

SOCIAL POLICY DEVELOPMENT IN THE CONDITIONS OF DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION OF SOCIETY

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Abstract: The article shows that digitalization has changed every sphere of human life and reformed the social order in society, but at the same time, this process has contradictory consequences - digital inequality, an increase in the share of a new social class of the precariat, deprived of most social guarantees within the traditional institutional structure of state social policy. The purpose of the article is to comprehensively study the role of social policy in the process of digital transformation of society in Western countries and to identify, on this basis, the general and specific patterns of formation and implementation of social policy, changes in the political approaches of the state to the development of the social sphere, including in the context of globalization processes.

Keywords: social policy; digital divide; precariat; SDG.

1 Introduction

Today, digital technologies and network effects represent an integral part of the socio-economic, political, and cultural life of all subjects of the world economic system and the basis of social progress in general. Most countries of the world are on the verge of another technological revolution, the emergence of a new civilization, which is characterized by the key role of knowledge, science, technology, and information in all spheres of life.

The relevance of the research topic is determined by the need to conduct a deep multifaceted analysis of the changes that occurred at the beginning of the 21st century in the socio-political development of Western countries, and, on this basis, to identify patterns and features of the formation and implementation of social transformation policies. The systematization and generalization of this experience in the context of the formation and functioning of modern systems and mechanisms of well-being is a very important problem in scientific and practical terms. In this regard, it seems relevant to study a set of issues related to the impact of social policy in Western countries on the transformation of society and the living conditions of the population and, conversely, an adequate perception of the impulses coming from these factors on the part of the relevant political institutions. This equally applies to the issue of effective structuring and prioritization of social policy.

At one time, Western countries faced difficult problems of "systemic transition", which required the mobilization of the moral and intellectual efforts of society to overcome the traditional worldview and develop a political and socio-economic strategy based on the principles of consensus and ensuring social guarantees. Its supporters proceeded from the importance of solving the problem of positive social reform on the basis of abandoning the policy of low wages. It was believed that a policy leading to an increase in the share of wage labor in the national income provides an increase in total welfare as a result of increased motivation and productivity.

Formed in the conditions of the establishment of an industrial society, this strategy was developed with the transition to a post-industrial system and information society. The main factor of competitiveness is highly skilled labor associated with intellectual activity in various fields. Under these conditions, the

role of social policy has increased, caused by the need to solve acute social problems and create effective conditions for the development of human potential. Nevertheless, the system of positive relationship between scientific and technological revolution and social policy at the present stage of Western society' development is under growing pressure from new factors.

It is necessary to be aware that social policy is a tool for the strategic implementation of a particular welfare model by the state and society. This is an integral element of any civilization, regardless of the level of its socio-economic and scientific and technological development. In terms of both philosophy and political economy, the emergence of civilization, the state naturally predetermines the emergence of elements of social policy, without which the social structure cannot exist. Another thing is the degree of civility of social policy as a component of the constructive development of society. The elements of such a policy are objectively formed at a certain historical phase. From a rigid social model, society is gradually moving to a developing social policy, and as a result, it is gradually transforming towards social openness and becoming in many ways different, socially mobile.

At the same time, it is evolving towards universal recognition and dissemination of the natural values of human development: justice, equality, the rule of law, democracy, and social solidarity. Accordingly, social policy is gradually becoming one of the most important institutions in this system of values, actively influencing social progress and the growth of well-being. As a result, a more just, motivating and balanced social model is being formed, based on the effective differentiation of income and property.

In this regard, it is of great interest to study both the conceptual foundations and principles on which modern social policy is built in the industrialized countries of the West, and its main directions related to ensuring the living conditions of various groups of the population [1-6]. Conducting such research at the current stage of social development is especially important, since the current period is characterized by paradigmatic transformations of regulatory institutions, production, the labor market, and other areas, which is inevitably reflected in changes in the principles of social policy. Due to the fact of evidently diverse 'landscape' of digital society in developed and developing countries, as well as the presence of significant regional differences and peculiarities, the analysis is based mainly on the data for the countries of 'global West', to show the overall 'locomotive' trends.

