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SHAPING A DIGITAL FUTURE THAT SAFEGUARDS HUMAN RIGHTS – GENERATIONAL PERSPECTIVES FROM SERBIA

ABSTRACT: This paper aims to explore the impact of digital transformation on human rights and security protection in the age of modern technologies, as well as to support policymakers in designing a rights-oriented and human-centric digital transformation. This challenge prompted the authors to examine relevant literature and analyze current policies and measures aimed at enhancing proactive strategies. To this end, an online empirical survey was conducted with 132 participants (ages 18-65+) from Serbia during the last quarter of 2024. The research findings support the hypothesis that the relationship between human rights and technological development is highly significant. The results emphasize privacy as the foundation of digital rights, focusing on the ethics of data usage and the protection of individuals' rights to freely express opinions and ideas online. Bridging the digital divide is crucial to ensure that technological advancements benefit all individuals equitably. Promoting access to digital literacy and education is essential for enabling individuals to effectively engage in discussions about these issues in the context of modern technologies. Furthermore, the effective protection of human rights requires coordinated efforts from

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policymakers, decision-makers, and institutional stakeholders to establish a framework that upholds justice, equality, and dignity in the digital era, as highlighted by the findings of this paper.

Keywords: *human rights, digital transformation, generation theory, stakeholder approach, Serbia.*

1. Introduction

Digital transformation significantly impacts every aspect of people's lives, influencing how they work, learn, access public services, and manage their health and well-being (Dror-Shpoliansky & Shany, 2021). Technological advancements have introduced new business models and innovative ways to connect, create, and participate in civic and economic spaces (Rajčević, Brajević & Jevtić, 2024; Dedjanski, Jevtić & Grozdanić, 2024). While these advancements offer immense benefits, they also pose significant risks and challenges. Among these challenges are unlawful surveillance practices, cyber and ransomware attacks, and privacy breaches. Additionally, the spread of illegal and harmful content, misinformation, disinformation, and advocacy of discriminatory hatred exacerbates societal harms and undermines trust in governments, the digital environment, and democratic principles (Citron, 2020). Adhering to the principles of human rights as “universal and inalienable, “belonging to all individuals simply by being human (UN Human Rights Office, 2022), governments have obligations to uphold and protect these rights under legislation, within the digital context (UN General Assembly, 2013). While digital technology is a recent phenomenon, the concept of rights has deep historical roots. Early milestones include the Cyrus Cylinder of 539 BC, often considered the foundational statement of human rights – Magna Carta of 1215, which limited monarchical power and emphasized legal rights, and the English Bill of Rights of 1689, which advanced ideas of civil liberties (Sutto, 2019; Đorđević, 2020). UDHR – The Global Charter of Human Rights, in charge from the 1948, marked a significant turning point by establishing a common standard for fundamental rights to be universally protected (UN, 1948). It affirmed the principle that HR are inalienable and universal, a perspective reiterated by UN High Commissioner (for HR, 2022), which also notes that many human rights are considered absolute. Similarly, the *Recommendation on Children in the Digital Environment* (OECD, 2021) calls on stakeholders to “identify how the rights of children can be protected and respected in the digital environment and take appropriate measures to do so.”

In the contemporary digital era, the speed, scale, and borderless nature of the online environment have transformed how human rights are understood and exercised. These include novel ways in which rights can be violated or abused and scenarios where the exercise of one right may come into tension with another rooted in Srebro, Paunović, & Jevtić, (2024), and Srebro, Zakić, Jevtić, & Milošević (2020) works. These rights encompass, in both online and offline spheres:

– *The right to express and share opinions, Addressing misinformation and disinformation, Combating illegal and harmful content, Preventing internet shutdowns and restrictions, Privacy and data protection, Connectivity and addressing digital divides, Emerging technology-related rights, and Individual interests.*

Additionally, *legal and human rights*, codified in domestic human rights and legal frameworks, require governments to recognize and protect them. Given its global and cross-cutting nature, digital transformation raises significant questions about the roles and responsibilities of various stakeholders. The digital environment operates across multiple jurisdictions, necessitating the involvement of policymakers, decision-makers, and regulators from diverse sectors. Additionally, private entities, particularly online platforms, play a pivotal role in enabling or constraining individuals' ability to exercise certain rights in the digital age (OECD, 2019; Billingham & Parr, 2020). In this regard, the aim of this study is to investigate the impact of digital transformation on human rights and security in the digital age, as well as to provide support for stakeholders in designing and implementing a rights-oriented, human-centric approach to digital transformation.

