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IMPLEMENTATION OF COOPERATIVE PRINCIPLES IN THE DIGITAL SOCIETY: CHALLENGES, OPPORTUNITIES AND RISKS

Abstract: The digital transformation of contemporary society generates structural changes in economic, social, and institutional relations, raising questions regarding the sustainability and adequacy of traditional organizational models. In this context, the cooperative, as a business entity established in the 19th century and founded upon cooperative principles—voluntary and open membership, democratic member control, member economic participation, autonomy and independence, education, training and information, cooperation among cooperatives, and concern for community—faces challenges related to the implementation of these principles and the need to adapt to the contemporary digital environment while preserving its distinctive identity. The subject of this paper is the analysis of the impact of digital transformation on the implementation of cooperative business principles, with a particular focus on emerging challenges, developmental opportunities, and systemic risks arising from the application of information and communication technologies. The objective of the research is to examine, through the application of normative-legal and theoretical-analytical methods, the sustainability of implementing cooperative principles in the digital environment from the perspective of preserving their normative and functional integrity. The findings indicate that digital transformation does not imply the derogation of cooperative principles but rather their functional adaptation and normative reinterpretation. Simultaneously, digital technologies facilitate their implementation and reinforce cooperative identity. It is concluded that the

successful implementation of cooperative principles in the digital society depends on the ability of cooperatives to integrate technological innovations in a manner that simultaneously enhances their market competitiveness while preserving the fundamental values and identity of the cooperative model.

Keywords: *digital society, cooperative principles, digital transformation, cooperative, cooperative identity*

1. Introductory considerations

The development of information and communication technologies has transformed all the functioning segments of human societies (Krivokuća, Ćoćkalo & Bakator, 2021, p. 97), generating deep structural changes in production organization and delivery of services, business process management, decision making and creation of economic value. These changes take place through the process of digital transformation, which imply the systemic application and integration of digital technologies within different areas of social and economic life in order to improve business efficiency, encourage innovation and create new development opportunities (Imran, Shahzad, Butt, & Kantola, 2021), where their scope, speed and intensity exceed societal capacity for timely and complete adaptation (Jašarević, 2016, p. 1104). Digital transformation also leads to the redefinition of existing and organizational and managerial patterns, placing new demands on business entities in terms of efficiency, flexibility and innovation (Dabetić, 2024). In that regard, the sustainability and competitiveness of traditional organizational models, including the cooperative business model, increasingly depend on their ability to adapt to the modern digital environment.

The cooperative business model was developed in the 19th century as a response to the needs of individuals to join together with the aim of achieving common economic, social and cultural interests and aspirations, where its identity rests on internationally recognized cooperative values and principles, which represent normative, organizational, and functional foundation of business and development. Today, under contemporary socio-economic conditions, a cooperative is expected to preserve its identity, but also to adapt its business operations to the digital environment in order to achieve long-term sustainability, functional relevance and market competitiveness. Therefore, the implementation of the cooperative principles in a digital society emerges as one of the key challenges of a

modern cooperative business. As per the above, the research subject in this paper is the analysis of the impact of digital transformation on the implementation of cooperative business principles, with special reference to new challenges, development opportunities and systemic risks arising from the application of information and communication technologies. In that regard, the paper analyzes the opportunities that the digital transformation process opens up for the implementation of cooperative principles, as well as the challenges and risks that can potentially affect the preservation of the cooperative identity and organizational characteristics of the cooperative within a digital society.

The aim of the research is to examine, through the application of normative-legal and theoretically-analytical methods, the sustainability of the implementation of cooperative principles in a digital environment from the point of preserving their normative and functional integrity. The starting hypothesis of this paper is that the digital transformation does not imply the derogation of cooperative principles, but rather encourages their functional adaptation and normative reinterpretation in accordance with altered social, economic, and technological circumstances.

