E-Participation in Russia: Developmental Difficulties and Recent Achievements

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E-Participation Studies

To date there have been several studies on e-participation in Russia.

A group of researchers from the Institute of System Analysis of the Russian Academy of Sciences and Moscow Institute of Physics and Technology exercised a monitoring on the feedback completeness and quality with respect to e-participation in Russia in 2007 – 2009 [1-3]. An output of this study was a list of the best feedback mechanism that can be implemented on the federal government web-sites.

Another study going back to 2010 [4], stated inadequate attention to the development of feedback tools between government and society. It referred to the rankings of transparency of federal and regional authorities provided by the Institute for Information Freedom Development: in 2009, the maximum openness of a federal authority's web-site was 55%, in 2008 – 38.4%, in 2007 – 49.3%. It also referred to a pilot study conducted by the Association of Managers in March-April 2009 that had demonstrated a significant discrepancy between the public demand and the services offered by the web-sites of the government, wherein the demand for electronic interaction was articulated very indistinctly.

A study undertaken by the Graduate School of Management of the St. Petersburg State University that was based upon a dataset of an Internet questionnaire survey carried out in April 2010 and involved random sampling of young Russian adults [5] showed that even university students manifested rather low public participation. The main factor impeding it (for 84% of those interviewed) was inability to impact the government policy. Only 12% think they had a chance to influence decisions made by the regional government. Other reasons for low public participation as indicated by the respondents were citizens' ignorance (68%), lack of information about government activities (59%) and distrust of government (56%). Corruption, fear of participating in public activities, intrinsic fear of government repressions, reluctance to risk one's own freedom, mentality of Russian society, lack of tools and levers of impact were mentioned as other possible explanations of low participation.

The survey showed that only 11.6% would not use any of available e-participation tools. 10.5% of them were not engaged in any kind of public participation activities, so implementation of e-participation projects would most probably have little impact if any on the public participation of this category of people. At the same time, the survey revealed that as much as 37.25% of those who were currently not engaged in public participation were willing to use at least one of the e-participation tools. The biggest potential impact on public participation would have the following e-democracy tools: e-voting, electronic public opinion polls, online access to information about current issues under consideration of municipal and regional authorities.

In June 2012, a leading Russian independent sociological service *Public Opinion Foundation* held an 'omnibus' *survey on Open Government*, covering 43 (of 82) regions of the Russian Federation, 100 centers of population and 1,500 respondents in a representative sample [6].

The survey showed that 79% of the population had heard something about the formation of the so-called 'open government' at the Government of Russia for the first time. 15% already heard something about it, and only 3% were aware of this fact.

Those who heard or knew something about open government (18% of all respondents) were asked what it meant. The table below shows quite an interesting picture of the distribution of answers to this question:

Question: Do You Think This Means:	Answer	% of Respondents
Providing citizens with the opportunity to participate in the discussion and public decision-making	The people are involved, an open discussion of the laws and government with the people; making decisions through discussions with people; engaging the people in resolving issues, people will be able to solve the problems in the country; people will be able to participate in the government, supposedly their opinion will be taken into account.	2
Alternative government of ordinary citizens	A government of people, a government of common people, it should consist of ordinary people; a government, which is attended by ordinary citizens; a public meeting; one man from each region; a body, which informs the government on some issues.	2
A fiction, an absurdity	Nothing weighty, another toy; splurging to distract people from urgent problems; kind of mythology; a screen; smearing people's eyes; nonsense, absurd; deception.	2
Providing government connections with the people	A body, which interacts with citizens; government's work with the people; our communication with the government; addressing the citizens; direct communication with the people; the voice of the people.	1
Providing citizens with the opportunity to control the government	The people will have an opportunity to control the government; people can keep track of the government; it should control the government in making decisions; monitoring the government's work; citizens' monitoring and control of the government is permitted; state procurement and government costs become transparent.	1
Other	This is e-government; a body for the people and for resolving their problems; when government' work will be fully covered by the media; the local authorities will be able to approach the higher authorities more easily; accessible for the people; cameras in the government offices; Putin's, Medvedev's web-sites are open – one can communicate with them on the internet and complain; I will not be invited, the ordinary people – all the more; I've heard the word but not understood the sense.	1
Do not know, no answer		9