The paper is structured in the following manner: it begins with an introduction, followed by a literature review that sets the foundation for the study. This is followed by a detailed explanation of the methods and materials used. Key results are presented and thoroughly discussed before concluding with the findings, limitations, and suggestions for future research. Finally, the references cited throughout the paper are compiled at the end.

2. Literature overview

To better understand the attitudes of participants included in the empirical research on the effect of specific factors on human rights protection, the principles of Generational Theory were consulted. This theory involves a cyclical generational model where values resonate with individual

psychological types and interactions within families and groups. The framework, developed by Strauss and Howe (1991) and further elaborated by authors such as Hawkins and Meier (2015), Sheldrake (2020), Diepstraten, Ester & Vinken (1999), Mannheim (1952), Toman (1976), and others, outlines a “secular crisis” and “spiritual awakening” The findings of this theory provide valuable insights for understanding and enhancing human experiences. Currently, commonly recognized generational labels in cultures such as the US, UK, and many European countries include Baby Boomers, Generation Y, Millennials, and Generation X. By recognizing the motivations and strengths of each generation, it is possible to transform the so-called “generational gap” into a source of harmony and collaboration. The Silent Generation and Baby Boomers, who grew up relying on face-to-face interactions, remain deeply engaged in their real-life communities. In contrast, younger generations, such as Millennials and Gen Z, have embraced digital tools and social media to build and maintain virtual communities. For organizations, understanding these communication dynamics is critical to fostering inclusive engagement. Supervisors, managers, and policymakers must adopt multi-generational approaches that address the needs and motivations of citizens of all ages, whether employed, unemployed, students, or retirees.

Within the framework of *HRP (Human rights protection) in the digital era*, tailoring strategies to the traits, experiences, and preferences of each generation is vital. **The protection of HR** and security in the the digital framework as the dependent variable in this research is a complex and multifaceted issue, influenced by the risks and challenges inherent in digital transformation across institutional, public, private, and civil sectors. A comprehensive understanding of these dynamics can be achieved by considering the following critical factors of impact:

Digital rights as human rights, where privacy stands as the cornerstone of digital rights, encompassing the right to control personal information and data in the digital landscape; Right of free speech in digital spaces; Cybersecurity and human rights; Equitable access to technology bridging the digital divide to ensure that technological advancements benefit all individuals equitably, regardless of socioeconomic status or geographical location; Algorithmic accountability and transparency, ensuring that algorithms used in decision-making processes are fair, transparent, and free from biases that could adversely impact human rights; Right to digital education promoting access to digital literacy and education, enabling individuals to navigate and participate effectively in the digital age; Protection against digital exploitation, and Ethics in data usage where the government and organizations must adhere

to ethical standards in data collection and processing, respecting individuals' consent and privacy while avoiding intrusive surveillance practices. These factors highlight the interconnected nature of human rights and technological advancement. Effective protection requires coordinated efforts from policymakers, decision-makers, and institutional stakeholders to address these challenges and create a framework that promotes justice, equity, and dignity in the digital era.

Citizens, as subjects of human rights protection in the digital era, must navigate significant changes within society, institutions, organizations, and themselves, all of which are influenced by digital transformation and empowerment. This can be understood through the following key factors of citizens impact as an independent variable through:

- Citizens' control over their personal information in digital spaces through their right to digital privacy; Protection against cyber threats; enabling citizens to understand and utilize digital technologies responsibly and securely and their empowerment through digital literacy improvement (Popović, Miškić, Jevtić, & Kvrđić, 2020; Jevtić, Kvrđić, Ćorić & Beslać, 2020; Jevtić & Srebro, 2024); Demand for transparent policies; equal access to digital resources; Right to protest and express opinions online; Accountability for digital platforms; Redress mechanisms for digital violations and participation in decision-making. An active involvement in shaping policies related to digital rights, ensuring that their voices are included in decisions about the digital landscape are base for the future collaborative role of citizens (Srebro, Janjušić, Miletić, Dzafić, Jevtić, 2023).