2 Materials and Methods

The article is inherent in a comprehensive methodology in the study of the above mentioned problems, which made it possible to significantly expand and deepen the analysis of the most significant, basic aspects of the social development of Western countries in conjunction with the policies of state and other institutions [7, 11]. This is due to the universality and diversity of the social policy phenomenon, constantly synthesizing impulses emanating from various aspects of social life, economic development, the relationship of social groups, external factors, and one way or another reacting to them.

In order to obtain more substantiated results, a combination of approaches was used. First of all, it is about traditional, fundamental methods that have received wide recognition in political and social science, namely: dialectical, sociological, analytical and structural-functional methods, along with civilizational and comparative ones.

3 Results and Discussion

In the scientific literature, there are several ideas about social policy. With some differences, there are basically two interpretations. This is, first of all, the idea of social policy as a narrow sphere of responsibility of state institutions, corporations, and trade unions, when social policy is limited mainly to the social security system. It took shape in the 19th and 20th centuries, when industrial countries were going through a phase of primary formation of appropriate mechanisms for providing partial social guarantees to certain categories of wage labor, and then largely preserved after the Second World War during the creation of already "universal" institutions, the socio-political responsibility of which is in this area covered all strata of society [46].

This position is widespread even now due to the fact that the policy of the state on social security issues plays a large role in modern society (policy in the field of pensions, health care, welfare, and poverty alleviation). At the same time, this perception may be strengthened due to the fact that at the end of the 20th - beginning of the 21st century, a partial transformation of this system began in Western countries [13, 14]. The main goal is to move to a new policy adapted to the changed internal and external development conditions - shifts in the socio-demographic structure of the population, the characteristics of the information society, and the challenges of globalization.

Along with this, a broad interpretation of social policy has become widespread, the space of "responsibility" of which, in addition to social security, includes other important branches of social services. It finds manifestation, among other things, in the active and passive policy of the state in the field of employment, the policy of the state and corporations in the field of income, in the field of education, etc. This concept was formulated by such prominent Western scientists as T. Marshall and P. Townsend. With some difference in wording, both of them define social policy as a policy associated with state management of the welfare system (P. Townsend), the provision by the government of a direct impact on the welfare of citizens by providing them with services or income (T. Marshall) [42]. A largely similar point of view on social policy was shared by a major authority in this field, the English scientist R. Titmuss.

It should be borne in mind that over the past 20-25 years, social policy models have been 'tested for strength' in connection with current and future social problems, in particular, changes in the demographic structure of the population and the impact of globalization [17, 20-24]. These challenges are very serious, and the fate of the social model and socio-political values inherited from the 20th century largely depends on how a particular society will be able to successfully resist them. At the same time, there is a danger that particular restructuring of the existing system and existing mechanisms of social policy in the face of pressure from new structural factors may lead to a decrease in the level of social guarantees in Western countries. Another aspect of the problem is also very important – geopolitical one, connected both with the competition of states, economies, and TNCs, and with their influence on the nature of social development and politics at the global and regional level.

In other words, consideration of the problems of social policy in Western countries in the context of the historical sequence of development and the contradictory reality of the modern world, as well as at the landscape of traditional problems and new challenges, seems to be very relevant, because it is necessary to summarize the accumulated experience and identify promising trends in the development of both Western and world civilization as a whole in the coming century.

In addition, political practice, namely political programs and actions, not only reflect the various processes of the life of society, but also synthesize the derivatives of these processes, expressed in political struggle [26-29]. The point is that society evaluates the activities of state power and administration structures through the institutions of public opinion, and most importantly through the mechanisms of democratic elections,

which are based on the competition of socio-political concepts and programs. Moreover, the subjects of this process are forced to prove the high efficiency of their political positions on issues of welfare and social development.

In this regard, it should be taken into account that in Western countries, achievements in the field of socio-economic development in the second half of the 20th - early 21st centuries are associated not so much with the functioning of market economy institutions but rather with the transformation of state institutions. And in recent decades, despite the contradictoriness of trends in socio-political development, increased criticism of the "big state" by supporters of the liberal concept, the ongoing restructuring of social institutions, the role of the factor of political management of various spheres of society's life has actually increased [30-32]. It is also necessary to note the specifics of the current stage in the global context, which consists in the active development of competition of socio-political models at the intercorporate and interstate levels.