Source: [6, p. 26]

The survey demonstrated that 56% of respondents believed the open government would not allow ordinary people to participate in public decision-making, and only 15% supposed it would. 59% of the population did not want to participate in open government, 14% would like to participate in solving local problems, 5% – in solving problems at any level, 4% – in solving nationwide problems, 3% – in solving regional problems.

The areas where experts' and citizens' participation were believed to be most useful to the Government in the public decision-making distributed as shown in the diagram below:
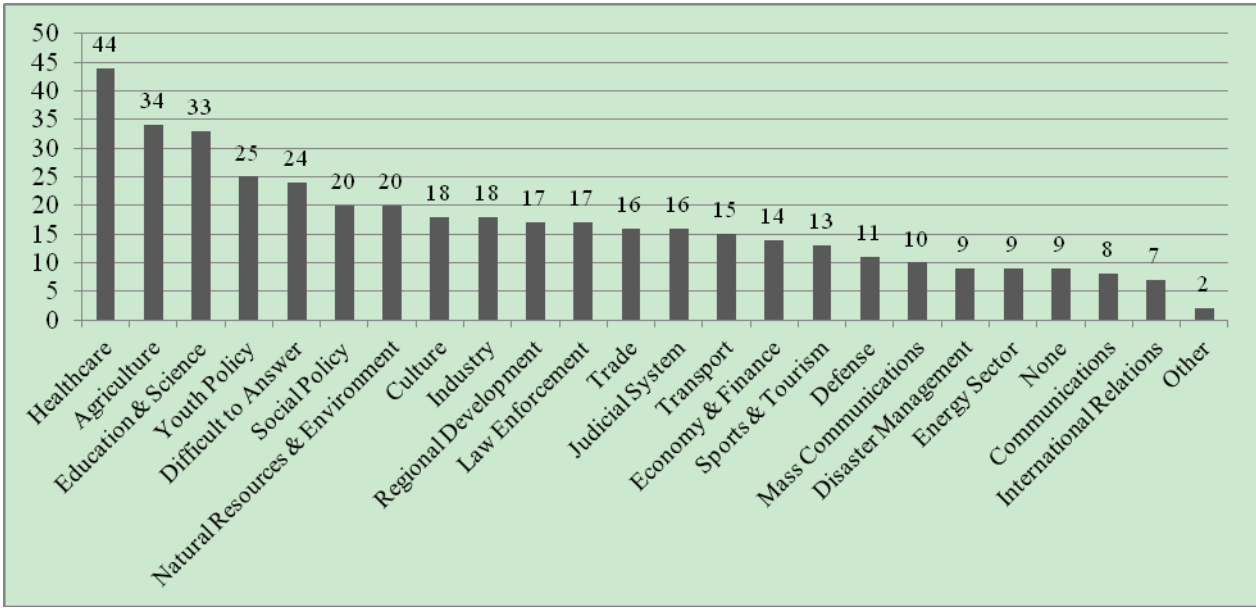
Source: [6, p. 30].

Open Government Rankings

In April 2012, *Institute of the Information Society* (IIS) initiated the pioneering *Index of Russian Regions Governments Openness* [7], which was a meter of using open government tools by executive authorities in 82 regions (subjects of the Russian Federation).

The index was calculated on the basis of indicators describing four dimensions of open government:

1) social networks services – use of social networks to interact with citizens;
2) open government data – availability, legality and the opportunity to get open data in a machine-readable format;
3) online collaboration with citizens – use of online collaboration tools for regional policy formulation, implementation and evaluation;
4) online (integrated / network) services – assessment of different feedback tools like polls, billboards, chat rooms, discussion forums, etc., according to the UN DESA e-Government Development Index methodology [8, p. 120–121].