To create a secure and just digital future, it's essential that both regulatory and court-based actions protect human rights in the digital age (Đorđević, 2022; 2020; Petrov & Stanković, 2020; Srebro, Paunović, & Jevtić, 2024; Jevtić & Srebro, 2024; Petrov & Prelić, 2019). This can be achieved by focusing on the following key aspects, and ensuring the collaborative role of the citizens:

- Public consultation requirements mandated by Government; Citizens right to access information, Citizens representation in digital policy decision-making bodies should ensured through Digital Governance Committees; Data protection regulations; Policymakers should establish platforms where citizens, governments, and private sectors collaborate to address global digital issues through Participation in Internet Governance, Whistleblower protections; Regulation of platform accountability to provide mechanisms for users to report harmful content and appeal wrongful decisions; Inclusion

mandates to ensure that marginalized communities' rights are protected in the digital space; Monitoring and auditing requirements as title support to Citizen-driven audits in their digital rights properly protection, and Court-based actions where courts should ensure citizens have access to legal remedies for digital rights violations, allow class action lawsuits, and provide oversight of government surveillance. Additionally, courts should review AI decisions, protect online speech, and support cooperation on cross-border cybercrime, ensuring that human rights protections are respected globally.

By focusing on these principles, both the regulatory framework and legal system can help shape a digital world that respects citizens' rights and promotes a fair and just society.

3. Methods and Materials

Study model and research hypotheses. The defined study model consists of two variables:

- Citizens' active participation, as independent variable (abbr. 1), which includes citizens' engagement in shaping digital policies, normative frameworks, and court practices. It represents the action or factor that influences the outcome, and
- A secure and human rights-based digital future, as dependent variable (abbr. 2), which refers to the result or outcome impacted by the level and quality of citizens' participation. It includes aspects like inclusivity, security, fairness, and the HRP in the digital era.

The hypothesis posits that the **independent variable** (citizens' active participation) directly influences the **dependent variable** (the achievement of a secure and human rights-based digital future). The more active and effective the participation, the stronger the positive impact on the dependent outcome. The objective of the research is to evaluate whether (1) significantly does not affect or affects (2). Hypothesis are defined as folowes:

H0: *Citizens' active participation in shaping digital policies, normative frameworks, and court practices does not ensure a secure and human rights-based digital future.*

Ha: *Citizens' active participation in shaping digital policies, normative frameworks, and court practices ensures a secure and human rights-based digital future.*

Sample characteristics

To substantiate the theoretical framework of the study, an empirical online survey was conducted to gather citizens' perspectives on the research topic. The survey involved a sample of 132 participants from the Republic of Serbia who voluntarily contributed to evaluating factors that could impact the improvement of HRP and security in the digital landscape. The data collection took place in August 2024. Specifically, the data reveal the following distributions:

- *Gender*: The survey participants comprised 65.15% men and 34.85% women, indicating a predominance of male respondents.; *Age Groups*: Respondents were divided into four age categories: 18–24 years, 25–35 years, 36–54 years, and 55 years and above. The largest proportion of participants belonged to the 36–54 age group (40.15%), followed by the 25–35 age group (28.79%) and the 55+ age group (15.91%). The youngest group, aged 18–24, constituted 15.15% of the sample. The results indicate a higher representation of middle-aged participants; *Level of Education*: Respondents were grouped into three educational categories: primary, secondary, and higher education. The majority of participants had completed secondary education (50%), followed by those with higher education (34.85%), and those with only primary education (15.15%). This distribution highlights that most respondents possessed at least a high school level of education, and *Social Status*: Participants were classified as employed, unemployed (including students, high school seniors, and family dependents), or retired. The majority of respondents were employed (57.58%), while 34.85% were unemployed, and 7.58% were pensioners.

This indicates that the largest proportion of respondents is actively employed, with fewer being unemployed or retired. The demographic insights provide a comprehensive understanding of the respondent pool, which is predominantly composed of middle-aged, employed individuals with at least secondary education.

3.1 Key Findings and Discussion

The questionnaire included specific statements representing both the independent and dependent variables, which respondents assessed using a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5, where 5 indicates the highest level of agreement with the statement.). Table 1 presents the mean values and standard deviations for the statements associated with variable (1).