A number of authors proceed from the fact that political institutions are called upon to play a fundamental role related to ensuring dynamic social balance in a broad sense (including the economic aspect). If they provide these functions, then the social reforms and other transformations initiated by them become productive. Otherwise, if this rule is not observed, then the society runs the risk of facing the threat of crisis shocks of a socio-economic and political nature, incurs significant social and economic costs, loses precious historical time, and thereby complicates the solution of current and strategic problems in connection with political and competitive basis of modern civilization [8]. In turn, this initiates a process of changing the political paradigm.

Social policy in Western countries plays a key role in the development of modern society, being a condition for its political stability, socio-economic efficiency, and international competitiveness. At the same time, the transformation of social policy in developed countries does not at all mean that the "norms" achieved by society in various areas are called into question [18].

The main strategic task of social policy is to maintain a state of dynamic social equilibrium through the systems and mechanisms of state institutions, while all its other functions are subordinated to the solution of this particular problem. Such a balance in modern Western society, depending on the nature of the social model, can be achieved on the basis of a greater or lesser role of the state, more or less "liberal" social policy, but within the range of social policy effectiveness.

The current model of social policy is not keeping up with the processes of transformation in society and, moreover, is not adequate to the coming changes. It was formed in conditions when the model of development based on other technologies dominated in society [33-37]. The social policy of the second half of the 20th century was designed to solve the problems generated by the industrial society of mass production and consumption. In fact, it remains such to this day. The system corresponds to the employment model, which is characterized by a large number of jobs for all categories of workers. This system is distinguished by a high and stable level of wages. But the transformation has made employment precarious, less routine, and less paid. While earlier social policy was mainly aimed at those who were somehow rejected by the labor market, could not find a job, found themselves among the persons covered by long-term unemployment, in the network society, the target groups of social policy are fundamentally changing. The need for adequate social protection is experienced by those who have a job, due to the fact that it is characterized by an unstable, temporary nature, fixed-term contracts and low wages.

It should be noted that today the complexity of precarious employment is manifested in the variety of its forms and huge scale, which tend to grow. The precariat is also a heterogeneous social stratum, which includes various groups of workers belonging to the category of precarious employment. It can be

argued that precarious employment is a global problem that has a wide range of consequences affecting many areas of society, including those not directly related to the sphere of labor and employment. The consequences of precarious employment, in particular, include the following: increased economic inequality, lack of security and stability, erosion of the self-identity of the individual, changes in social roles within the family, etc.

Dynamism characterizes the growth in the number of representatives of the precariat around the world and the spread of various forms of precarious work. Today, according to various expert estimates, the share of precarious employment ranges from 15 to 40% of the able-bodied population in different countries [16, 19]. A subjectively mediated character is inherent in precarious (unsustainable) employment due to its focus directly on individuals and on meeting the various needs of social groups that form the social stratum of the precariat. Due to the latency of such employment, it is not seriously considered by regulatory authorities, and the development of an appropriate social policy aimed specifically at the precariat is not carried out. Meanwhile, it is critically necessary until a new social class - the precariat - becomes a trigger for serious entropic processes in society.

For a welfare state, the development of a network society is a serious challenge. Political power must seek a response to growing social inequality and the so-called "digital divide". Disproportionate access to information technology resources gives rise to a phenomenon called the 'digital divide'. It is caused by both economic factors and socio-demographic ones. In sociology, it is customary to distinguish three types of it: the first one implies the presence or absence of access to technologies, the second implies differentiation based on the possession of digital competencies, the third indicates unequal opportunities and chances due to difficult or absent access to information technologies and is associated with a new form of inequality - digital inequality [46]. Van Dijk argues that the digital divide is an aspect of social inequality and, as a result, one of the most pressing problems in the development of modern society [60]. Social inequality as a result of the digital divide becomes the basis for the perpetuation of social exclusion. Even among EU countries, there is a fairly obvious degree of digital divide (see Figures 1 and 2 below) [9].