2. Digital society as a framework for the transformation of organizational structures and business processes

One of the key characteristics of a modern society is the digitalization process, that has enabled the development of new forms of communication, interaction and realization of transactions (Vasić & Petrović, 2024, p. 694). This process was based on the gradual transformation of traditional, physically conditioned forms of contact into digitally mediated, networked and virtual models of information exchange and business operations. The further, continued development of information and communication technologies during the last decades and their increasingly more intensive integration in the economic, social and institutional flows has led to the formation of a digital society as a new pattern of social organization, where digital technologies have become the structural element of contemporary production, exchange and management processes. Unlike the industrial society, which relied on material resources, mass production and standardized forms of labor organization within physical production systems, the development of the digital society has turned data into one of the most valuable resources of modern business (European Commission, 2020). In that regard, the digital society is characterized by the application of data as a key resource of economic and social development, as well as

wide internet availability, which represents the infrastructure precondition for the development of digital platforms, the expansion of electronic business operations and the strengthening of digital economy. At the same time, the digital society entails the application of virtual intelligence and advanced algorithm systems that contribute to the transformation of management and decision-making processes, which significantly changes the traditional structure of organizational and business models. In that regard, the accelerated automatization of business processes and the development of digital forms of labor have led to the redefining of the spatial and time boundaries of economic activities. As emphasized by Levin & Mamlok (2021), a digital society is characterized by the continuous expansion of data and information where the boundaries between the physical and digital space are increasingly blurred, given that a significant portion of economic, labor and social activities takes place simultaneously in both environments. These changes have a special impact on organizations applying traditional business patterns. This due to the fact that the adaptation of organizational models on a digital society is not only reflected in the adoption of technological innovations but primarily in their implementation in a way that simultaneously enables both market positioning and the preservation and advancement of core goals, values, and principles that define the organization's identity and distinctiveness. In that regard, Ciruela-Lorenzo, Del-Aguila-Obra, Padilla-Meléndez & Plaza-Angulo (2020) emphasize that the traditional business patterns alone are no longer sufficient for the preservation of a competitive position, which is why it is necessary to direct business toward innovation and the integration of digital technologies as key factors of sustainability and market competitiveness. As per the stated, and within a modern business environment, business success cannot be observed outside of the digital transformation process, as it largely depends on the ability of the organization to continuously adapt its organizational structures, management mechanisms and service delivery models to contemporary technological innovations and the demands of the digital environment.

In the context of the cooperative business model, adapting to modern technological innovations and digital environment demands implies the integration of digital tools in order to improve operational efficiency, such as the adoption of digital payment systems, e-commerce platforms and cloud-based management solutions, through which cooperatives can expand their market presence, improve their financial transparency and simplify services for their members (Sukardi et al. 2024, p. 79). Accordingly, digital transformation does not only represent a technical and operational

modernization process, but a comprehensive structural and developmental framework that influences the redefinition of business models and value creation methods. At the same time, the level of digital maturity of an organization becomes one of the more relevant indicators of its efficiency and market competitiveness. In that regard, we can state that the digital society represents today the most significant and dominant framework within which modern organizational and business models are shaped, developed, and transformed.

3. Cooperative business principles and their implementation under digital society conditions

Cooperatives represent specific organizational forms whose identity is normatively shaped through the Statement on cooperative identity, adopted by the International Cooperative Alliance in 1995. This document defines a cooperative as a specific economic entity whose identity is based on the values of self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity, and solidarity, as well as on universal cooperative business principles. These principles include voluntary and open membership, democratic member control, member economic participation, autonomy and independence, education, training, and information, cooperation among cooperatives, and concern for the community (International Co-operative Alliance [ICA], 1995). The special characteristics of cooperative organization and business stem precisely from cooperative values and principles, which constitute the basic characteristics of cooperative identity and its institutional distinctiveness (Nikolić, 2014, p. 15).

Cooperative principles represent the operational expression of cooperative values and the fundamental mechanism for their practical realization. Although they originated in significantly different social and technological circumstances, as a response to the social and economic challenges of the Industrial Revolution, cooperative principles have demonstrated an exceptional capacity to adapt to socio-economic changes over more than a century and a half. Modern digital transformation brings new challenges, which is why the question of implementing cooperative principles within a digital environment is raised today. Consequently, the next section of the paper will analyze the impact of digital transformation on the implementation of cooperative business principles and their sustainability under modern economic conditions.

3.1. Voluntary and open membership

The voluntary and open membership principle represents one of the most basic elements of the cooperative identity through which a cooperative is determined as an organization open to all entities that are able to use its services and are ready to embrace all obligations and responsibilities that come with a membership, regardless of gender, social, racial, political and religious differences. Although the digital transformation process does not affect the essence of the voluntary and open membership, in a digital society it gains a new dimension which stems from the electronic business operations regulation. Specifically, the digitalization of business processes entails the implementation of electronic procedures for joining the cooperative, where the conventional models based on physical presence and paper documentation are transformed into digitally supported legal and administrative procedures. In a normative sense, this demands the aligning of cooperative business rules with regulations governing e-business elements. At the same time, the development of a digital society has generated prerequisites for a more efficient and functional membership admissions procedure. The application of electronic platforms, digital services and contemporary information and communication technologies, enables potential members an easier access to cooperative information, its activities, members rights and obligations, as well as rules for membership admission. At the same time, electronic submission of admission requests as well as the exchange of communication through digital channels, contribute to the overcoming of geographical and administrative limitations, therefore potentially widening the circle of entities to whom cooperative services are accessible.