Table 1. Central tendency and dispersion measures for variable (1)

Statements related to the independent variable (1)	Mean	Std Dev
(1.1) Privacy is the cornerstone of digital rights, alongside ethics in data usage, and the safeguarding of individuals' rights to express opinions and ideas freely on online platforms.	3.69	1.02
(1.2) Individuals should have access to education that enables them to understand and protect their rights in the digital era, including recognizing risks like cyberbullying and data misuse.	3.90	0.97
(1.3) Citizens must actively engage in shaping ethical digital practices and policies that align with human rights, ensuring their voices are heard in the development of secure and inclusive digital ecosystems.	3.93	1.09
Total	132	1.00000

Source: Authors' research

Table 2 presents the mean values and standard deviations for the statements associated with variable (2).

Table 2. Central tendency and dispersion measures for variable (2)

Statements related to the dependent variable (2)	Mean	Std Dev
(2.1) Regulatory frameworks and policies should ensure citizen representation in decision-making bodies and establish multistakeholder platforms for collaboration between governments, the private sector, and citizens to address human rights protection in the digital environment.	3.87	1.14
(2.2) Courts specializing in digital rights issues should oversee and regulate government surveillance activities to ensure they are lawful, necessary, and proportionate, thereby improving access to justice for citizens.	3.91	1.09
(2.3) The judicial system should consistently defend freedom of expression online while balancing it with measures to address hate speech and misinformation.	3.75	1.15
Total	132	1.00000

Source: Authors' research

Accuracy of the research framework is detailed in Table 3. The coefficient of determination (R^2) of 0.6437 indicates that variable- citizens' active participation (1) accounts for approximately 64.37% of the variation in variable- the achievement of a secure and rights-based digital future (2).

This value reflects a good model fit and demonstrates that a significant share of the fluctuation in the dependent variable – the achievement of a secure and rights-based digital future (2) is accounted for by variations in the independent variable – citizens’ active participation (1). The model’s root mean square residual (RMSR) of 0.5421 further highlights its accuracy. Additionally, the mean value of the dependent variable – the achievement of a secure and rights-based digital future (2) is 3.843, with a total of 132 observations in the dataset. While the results suggest that the model performs well, there is potential for improvement through the inclusion of additional predictors or consideration of other relevant variables.

Table 3. Model Summary

Coefficient of Determination	0.643678
Adjusted Coefficient of Determination	0.640937
Standard Error of Estimate	0.542082
Average Response Value	3.843434
Number of Observations (or Weighted Sum)	132

Source: Authors’ research

Statistical importance is displayed in Table 4. The ANOVA results [F(1,130)= 234.8381, p<0.0001][F(1,130) = 234.8381, p < 0.0001][F(1,130) =234.8381, p<0.0001] demonstrate a high F-ratio and a p-value below 0.0001, indicating that the model achieves a high level of statistical significance. This confirms that the model’s ability to account for the fluctuation in the outcome variable is robust and not due to random chance. Furthermore, the Model’s Sum of Squares (79.29588) and the Sum of Squares for Error (43.89604) suggest that the model explains a significant portion of the fluctuation in the outcome variable.

Table 4. Variance Examination

Source	DF	Sum of Squares	Mean Square	F Ratio
Model	1	79.29588	79.2959	234.8381
Error	130	43.89604	0.3377	Prob > F
C. Total	131	123.19192		<0.0001

Source: Authors’ research

The strength of the influence is illustrated in Table 5. The intercept is statistically meaningful, with a p-value of 0.0156, indicating that it is not random and plays a role in the model, despite not being directly related to the independent variable. The independent variable- citizens' active participation (1) shows a high t-coefficient of 15.32 and a very low p-value (<0.0001), confirming its substantial significance as a predictor in the model. A one-unit rise in the independent variable (1) results in an increase of 0.8600232 in the dependent variable. The standardized beta coefficient (Std Beta) for the independent variable- citizens' active participation (1) is 0.802295, demonstrating its strong influence on the dependent variable- the achievement of a secure and rights-based digital future (2). Additionally, the variance inflation factor (VIF) for the independent variable- citizens' active participation (1) is 1, indicating the absence of significant multicollinearity and confirming the stability of the model.