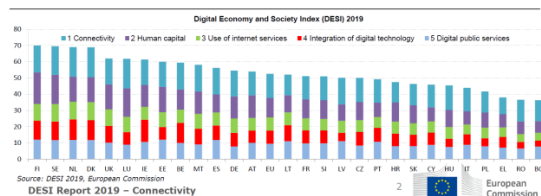


Figure 1. Digital Economy and Society Index within EU countries

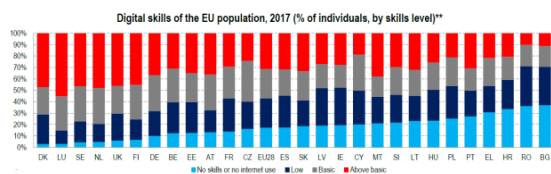


Figure 2. Digital skills of the EU population, 2017 (% of individuals, by skills level)

First of all, the search for a solution to the problem is possible through the development of education, training, and digital literacy. However, this also affects the conceptual foundations on which the welfare state is based. A promising policy in this regard concerns, in particular, taxation and social insurance, which requires a new institutional approach and a look at the role of the main participants in this process - workers, business, and the state [12, p. 6].

The important point is that in Western countries the social state as a whole has fulfilled its epoch-making task. It contributed to the formation of a complex of socio-political institutions that provided society with high stability and are relying on the mass middle class. But the middle class has been undergoing a phase of transformation over the past decades. It must also be taken into account that this is the most mobile and least monolithic part of the social structure [39-41]. The activation of ideological opponents of "big" social policy is largely a reflection of these changes. And this is the problem associated with the reforms, with the transformation of the welfare state. The middle class, in which active differentiating processes are taking place, is not as active and cannot be as active as before in supporting the principles on which social policy was developed in the first post-war decades. To a large extent, this relative passivity is due to the fact that during this time it has formed a significant potential for property and income, and thus acquired relative independence from the social policy of the state.

However, in the digital age, when considering social problems, it is necessary to take into account the development of such a phenomenon as network employment, although it has not yet received significant distribution [44, 45]. But the development of such structures leads to the transformation of traditional social and labor relations, and social policy does not actually affect or only slightly influence this area of activity, depriving those employed there of social support.

It is necessary to take into account the inevitable further growth of social differentiation of incomes in these conditions, and this is a threat to stability. Therefore, to maintain a dynamic social balance, it may be necessary to increase the social spending of the state. At the same time, this is another possible dead end, because due to financial problems, such an increase may not take place as an effective support to citizens, that is, it will not be able to properly fulfill social obligations [47-52, 54]. The possibility of reducing the financing of social spending is a serious problem, which is everywhere generated by global factors, the processes of networking and digitalization of society.

'At gunpoint', there is the current model of the social state and socio-political relations based on the consolidation of interests. A modern developed society throughout the world relies on such consolidation and cannot develop effectively without it, because such is the general structure based on the principle of dynamic balance (socio-economic and political). Otherwise, the loss of balance will generate conflicts of not only low, but also high power. And one of the tasks of the state is to ensure that its social activity does not lag behind the changes. Formally, the goal is to replace the large but "passive" welfare state, whose activities are related to the prevention of poverty and the payment of cash benefits, by an "active" state, more compact, economical, but more effective in terms of social spending and results, aimed at coordinated partnership in solving problems of welfare and development of society [38, 58].

Meanwhile, rigid institutional structures hinder the social progress in developed countries (see Figure 3 below for G7 data).

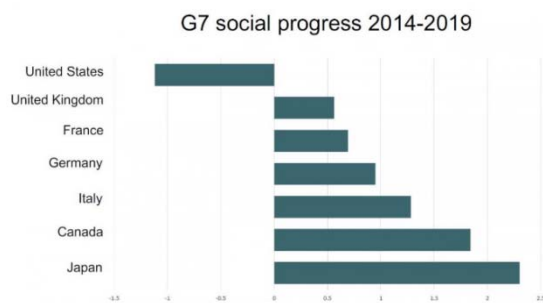


Figure 3. G7 countries social progress, for the period of 2014-2019. [5]

"G7 countries like Germany, France and the UK are sluggish in their improvement ... Rich countries can rightly point out that poorer countries catching up will probably make faster progress towards the SDGs. This is why although some of the big emerging countries, like China, Nigeria, Pakistan and Bangladesh, have improved by around three points on SPI since 2014, they should be doing better" [15].

Meanwhile, in many countries, both poverty and wealth have been on the rise for a long time; inequality is increasing, and social policy is not able to effectively counter it. For example, a visualization exploring racial inequality in delivering the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the US shows that as of 2021 the country failed to deliver a promise on racial equality (see Figure 4). In this situation, the political authorities set an important, but paradoxical and difficult task - to ensure greater involvement of citizens and society in development processes.