Democratic member control

The principle of democratic members control determines cooperatives as democratic organizations managed by their members, where decision making is based on the "one member-one vote" principle, regardless of the amount of capital invested by an individual member. This ensures the equal participation of all members in the management and decision-making process. Traditionally, the principle of member's democratic control is realized primarily through direct participation of members in assemblies and other collective decision-making bodies, at pre-determined intervals and at a specific location, where physical presence constitutes the basic prerequisite for participation, while communication between members and governing bodies takes place directly or through written notices. In a digital society,

member participation in decision-making is realized through electronic assemblies, videoconference sessions and online voting systems. This replaces traditional models of direct physical presence with digital participation mechanisms, which requires proper legal regulation. In that regard, it is necessary to normatively align cooperative acts with the digital regulatory framework. At the same time, organizing electronic assemblies, conducting online voting, implementing digital consultations, using virtual discussion forums, and transparently publishing decisions and financial reports are assumed to contribute to greater accessibility of the decision-making process, a more efficient flow of information, and more intensive member involvement in the cooperative's work. Digital tools carry special significance for members who are geographically distant or unable to physically attend meetings of the cooperative's bodies.

3.2. Member economic participation

The member's economic participation principle reflects the specific relationship of the cooperative model toward capital, where members contribute equally to, and democratically control, the capital of their cooperative, while the generated surpluses are allocated in line with cooperative goals, member needs, and the principles of the cooperative's sustainable development. Traditionally, the realization of this principle is based on the direct and physical participation of members in funding and operating the cooperative, where the payment of cooperative shares, record-keeping, calculation of business results, and distribution of surpluses are carried out via paper documentation and administrative procedures that require significant time and human resources. Information regarding the financial state of the cooperative is available to members predominantly during assemblies, meetings, or through periodic reports, making them dependent on geographical proximity, physical presence, and traditional communication channels. Under digital society conditions, the application of modern information and communication technologies enables electronic record-keeping of cooperative shares, the digitalization of accounting and financial processes, and the use of digital platforms to access business information, which represents a significant transformation in how this principle is realized. Furthermore, the development of digital assets and digital financial instruments opens up new opportunities for asset management and transaction execution, providing greater flexibility, speed, and accessibility of financial services (Stojšić Dabetić & Mirković, 2024). From a normative standpoint, digitalization does not question the essence of

the member's economic participation principle, according to which members equitably participate in forming, controlling, and using cooperative capital. The fundamental rights and obligations of members regarding capital investment, surplus distribution, and obtaining economic benefits remain unchanged regardless of the manner in which business processes are carried out. However, the application of digital technologies requires an adaptation of the legal mechanisms regulating the record-keeping and management of cooperative capital, particularly regarding electronic registers, digital documentation of financial transactions, and the electronic exercise of member rights. At the same time, digitalization imposes the need to establish appropriate normative solutions that ensure financial data protection, the security of electronic transactions, reliable participant identification, and efficient monitoring and control mechanisms in the digital environment.

3.4. Autonomy and independence

The autonomy and independence principle, as one of the basic assumptions for the preservation of cooperative identity and institutional independence of a cooperative, implies that cooperatives, when interacting with government bodies, financial institutions and other organizations, must preserve democratic control by their members as well as their capability for independent decision-making. In a traditional, analog environment this principle first and foremost implies the protection of cooperative independence against state, financial and market actors who can exert various forms of influence on the operations and management structure of the cooperative. Under digital society conditions, the normative content of the autonomy and independence principle remains unchanged, but its domain of application expands significantly. Namely, digitalization further actualizes the autonomy and independence principle, expanding its scope from the institutional and financial to the technological sphere. Although usage of digital tools generally contributes to the operational independence of a cooperative digital transformation can increase the dependence of cooperatives on complex digital infrastructure and technological solutions that are frequently managed by large global entities. In that regard, when key business processes, communication channels or data management systems depend on technologies controlled by external actors, there is a risk of limiting the real autonomy and independence of a cooperative. Although this issue transcends the scope of cooperatives and concerns other actors in the modern economic system as well (Kenney & Zysman, 2016), it is