The values of indicators were determined through a survey of the government official web-site and five available agencies web-sites (education, health, labor and employment, social protection, finance) in each region, totally around 480 web-sites. The survey was conducted on a specially designed questionnaire that allowed evaluating the availability and use of open government tools according to four above dimensions.

The evaluation of the social networks services use was conducted by the following indicators (their possible range is given in brackets):

• availability of a blog (or video blog) of the top official of the subject of RF in social networks or on the official web-site of the supreme executive authority (0/1/2);
• providing content to the blog of the top official of the subject of RF on average over the past year (0/1/2);
• interaction of the top official of the subject of RF with citizens (0/1/2);

- availability of a micro-blog of the top official of the subject of RF in social networks (twitter, etc.) (0/1/2);
- providing content to the micro-blog of the top official of the subject of RF on average over the last 3 months prior to the survey (0/1/2).

The availability and use of blogs and micro-blogs of the top officials was evaluated only in case they were located on the official web-sites of the authorities, or links to relevant blogs in social networks were placed on these web-sites.

Providing open government data was evaluated by the following indicators:

- availability of open government data (0/1/2);
- readiness of open government data for automated processing (1/2/3/4/5);
- legality of open government data use (0/1/2).

Online collaboration tools were evaluated according to the following indicators:

- availability of special online tools for involving citizens in developing and making decisions by executive authorities (0/1);
- availability of special online tools for attracting and coordinating partners willing to participate in the implementation of executive authorities' decisions and initiatives (0/1);
- availability of special online tools for monitoring and assessing the executive authorities' performance (0/1).

Integrated / network services were evaluated according to the following indicators, following the UN methodology, as IIS interpreted it taking into account Russia's specific conditions:

- availability of a declaration on the policy of involving citizens in developing and making supreme executive authorities' decisions in electronic form (0/1);
- availability of a calendar / pointer of coming events providing for citizens e-participation in developing and making supreme executive authorities' decisions (0/1);
- archives of events providing for citizens e-participation in developing and making supreme executive authorities' decisions (0/1);
- availability of tools for citizens e-participation in in developing and making supreme executive authorities' decisions other than virtual reception room (polls, surveys, billboards, chat rooms, blogs, discussion forums, etc.) (0/1);
- feedback possibility on government policy and e-services in the form of a virtual reception room (0/1);
- ensuring publication of citizens' applications, comments and suggestions on issues related to supreme executive authorities' strategy and policy (0/1);
- availability of archives of supreme executive authorities' answers to citizens' questions and complaints (0/1).

The resulting evaluations for each dimension were summed across all sites in a subject of the RF, and then normalized with respect to the maximum possible number of points for a given dimension. The index for the subject of the RF was defined as the arithmetic average of the normalized evaluations of dimensions of using open government tools.

The first Index of Russian Regions Governments Openness opens the following picture:

Place	Region	Score	Using social networks	Open government data	Online collaboration with citizens	Integrated / network services
Leaders						
1	Ulyanovsk region	0,3067	29	20	0	22
2	Moscow	0,2211	4	20	2	20
3	Penza Region	0,2103	25	19	0	7
4	The Republic of Buryatia	0,2069	4	13	1	25
5	Ivanovo region	0,2012	10	24	0	13
Outsiders						
78	The Republic of Mariy El	0,0867	0	18	0	3
79	The Republic of Bashkortostan	0,0856	16	3	0	2
80	Altai Republic	0,0748	0	15	0	3
81	Primorsky Krai (Territory)	0,0714	0	9	0	7
82	Chukotka Autonomous Okrug	0,0675	3	5	0	7

Source: IIS (http://opengov.eRegion.ru)

The framework proposed within the development of the above Index is consistent with the citizens' involvement model proposed by the International Association for Public Participation [1] and with e-Government Development Index methodology (UN DESA). The study conducted in order to build the Index has shown applicability for monitoring open government and citizens' involvement. It has shown the potential to make rankings of different governments including those being at mature stages of citizens' engagement based on the use of ICT.