Figure 4. The level of achievement SDGs concerning racial equality, across the USA states [10]

In fact, there is a crisis in the management of society, because in the conditions of the global world, networkization and digitalization, the state loses its former efficiency, appears unable to adequately respond to the problems of social development. There is a need to move to forms of management that are better adapted to the new situation. However, now these problems are largely a consequence of the growth of competition at the global level. Therefore, the future lies only with policies based on greater support, greater resources, and greater opportunities to achieve the set goals.

In other words, modern politics cannot be effectively formed and implemented except on a network basis. In many cases, the traditional (hierarchical) model of policy and management becomes less effective in such conditions [56, 59]. And the state should unite efforts, playing the role of an intermediary in the corresponding system of political decision-making. Such a political network can lead to greater social efficiency.

In particular, this also applies to social policy, because it must be conciliatory and coordinated. Separate directions can be formed according to the sectoral-network principle with the participation of interested parties on a parity basis. This will allow combining resources, political potential for influence, professional and political experience to effectively solve the problems of society. However, this applies primarily to strategic issues. Naturally, the activity of such networks is based on trust [61-63]. This is a break with the traditional concept that determines the dominant role of the state in socio-political processes.

As measures to correct social policy in many countries, a search has begun for new correlations of the basic principles of social policy, such sizes and forms of social guarantees that would not suppress incentives to work, would not hinder economic growth and efficiency. It is noteworthy that social budgets in most countries, despite the "audit" carried out, began to grow in absolute terms, and in many cases - in relative terms, since the previous, even revised, obligations of the state are significantly supplemented by a number of new ones associated with such phenomena as the aging of the population, the transition to continuous education, the growth of unemployment, the expansion of migration flows, the instability of the family, etc. [53].

The role of the implications of globalization processes in changing the foundations and content of social policy should be

especially emphasized. In particular, the adoption in 2015 of 17 UN sustainable development goals (already mentioned above in the context of racial inequality in the USA), including the eradication of poverty and hunger, raising the standard of living and employment of the population, ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting opportunities for lifelong learning, reducing inequality within and between countries etc., influenced the development of international and national law and social policy.

The distribution of powers between state authorities and the involvement of non-state actors in the process of implementing the national policy in the field of sustainable development are significant factors in the process of localizing the SDGs. The structure of executive authorities responsible for ensuring sustainable development reflects the national vision of the SDGs and the priority nature of certain industries. For example, the priority areas for achieving the SDGs for Brazil, both internally and externally, are decent employment and job creation, combating youth unemployment, ensuring sustainable and efficient use of resources (primarily water and fossil fuels), development of tourism [64-67]. Much attention is also paid to the eradication of poverty, the fight against hunger, and the development of infrastructure.

In many countries, sustainable development strategies are inclusive and involve all or most regulatory state departments. Special coordinating bodies are also being created to ensure the coherence of government actions in the field of sustainable development. At the same time, along with the coordination of the activities of state bodies in the field of sustainable development, an important role is also played by ensuring the accompanying rights and interests of non-state actors - civil society, business, certain social and ethnic groups, etc. In this regard, various states also demonstrated a high level of institutional readiness to take into account the interests of these groups.

Since the experience of different countries in the field of sustainable development varies greatly, all the goals and corresponding targets of the 2030 Agenda are formulated in a general, universal form, and specific quantitative goals, as a rule, are absent. It is assumed that each country should localize the SDGs, that is, independently select from the 169 tasks of the 2030 Agenda those tasks that it will solve until 2030, based on its development priorities and financial capabilities, adapt them to its national conditions (that is, reformulate), and also, if possible, determine quantitative goals for each task according to the statistical indicators corresponding to it [25]. Tasks and specific quantitative goals should be fixed in national strategic documents, which are one of the key foundations of national social policy.

As of 2022, "six years after the adoption of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs in 2015, a majority of governments had by 2021 developed strategies and action plans to implement the goals. For many governments, this takes the form of a national sustainability strategy that is explicitly linked to the 2030 Agenda goals and targets. Some governments though have preferred to take a mainstreaming approach, whereby the SDGs are implemented by each government ministry within the scope of its mandate (instead of via an overarching national action plan)" [55].