particularly important for a cooperative because it directly touches upon the preservation of its identity. Therefore, in the modern digital environment, the question of autonomy and independence gains a new dimension that involves the cooperative's ability to independently manage its data, technological resources, information systems, and decision-making processes, without excessive reliance on external technological intermediaries. In this sense, the implementation of the cooperative autonomy and independence principle in the digital society also implies achieving an appropriate degree of technological or digital autonomy and independence through the development of proprietary digital platforms and the establishment of independent communication channels.

3.5. Education, training and information

It is the obligation of the cooperative to provide education, trading and information to their members, elected representatives, managers and employees in order for them to efficiently contribute to the development of the cooperative. At the same time, it is a task of the cooperative to inform the public on the nature, values and advantages of the cooperative business model. Digital transformation does not change the essence of the education, training and information principle, but it affects the methods of its realization, supplementing traditional forms of education with contemporary digital tools, platforms, and channels for the transfer of knowledge. Accordingly, it is necessary to expand the normative content of this principle with a request for cooperatives to systematically develop the digital competence of its members, along with the delivery of expert knowledge as it pertains to the area of cooperatives and cooperative business operations, in order to enable their equal and active participation in a digital environment. At the same time, the development of a digital society imposes the need to adapt existing legal and institutional mechanisms with new forms of education and information delivery, achieved through electronic platforms, remote learning systems and other educational channels. In such circumstances, the realization of this cooperative principle is no longer conditioned by geographical proximity or the physical presence of members, but rather by the cooperative's ability to provide equal, continuous, and unhindered access to digital knowledge sources and educational content for all its members.

3.6. Cooperation among cooperatives

The cooperation among cooperatives principle is based on the idea that cooperatives most efficiently serve the interests of their members when they mutually cooperate through local, national, regional and international structures. Inter-cooperative cooperation represents an important mechanism for the development of the cooperative movement, since it enables the exchange of experience, mutual market activity and the achievement of economic and developmental benefits that individual cooperatives are often unable to achieve independently. In a traditional environment, the cooperation between cooperatives principle is primarily realized through institutional and organizational forms of networking, such as cooperative alliances, federations and other local, national and international structures. Cooperation is achieved during periodic conferences, through direct exchange of information, which implies certain time, financial and logistic limitations. In a normative sense, digitalization does not alter the essence of the cooperation between cooperatives principle since its primary goal remains the improvement of economic, social and development interests of the members through inter/cooperative cooperation on a local, national and international level. However, digital transformation significantly influences the realization of this principle by expanding traditional forms of institutional linking through new digital communication, coordination and joint actions mechanisms. Consequently, cooperation between cooperatives is less linked to physical presence and territorial closeness, and more linked to a possibility for continuous linking through digital networks and platforms. As a result, the digital environment demands adaptation of the existing regulatory framework with new forms of electronic communication, exchange of data and realization of joint projects between cooperatives, which leads to the increasing significance of normative issues regarding legal security of electronic communication and data protection.

3.7. Concern for community

The cooperative concern for community principle confirms that cooperatives, aside from the economic goals of their members, have a wider social responsibility towards the communities where they operate. By developing activities that contribute to the sustainable development of local communities, cooperatives affirm their role as socially responsible actors. In a traditional information and communication environment, the concern for community principle is realized primarily through the direct action of

cooperatives in local areas, where activities are aimed at satisfying the economic and social needs of members and the wider community. The contribution to sustainable development manifests through local employment, support for joint infrastructural and social initiatives, and direct participation in the life of the local community, accompanied by limited visibility and a slower flow of information regarding the broader social impact of cooperative activities. Under digital society conditions, this principle gains a broader and more visible dimension because digital technologies enable more efficient organization of community-oriented activities, as well as greater transparency and visibility of the social contribution of cooperatives. Digital communication channels, platforms, and networks allow cooperatives to participate more actively in sustainable development initiatives, as well as to mobilize resources more quickly and involve the general public in their activities. At the same time, the digital environment strengthens the capacity of cooperatives to identify community needs in real time and adjust their actions to contemporary social and ecological challenges. In a normative sense, digitalization does not challenge the essence of the cooperative principle of concern for community, given that the obligation of cooperatives to contribute to the sustainable economic, social, and environmental development of local communities remains unchanged. However, digital transformation significantly influences the modalities and instruments of its realization, expanding the traditional understanding of socially responsible action with new forms of digital participation, transparency, and communication with the community.