Table 5. Coefficient Estimates

Term	Estimate	Std Error	t Ratio	Prob> t	Std Beta	VIF
Intercept	0.543042	0.221548	2.45	0.0156	0	.
Varijable(1)	0.8600232	0.056121	15.32	<0.0001	0.802295	1

Source: Authors' research

Valorization of the Defined Research Hypothesis. ***Hypothesis Ha: Citizens' active participation in shaping digital policies, normative frameworks, and court practices ensures a secure and human rights-based digital future***, was confirmed, as it was established that variable (1) has a statistically significant impact on variable (2). This finding backs the theoretical research model and substantiates the presumption of a cause-and-effect relationship between the two variables. The regression model is represented by a linear regression equation, providing a concrete mathematical framework for forecasting the value of the variable – the attainment of secure and rights-based digital future (2) calculated from the measurement of the variable – citizens' active participation (1). The resulting function quantifies the relationship between the variables and can be applied to predict outcomes in future analyses, as expressed in formula (1).

$$\text{Variable (2)}=0.5430419899+0.8600232405 \cdot \text{Variable (1)} \quad (1)$$

Based on the analysis of the regression model, including ANOVA and regression results, the effectiveness and significance of the study model were assessed. The explanatory power coefficient (R^2) of 0.6437 and the adjusted R^2 of 0.6409 indicate that the model explains approximately 64% of the variation in the dependent variable, demonstrating its strong explanatory power, although not accounting for all of the data's variability. Additionally, the root mean square error (RMSE) of 0.5811 confirms that the discrepancies between actual and predicted values are minimal, reflecting the model's high accuracy. The ANOVA results, with p-values below 0.0001, further validate the statistical importance of the model, confirming that the independent variable has a substantial and meaningful effect on the outcome variable. The coefficient of the predictor variable – citizens' active participation (1) (0.8600) shows a favorable and statistically meaningful impact on the outcome variable – the achievement of a secure and rights-based digital future (2). The standardized beta coefficient (0.8023) further emphasizes the relatively strong influence of the predictor variable on the outcome variable. Additionally, the high t-ratio (15.32) for the independent variable reinforces the robustness and significance of the model. A variance inflation factor (VIF) of 1 indicates that there is no multicollinearity between the predictor variables. This suggests that each independent variable in the model is independent of others and does not cause redundant or inflated estimates in the regression analysis, which is a positive indicator of the model's stability. These findings collectively indicate that the model is accurate, statistically significant, and provides meaningful insights into the relationship between the independent- citizens' active participation (1) and dependent – the achievement of a secure and rights-based digital future (2) variables. While the model demonstrates strong explanatory power, there remains potential for further enhancement, such as incorporating additional variables or performing a more detailed data analysis, to improve its predictive accuracy and explanatory capacity. Concerning the Generation Theory in the results of the research, there can be found further groups of participants:

- 15.91 % of Baby Boomers, within the half are from ***Silent generation*** (pensioners) (7.58%). The Silent Generation's contributions to human rights protection are deeply intertwined with their pivotal role in advancing civil rights and advocating for social welfare in shaping key legislative advancements that protect fundamental rights and freedoms. Their legacy serves as a reminder of the lasting influence of collective effort and the significance of safeguarding rights for future generations in both analog and digital contexts. The contributions

of Baby Boomers to human rights protection in the digital era are deeply rooted in their generational characteristics and historical experiences. Baby Boomers' commitment to social justice, diversity, and environmental conservation reflects their belief in the collective responsibility to protect human rights. Their legacy underscores the significance of intergenerational collaboration to address emerging challenges and create a fairer, more equitable future for all.

- 40.15 % of **Generation X's**, known as the “bridge generation,” born between 1966 and 1980, in a period marked by rapid technological advancements that were not yet universally accessible, make the biggest part of participants, and among employed (57.58%). Gen X Generation contributions hold significant relevance within the scope of HRP in the digital era. Their contribution to the expansion of entrepreneurship, technological progress, and increased environmental consciousness, reflects their commitment to progress while balancing the values of equity and sustainability emphasizing the need for inclusive digital policies that respect human dignity, protect individual freedoms, and promote fairness in a technology-driven society.
- 28.79 % of Millennials (Gen Y), among which there are employed mostly, but also unemployed participants. Millennials' technological proficiency and adaptability have played a pivotal role in driving innovations like remote work, virtual collaboration, and digital problem-solving, all of which align with the evolving demands of a digitally connected workforce. To retain Millennial talent and advance human rights in the workplace, businesses must focus on mentorship, diversity initiatives, and career development, all while ensuring robust protections for employees' digital data and privacy.
- 15.15 % of participants are from Gen Z generation, often described as the “generation of truth,” mostly studding, unemployed. From the viewpoint of HRP, Generation Z brings a unique approach to the workforce and societal values, emphasizing sincerity and accountability. Shaped by the financial instability their parents experienced Influenced by the 2008 Great Recession, Generation Z remains focused on traditional financial incentives, such as salaries and bonuses, as key motivators, retirement benefits, healthcare coverage, and tuition reimbursement. Recognizing and addressing these priorities is crucial not only for fostering engagement and productivity but also for upholding the broader principles of human