It should also be noted that within the framework of the ESG paradigm (environmental friendliness (E), social responsibility (S) and high-quality corporate governance (G)), traditional risk assessment practices have expanded by including environmental, social, and management indicators in social policy models [10].

With the development of information and communication technologies, it becomes increasingly more obvious that the digital skills and digital capital of individuals to a large extent influence the success of their social activities in a wide range of areas - from education to healthcare. As a result of this state of affairs, better-skilled digital users gain an advantage over those with more modest skills, and this creates the basis for a new

form of social differentiation. Thus, the second dimension of the digital divide is manifested, related to the specifics of Internet use. Evidence from research on the digital divide suggests that it broadly coincides with traditional sociological signs of differentiation. In particular, there is evidence of the impact on the digital divide made by gender, race, ethnicity, and level of education [43]. Thus, the digital divide is based on already existing social differentiation. At the same time, specific digital forms of inequality are also emerging, which do not coincide with the already existing types of social differentiation, but rather reflect the individual experience of using digital technologies. Another area where the digital divide is acute is the growing field of telemedicine, which involves the provision of medical services at a distance using digital technologies. Currently, telemedicine is considered as a promising tool for reducing the cost of medical care and equalizing access to medical services. However, a serious problem in this case is that the groups most in need of medical services (people with low incomes, social minorities, the elderly, etc.), as a rule, do not have the capabilities and necessary skills to use digital technologies. This problem is exacerbated by the patient-centered nature of many of the solutions offered by telemedicine, which shifts the focus to prevention and the implementation of treatment strategies by the patients themselves, that in itself requires certain intellectual skills.

At the same time, according to experts from the FAO and other international organizations, the growing digital divide may become "the new face of inequality," since the lack of access makes almost half of the world's population autonomous [57]. A representative of the agrarian community of Bangladesh A. Borhan spoke very emotionally, but fairly, at the meeting of the Regional Conference of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) for Asia and the Pacific: "We need not just digitalization, we also need "digital justice", under which Asia's small land users understand the most elementary technologies that provide communication with the external environment for basic information about the weather, markets, access to education" [58]. The issue of connecting rural areas to the Internet underlies digital integration as a phenomenon that is opposite to the digital divide and means smoothing the gap in the economic and social opportunities of individual entities. Thus, overcoming the digital divide (that is, the digital inequality) has become one of the important areas of social policy in most states.

An analysis of current trends and the regulatory framework shows that society is rapidly transforming. The regulatory framework in the field of information technology has not only been structured and updated over the past few years, but has also created a fundamentally new vector of development in the field of digitalization of the state.

Thus, it can be seen that government policy is changing in response to the challenges of the rapidly developing information society. In this regard, it is important to direct the state policy in the field of digital transformation towards the creation of a high-quality regulatory legal framework, as well as development institutions that will act as a driver for the development of the entire digital transformation mechanism in the public and private sectors.

Digitalization processes improve both business and political space. In the context of modernization, the most successful solution for the state and business is the interaction and mutual understanding of the participants. The organizational mechanism that currently exists must work systematically so that all its elements interact. Business structures often look back at the opinion, situation, management decisions that arise in the political space. Gradually, political management becomes a mediated and virtualized process. Thus, certain risks arise. For example, political media reality can distort the perception of the information received, which can lead to various consequences. However, the transition from the established methods of political management to mediated and virtualized ones has already been completed, and here it is important to carefully control these

processes. Real political processes are inferior to mediated ones and are perceived as political reality, although 'de facto' they are of a virtual nature. All this inevitably influences the society requirements and real needs concerning social policy.

An important property of a social system that must be taken into account when implementing social modeling is emergence. Similar is the presence of new properties in the whole, that were not previously observed in its constituent elements. It arises as a result of the action of synergistic relationships (ties) that provide an increase in the effect of the interaction of the social system' elements. This implies the interpretation of such objects of social modeling as an integral entity, and not as a collection of separate parts. In any case, systemic problems require systematic solutions.

In our opinion, it is necessary to consider social policy, firstly, in a systemic context, but taking into account the central role of the state, and secondly, in the context of general, strategic goals - as a political activity aimed at strengthening and positively transforming society. Namely this focus is the essence of modern responsible strategy and policy of the state. And certain reforms, in particular those carried out in developed countries, should be designed to strengthen this character of social policy.

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