In May 2013, *RIA Rating*, a rating agency, and *PRIME*, an agency for economic information, in cooperation with RBC Group and under the auspices of the Advisory Council at the Government of the Russian Federation conducted a study, which made a basis for the *Openness Ranking of the Federal Bodies of Executive Power* [9, 10].

The rankings are based either on a poll of highly qualified experts that had an experience of working with government agencies or on an input from those experts. The contributors were members of the Advisory Council of the Government of the Russian Federation, representatives of NGOs and nationwide public organizations (including the Business Russia, the Russian Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs, the Support of Russia, the Chamber of Commerce, Association of Managers), the leading educational institutions, regional public chambers, senior executives of major corporations and other highly qualified experts.

The evaluation criteria were as follows:

1) completeness, efficiency and quality of information related to the subject area of the respective federal executive body;

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[1] See http://www.iap2.org

2) accountability of the federal executive body;
3) openness, accessibility and quality of the official web-site of the federal executive body;
4) the possibility of civil participation in the activities of the federal executive body and of public presentation of the feedback from citizens, experts, NGOs, media;
5) openness and approachability of the federal executive body through the prism of the media.

The ranking is led by Ministry of Civil Defense, Emergencies and Disaster Relief, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Economic Development, who received the highest evaluations. It should be noted that the ministry with the final estimate of 6.83 (the maximum of all estimated federal authorities) is a leader in all of the five criteria used in the openness ranking. At the same time, the maximum estimate is less than 7 on a ten point scale and only three ministries had more than 6 points. This indicates that the potential for increased openness is far from exhausted, and further work is required in the implementation of openness standards, even for the leader. The outsiders, according to experts, are the Ministry of the Far East Development, the Federal Service for Defense Contracts, the Federal Service for Alcohol Market Regulation. The highest estimate characterizing the information transparency of these federal authorities is 4.77, which is lower than the total average of 5.32.

The evaluation showed a strong correlation for all five criteria used in the ranking. This means that a federal authority having a high score, e.g., in 'openness, accessibility and quality of the official web-site' or in 'the possibility of civil participation in the activities of the federal executive body' as a rule has high scores in other criteria. This suggests that the authority keeping to a policy of openness and views it as an essential element of its work, displays it in all directions of its activities.

The problem for this Methodology is that the evaluation criteria and ways of using the expert knowledge and experience are not worked out in detail. To be able to make a qualitative assessment of an authority along all proposed criteria the expert should be involved in various forms of cooperation with this authority to dispose of the necessary experience and information (ideally be a member of an advisory council and at the same time a journalist, etc.), which is possible only in very rare cases. The evaluation criteria are revealed through diverse and multiple sub-criteria, which are not specifically measured, making it difficult to make an assessment and reducing the ranking utility. If an authority has a low general evaluation is not clear what it has to pay immediate attention to. Moreover, experts are encouraged "to take into account the description of each criterion, but not be limited to it", which means to actually change the content of the evaluation criteria. This jeopardizes the comparability of estimates obtained from different experts. Also, the methodology does not provide explanations how to assess the accessibility, completeness and quality of the information provided.

Policy Measures and Methodological Framework

On 21 May 2012, a new position was introduced into Russian federal government: Minister for Open Government. Its holder Mikhail Abyzov assessed the facts of the creation of such coordinating body and providing it with governmental status as an indicator of the country leadership's serious attention to the issues of real participation of citizens, experts and civil society organizations in government and decision-making [11].

In 2013, Russia joined the top ten countries on the Open Budget Index of the International Budget Partnership. Currently, the Russian Federation disposes of quite a heavy legal and methodological framework, including federal laws, decrees of the President, Government decisions, orders and guidance documents of federal executive bodies that regulate specific issues of cooperation between

public authorities and society. However, influence of citizens and civil society organizations on the adoption and implementation of decisions made by federal government continues to be quite low, but a negative public perception of any socio-political and economic transformation and distrust of public authorities in general still remain quite high. The regulation of the openness and transparency of the federal government also can be characterized as still insufficient and fragmentary.