rights protection, which emphasize equity, inclusion, and the right to work in environments that respect individual identities and values.

Generation Alpha, born around 2010 and onwards who represents the youngest cohort, with its oldest members just entering their teenage years, was not represented in the research sample but, holds significant importance for the future of HRP in the digital era. As the first generation to grow up entirely within the context of a highly interconnected digital world, their formative experiences are deeply shaped by a landscape of rapid technological innovation, globalized social networks, and unprecedented access to information.

4. Conclusion

This paper explores a dynamic approach to the protection of human rights and security in the era of modern technologies, with a particular focus on the ongoing digitization of institutions, the economy, education, and the ecosystems supporting these processes. The analysis emphasizes the importance of strengthening the collaborative relationship between citizens and the institutions responsible for safeguarding human rights.

The study argues for the need to recognize the transformative power of modern digital applications, the knowledge and skills of individuals, and the broader implications of digital communications in shaping the future trajectory of human rights protection. In this context, the paper calls for a comprehensive understanding of how institutional frameworks—particularly the judicial system—can be redefined to meet the challenges of digital rights protection. A significant contribution of this study lies in its expansion of the generational characteristics of human rights holders (Jevtić., Beslać, Janjušić., & Jevtić., 2024), drawing attention to their evolving roles in both historical and future contexts. By examining how different generations engage with digital technologies and human rights, the study seeks to provide deeper insights into how diverse stakeholder groups can play an active role in shaping a more inclusive and resilient framework for human rights protection in the modern era.

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OBLIKOVANJE DIGITALNE BUDUĆNOSTI UZ POŠTOVANJE LJUDSKIH PRAVA – GENERACIJSKI PRISTUP IZ SRBIJE

APSTRAKT: Cilj rada je da istraži uticaj digitalne transformacije na ljudska prava i zaštitu bezbednosti u doba savremenih tehnologija, kao i da svojim nalazima podrži kreatore politike u dizajniranju digitalne transformacije orijentisane na ljudska prava. Ovaj izazov je podstakao autore da prouče relevantnu literaturu i analiziraju politike i mere s ciljem unapređenja proaktivnih strategija. U tu svrhu, sprovedeno je online empirijsko istraživanje sa 132 učesnika (starosti 18-65+) iz Srbije tokom poslednjeg kvartala 2024. godine. Rezultati istraživanja podržavaju hipotezu da je veza između zaštite ljudskih prava i tehnološkog razvoja izuzetno snažna. Nalazi naglašavaju privatnost kao osnovu digitalnih prava, fokusirajući se na etiku korišćenja podataka i zaštitu prava pojedinaca da slobodno izražavaju svoja mišljenja i ideje na internetu. Premošćavanje digitalnog jaza od ključne je važnosti kako bi se osiguralo da tehnološki napredak koristi svim pojedincima na ravnopravan način. Promovisanje pristupa digitalnoj pismenosti i obrazovanju od suštinskog je značaja za omogućavanje pojedincima da efikasno učestvuju u komunikaciji o ovim pitanjima u vreme savremenih tehnologija. Takođe, efikasna zaštita ljudskih prava zahteva koordinisane napore kreatora politike, donosilaca odluka i institucionalnih aktera u cilju uspostavljanja okvira koji podržava pravdu, jednakost i dostojanstvo u digitalnoj eri, na šta upućuju rezultati ovog rada.

Ključne reči: *ljudska prava, digitalna transformacija, generacijska teorija, pristup zainteresovanih strana, Srbija.*

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