4. Challenges and risks of digital transformation within the context of implementation of cooperative principles

Although information and communication technologies offer numerous possibilities for the improvement of business performance of the cooperatives, the digital transformation process raises at the same time new questions and generates certain challenges and systemic risks. Digital technologies, on one hand, appear as a modernization tool, while on the other they can be a source of new forms of economic, social and institutional inequality. Consequently, their implications must be viewed not only through the lens of technological efficiency, but also through the context of preservation of cooperative identity. In that regard, theoretically it is emphasized that one of the most significant challenges of the digital society is the digital exclusion phenomena. (Lythreatis, Singh, & El-Kassar,

2021; Dille & Buhl, 2025; Bentley, Naughtin, McGrath, Irons,& Cooper, 2024). Specifically, although digital technologies enable broader access to information and services, the benefits of digitalization are not evenly distributed among all social groups. Access to digital technologies depends on economic capabilities, education levels, digital competencies, age, and infrastructure development. If a significant portion of organizational activities, communication, service delivery, or participation in management processes shifts to the digital environment, cooperative members who lack adequate access to technology or do not possess the required digital skills may be placed at a disadvantage. For cooperatives, the issue of digital exclusion carries special weight, since all forms of unequal access and limited participation run contrary to cooperative values. For this reason, the successful implementation of cooperative principles in the digital environment requires developing digital inclusion mechanisms, continuously improving the digital literacy of members, and providing alternative forms of communication and participation for those members unable to utilize modern digital tools.

Furthermore, digital transformation challenges in the field of data management relate to data privacy and security protection, ensuring data quality and reliability, developing adequate data governance mechanisms, and compliance with legal and ethical standards (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2019; European Commission, 2020). From the perspective of cooperative business principles, the issue of data protection transcends a purely technical and legal dimension. Given that the cooperative model is built on trust, data management implies establishing clear rules on data collection, usage, and protection.

The principle of democratic members control is particularly exposed to the challenges of digital transformation. Namely, digital platforms and electronic voting systems undoubtedly increase the accessibility of the decision-making process and allow for broader member inclusion in cooperative management. At the same time, increased technological mediation can lead to a reduction in direct communication among members. Traditional cooperative assemblies represent a space not just for formal voting, but also for the exchange of opinions, arguments, and for the building of common stances. In a digital environment, there is a danger that the decision-making process becomes reduced to a technical expression of preferences without proper discussion and deliberation. Beyond traditional cyber-security risks, the literature points out that an additional challenge is posed by sophisticated data processing systems and algorithmic profiling of users (Foini, 2023), which can influence information visibility, shape

member attitudes, and prioritize certain topics. Therefore, the digitalization of management processes requires careful balancing of technological efficiency with the preservation of cooperative identity.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of the implementation of cooperative business principles within the digital society conditions, has confirmed the basic hypothesis that digital transformation does not lead to the derogation of cooperative principles, but rather encourages their functional adaptation and normative reinterpretation in accordance with changed social, economic and technological conditions. At the same time, the analysis shows that the digitalization of business operations does not constitute exclusively a technological process, but that it is a complex transformation raising questions regarding digital inclusion, data protection, algorithm management and technological dependence. These challenges did not exist when the cooperative principles were formed, but today they represent an indispensable part of the environment in which cooperatives operate. In that regard, the implementation of cooperative principles needs to be functionally adapted and normatively recontextualized within cooperative acts in accordance with contemporary social and technological changes, whereby their essence, value content, and function of preserving cooperative identity must remain unchanged. It is particularly important that the digital transformation process does not lead to digital exclusion or to the weakening of democratic participation of members, since such consequences would be incompatible with the basic values of the cooperative movement. At the same time, the analysis has confirmed that digital technologies can serve as a powerful instrument for advancing cooperative business. In this sense, technology represents a means for its further strengthening and development, confirming that technological progress and the preservation of cooperative identity are not opposing, but mutually complementary processes. Based on all the presented facts, it can be concluded that the successful implementation of cooperative principles in the digital society depends primarily on the ability of cooperatives to integrate technological innovations in a way that simultaneously enhances their market competitiveness while preserving the core values and identity of the cooperative model.

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