A recently elaborated draft *Concept of Openness of the Federal Bodies of Executive Power* states a number of principles through the implementation of which the openness of the federal government could be achieved:

- the involvement and participation of citizens and experts in the work of the federal bodies of executive power;
- accountability of the federal government before the civil society;
- open government data.

The Concept was followed by a draft *Standard of the Federal Executive Power Openness* [2] developed by the Working Group (WG) of the Government Commission for the Coordination of Open Government. The adoption of the Standard at the level of ministries and agencies within the Government is expected before September 1, 2013. Besides, the mentioned WG elaborated a draft *Methodology of Monitoring and Assessment of Openness of the Federal Bodies of Executive Power*. According to this document, the monitoring should be carried out in the following ways:

- federal executive bodies' self-assessment (self-analysis) on the basis of the results achieved in implementing and developing openness tools (current state);
- expert assessment of the quality of openness mechanisms implementation in the federal bodies of executive power (peer review);
- sociological study of the level of openness of the federal bodies of executive power and of the openness impact;

The Methodology provides guidance for an Openness Index design, which is a composite indicator and is calculated on the following indicators:

- indicators of development of openness mechanisms;
- indicators of effectiveness of openness mechanisms introduction;
- indicators of importance (utility) of openness mechanisms use;
- indicators of efficiency of openness mechanisms use.

Monitoring is carried out by each of the following ten openness mechanisms:

1) interaction with a non-government council at the federal body of executive power;
2) work with reference groups, expert and advisory bodies;
3) interaction with the media and social networks;
4) work with citizens' applications;
5) a public declaration;
6) accountability of the federal body of executive power;
7) an independent anti-corruption expertise and public monitoring of law enforcement;
8) the web-site of the federal body of executive power;
9) 'intelligible government' (incl. informing and consulting on the activities of the federal body of executive power);

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[2] See http://xn--80abeamcuufxbhgound0h9cl.xn--p1ai/events/5508409/

10) open government data.

Monitoring should be carried out biannually.

The information collected in the course of self-assessment is used as initial data for the evaluation according to each of the ten openness mechanisms and later on is published on the official web-sites of the federal bodies of executive power and (or) on the open government web-site.

The introduction of each openness mechanism in the activities of the federal bodies of executive power presuppose five levels, reflecting the gradual development and improvement of these mechanisms: 1st level – basic, 2nd level – starting (launching), 3rd level – middle, 4th level – enhanced, 5th – open.

The maximum value of each openness level for each openness mechanism is assumed to be unity. Each indicator of the openness mechanisms development at any level is estimated at the nominal scale (in fact of presence or absence of a value, in fact of formal correspondence to the real state of substance measured by this indicator) 'present' – 'absent'. The value of indices of the 1st and 2nd levels is assumed to be equal to 0,2: $P_{1 \div 2} = 0,2$. The value of indices of the 3rd, 4th and 5th levels is assumed to be 0,25: $P_{3 \div 5} = 0,25$.

The number of openness indicators of the 3rd and subsequent levels may be amended and supplemented by the decision of the federal body of executive power. Additional openness indicators included in the self-assessment form should reflect special (additional) initiatives related to the openness mechanisms development.

The official Methodology of Monitoring and Assessment of Openness of the Federal Bodies of Executive Power is still represented in a draft and is incomplete: a procedure of work with experts and a respective questionnaire as well as performance indicators, survey tools and methodology should be elaborated. To our view, the methodology does not pay enough attention to the use of online open government tools. The methodology proposes a self-assessment questionnaire for the evaluation of the authorities' web-sites, but, taking into account the international experience, it appears to be reasonable to carry out a regular (every six months in accordance with the Index timetable) independent external examination of the official web-sites using a tool that takes into account the recommendations and criteria proposed by international organizations (UN DESA, the World Bank) as well as provisions of the Concept of Openness of the Federal Bodies of Executive Power. The results of such examination should be widely used for the calculation of the Index.

