

“Almighty AI”

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Everywhere we hear that we are living in an era of revolutionary upheaval, especially in terms of technological development. Everything around us is rapidly becoming “digitized” as routine everyday and professional tasks are replaced by automated electronic services. There is a sense that change is inevitable and accelerating. However, does the emotional and informational backdrop of these changes truly reflect reality?

In fact, the technological changes of recent decades are proceeding much more slowly than those that took place, for example, in the mid-20th century. Back then, in a matter of years, humanity moved from the first ballistic missile launches to the full-scale conquest of space; television and civil aviation became widespread, enabling the modern technological level of movement of people and information across the entire planet. It is hardly possible to seriously compare all of this with the refinement of mobile communication technologies – perhaps the most important and, to some extent, comparable achievement of the 21st century.

Rapid automation has indeed taken place. But while it has been swift in manufacturing processes, its adoption in people’s daily lives has been significantly delayed. The appearance of our cities (at least those with a long history) still bears a closer resemblance to photographs and paintings from a century or more ago than to the futuristic illustrations and computer graphics found in science fiction novels and films. “Analog” and “tube-based” forms of entertainment are coming back into fashion: paper books, classical theater, the sound of vinyl records. The forced experiment with a mass retreat into digital seclusion during the coronavirus pandemic made us feel even more acutely just how valuable and irreplaceable direct human interaction is.

In short, there are currently no signs that the offline economy will become a thing of the past. Digitalization merely creates new tools to free people from certain routines – and this process is evolutionary rather than revolutionary – no matter how hard the apostles of the new faith try to convince us otherwise.

Riding the wave of the latest tech startup boom, the star of “artificial intelligence” points the way for modern investors to put their capital to work, traditionally promising fabulous returns in return. Of course, in the promotional materials and presentations of reputable analytical agencies – created according to all the canons of marketing – one rarely finds honest admissions that “AI” is hardly as omnipotent as it may seem to the unsophisticated consumer of digital

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services. That is why it is particularly important to speak frankly about both the benefits and effectiveness of its implementation and the significant risks and challenges it already poses to humanity.

First and foremost, these problems concern the labor market: the widespread use of any automation technologies increases the demand for highly qualified specialists involved in their development and implementation. As a result, a much larger number of workers are displaced, finding themselves out of work due to the abandonment of outdated methods of economic activity.

In our country, these issues are further accentuated. The resources of the Russian territory far exceed the capacity of a relatively small population to develop them. Weak population growth dynamics are the most critical constraint on our country’s socioeconomic development for decades to come. In a situation where natural population growth cannot, under any reasonable scenario, become a sustainable factor in economic growth, issues of the prudent and effective use of human capital come to the forefront of the discussion – this is the subject of the featured thematic section in this issue.

A discussion of mechanisms for increasing labor productivity, the effective use of opportunities presented by the digitalization of the economy, and the challenges of “sovereignizing human capital” is essential for overcoming key constraints on national development.

The issues raised are particularly acute for the eastern regions of our country. The already sparsely populated territories of Siberia and the Far East have, throughout the post-Soviet years, served as a source of youth migration to western Russia, exacerbating the difficult demographic situation in the macro-region. These and other critical challenges to its development were discussed at the All-Russian Scientific and Practical Conference “Siberian Express,” held in February in Krasnoyarsk and organized by the Council on Siberian Development under the Chair of the Federation Council of the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation, Siberian Federal University, the Institute of Economics and Industrial Organization of the Siberian Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences, and the P.A. Stolypin Siberian Institute of Growth Economics, with the support of the “Siberian Club” Strategic Initiatives Foundation. The discussion forum brought together leading representatives of the academic community, industrialists, and experts from federal and regional development institutions to discuss issues related to the strategic development of the Siberian economy based on the synergy of natural resources, the formulation of a strategy for the deep processing of rare-earth and non-ferrous metals, assessing the macroeconomic effects of new development projects,

the role of the state and business in shaping the region's new economic structure, and the challenges and prospects for the sustainable development of Siberian territories.

The “Siberian Express” platform is conceived as a venue for uniting the efforts of government, business, and the expert community with the aim of launching a new engine of growth for the Russian economy.

The general consensus of the discussion boils down to the fact that without new mechanisms for implementing projects to develop Siberia, it will not be possible to counter the trends of slowing economic growth in the country. At the same time, it is essential to take into account the context of changes in the global economy under the influence of digitalization – in a clear understanding of it, free from the prejudices imposed by the marketers of Western tech giants.

The relocation of new production chains to Asia is critically important from a geopolitical standpoint: the circumstances of recent years render further commentary unnecessary.

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