popularize their network groups. This is important for the full development of a democratic political regime - an explanation of the importance of maintaining a legal society, an electoral mechanism and judicial procedures. Any imbalance in the representation of political institutions in a virtual environment is fraught with threats of a rebirth of democracy.

If we interpret the situation with the party virtual communities of the United States and France, here it has its own specificity: on the one hand, by nominating its candidate for the presidential election, parties deservedly use his authority as head of state to increase their own recognition in the electoral environment, but on the other hand, parties, unlike government organizations and departments, always lack funding. It follows that they will have far fewer resources for quality support to network communities than leaders and government organizations. Perhaps this can explain the revealed imbalances in the representation of political players on social media. Meanwhile, the American communities Republican Party, Democratic Party and the French community La République en Marche! Have a fairly broad network of regional virtual communities. They are much smaller in the number of subscribers, but materials related to the activities of the party and the life of the regions are actively posted here. But the least interesting users are virtual communities of parliaments and courts. Several reasons can explain this situation in courts: (a) insufficient information coverage of their activities in news media and on websites from which community participants and administrators could receive information; B) the procedural nature of the work of the judicial authorities, which prevents the practice of populism in them. In parliaments, populist behavior of faction representatives is possible, but its effect works more to increase the recognition of political and party leaders, rather than the parliamentary structures themselves, whose representation in the news is also low, unlike other actors. Populism focuses public attention not on a collective entity, but on an individual - a political person. This observation is also fundamental to modern political science, as it allows scientists to study the potentials of parliamentary and judicial organizations to spread, reproduce and consolidate democratic values in society.

## **5 Conclusions**

Comparative analysis showed that American and French democratic political regimes actively use online network communities to strengthen their positions in society. As the potential of communities for political regimes, it is logical to highlight their strengths and capabilities, taking into account the methodological principles of SWOT analysis. The strength of communities to ensure the stability of democratic regimes can be defined as their communication, interactive convenience, saving financial and time costs, which is an undeniable advantage over expensive traditional means of communication (television, press). Charisma and the celebrity effect of leaders loyal to the political regime can increase public confidence in it. The identified appeal of leadership and government online communities confirmed the research hypothesis. In general, such popularity can be considered to be derived from two factors - a large number of subscribers and an increasing pace of material placed, interesting to active participants. The potential of network communities should include the prospect of their application in the sphere of strengthening the legitimacy of political regimes - reaching agreement of subjects and institutions of

government in recognizing existing political institutions as the most effective and fair. In this direction, it seems that future political research will reach a strong application.

Online communities are constrained by their weaknesses and potential threats. For example, a serious weakness for democracy can be seen as the revealed dependence of the degree of prominence of the virtual network communities of US and French leaders on the growth of their populist activity. However, the mere statement of this process is not sufficient. The importance of this observation must be understood - because leadership and some departmental communities are becoming the most massive on the Internet, there is a serious risk of weakening democratic principles of political regimes and gradually transforming them towards authoritarianism. The echo camera mechanism in virtual communities forms an enabling environment for manipulating public opinion and dominating a limited set of viewpoints about politics and the political process. Therefore, a comparative analysis of the democratic and authoritarian aspects of social networks to prevent digital inequality, network imbalances in community development and the risks of anti-social transformation of political regimes is seen as a promising direction for future research. The formation of a media system in a democratic regime will require the researcher to identify political processes that contribute to or impede the development of the democratic system. An important empirical base that can help scientists in this difficult direction already exists within the framework of two political science projects - Polity IV (The Center for Systemic Peace) and Regulations of the World (Department of Political Science, University of Gothenburg). This political empirical is strategically important to try to combine with the empirical in the field of network mass media, which will allow to better understand the direction in which modern democratic political regimes are evolving

Eventually, threats to the transition of political regime actors (leaders, parties, government, Parliament) to the model of active interaction with citizens through the mechanism of social networks and communities are seen as risks of information wars, violations of the digital sovereignty of the country. A unilateral bet on the interaction of the authorities with citizens through Internet communications does not exclude the risks of hacking, leaks of personal information, manipulation by the radical political opposition and extremist organizations. This observation is further confirmed by the recent situation in France with the "yellow vests", when due to changes in the settings of the news feed on the Facebook network, users of virtual communities mostly began to view only negative and critical information about the government and the President, which quickly radicalized French society, led to mass riots and destabilization of the political regime. Consequently, there is a demand for additional comparative research in the field of theory and practice of preserving full-fledged democratic institutions in the conditions of digitalization.

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