Starting from January 1, 2015, weight factors are planned to be introduced for above openness indicators by the decision of the Government Commission reflecting the priorities and (or) importance of each of them for the Openness Index in the course of openness monitoring.

In 2013, the draft Guidelines for the Implementation of the Principles and Mechanisms of Open Government in the Russian Federation was developed. These recommendations are prepared based on the 2012 experience of open government pilot projects in the Russian Federation.

Pilot Projects

At present, the country has begun to implement a number of projects aimed at increasing transparency and strengthening e-participation. Among them one should mention the following:

1. *Russian Civil Initiative*. Dimension: E-Participation. A portal for placing citizens' proposals on the socio-economic development, improvement of state and municipal government. Implemented on the federal level (http://www.roi.ru/).

2. *Government: Instructions for Use*. Part of federal 'locomotive' project 'The Intelligible Government'. Dimension: Information Transparency. Implemented in the Tula region.

3. *Open Budget.* Dimension: Information Transparency. Implemented in Moscow(http://budget.mos.ru/), Republic of Bashkortostan, Leningrad region (http://budget.lenobl.ru/) and Tula region (http://dfto.ru/www/open/).

4. *Region without Fools.* Dimension: E-Participation. Implemented in the Republic of Bashkortostan (https://bezdurakov.openrepublic.ru/).

5. *Voice of the Region.* Dimension: E-Participation. Implemented in the Republic of Bashkortostan.

6. *Regional Open Data Portal*. Dimension: Open Data. Implemented in the Republic of Bashkortostan, Republic of Tatarstan, Krasnodar Krai (Territory) (http://krd.ru/opendata), Perm, Tula (http://openregion71.ru/otkrytye-dannye/) and Ulyanovsk regions (http://data.ulgov.ru/), the Yamal-Nenets Autonomous District and Moscow (http://data.mos.ru/).

7. *Domouprava*. Dimension: Open Data. Improving the quality and accessibility of public housing and communal services. Implemented in the Tula region and in (http://dom.mos.ru).

Conclusions

The research results briefly presented in this paper show that government has still little accountability to its citizens and citizens' attitude towards participation in public decision-making could be characterized rather as political inertia. The main reasons for this is, on the one hand, the traditional citizens' mistrust in government and any reforms, and on the other hand, the paternalistic model of social organization, which is being fostered by today's leadership of the country and conflicting with the measures taken in connection with the creation of 'open government'. Due to such political environment, emerging e-participation projects have a potential to become "Potemkin e-villages" [3] used to communicate to the international community democratic image, openness of government, modernization, etc. [5, p. 3–4] but not providing substance for real citizens' engagement.

Nevertheless, e-participation processes are taking place against a background of growing Internet use, ongoing development of e-government services and adoption of e-government related legislation, approval of information society strategy and program stipulating the creation of electronic services supporting public debate and control over activities of public authorities, as well as the creation of online and mobile tools for public participation in decision-making.

Under these circumstances, the introduction of a special ministerial position in the Government of the Russian Federation and the formation of the methodological framework for experts' and citizens' engagement at the federal and regional levels can be considered to be necessary and timely measures, which, if strengthened by massive media propaganda of the participation of the expert community, civil society and the public in government, may provide a positive and lasting effect in the foreseeable future.

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[3] A term introduced by Katchanovski & LaPorte [12] to denote any significant differences between appearance and substance of electronic form of democratic governance.

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[9] Reyting otkrytosti federal'nykh organov ispolnite'noy vlasti.

[10] Reyting otkrytosti federal'nykh organov ispolnite'noy vlasti.

[11] Mikhail Abyzov naznachen ministrom po voprosam Otkrytogo pravitel'stva.