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Revealing the factors influencing e-participation development in Russia

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Abstract. International rankings of e-participation development provide useful information for making strategic decisions for a more successful information society development. However, when we start the interpretation of the ranking details, it is important to consider the context, as well as national factors and existed barriers on the way. The paper presents some results and conclusions drawn from the expert survey and aiming to detect the factors which affect e-participation development in Russia. The authors conducted an expert poll with the participation of 41 experts from government, business, NGO, scientific and education structures, and city-activists. The survey results allowed to detect the target of e-participation tools development in Russia; to determine the factors that influence positively and negatively on its development. The major finding of the survey showed the following trend: e-participation tools in Russia served to optimize the authorities' work and fight such barriers as administrative, regulative and lack of citizens' trust in e-participation tools.

Keywords: E-participation, expert survey, factors of development, assessment

1 Introduction

The global trends belonged to the term “e-participation” assume a technological mechanism for linking citizens' demands and needs and the politicians. According to the last world ranking on E-participation development prepared by UN in 2016 [8], the world leadership in this field belongs to the United Kingdom, Australia, Japan, South Korea, Netherlands, New Zealand, Spain, Singapore, Canada, Finland, Italy. Russia occupies the 32nd place losing two positions from the previous rating and receiving 91,2% (out of 100) for e-information, 63,2% for e-consultation and just 28,6% for e-decision-making directions.

With the purpose to determine the reasons for such un-proportional development we conducted an expert survey focusing on factors which influence positively and negatively on e-participation development in Russia.

2 E-participation development factors

Russia, following global trends, attempts to activate the citizens' participation in solving various issues of state and public life through ICT [23]. Over the past few years several legal acts that form the basis of electronic interaction between the state bodies and the citizens have been adopted. For instance, the Concept for e-democracy mechanisms development in the Russian Federation till 2020, developed by the Ministry of Communications and Mass Communications, forms the institutional environment for this phenomenon.

The concept determines a direct relationship between the transition to e-democracy practice and the process of strengthening and further development of Russian civil society: "... the active introduction of ICT in the social and political relations can significantly enhance the ability of Russian citizens in terms of their social and political participation and creating conditions for the civil activity growth, which contributes to the formation of a qualitatively new level of citizen activity" [5]. In addition, the Concept identifies several barriers for e-democracy development in Russia. The following barriers from the list related to e-participation: the lack of efficiency, poor organization and technical support, inadequate attention to the issues of citizens' identification and authentication, digital divide in the Russian regions, inequality between the federal, regional and municipal levels.

When we looked at the world research practice, we found a variety of factors that determine the success of e-participation development. According to the South Korean survey, conducted in 2015 in 125 countries around the world, there is a statistically significant correlation between the degree of citizens' e-participation and groups of indicators characterizing ICT development, the level of democracy, political institutions and human capital (literacy, education, income, etc.) [25]. J. Fountain argues that the institutional and organizational contexts act as an intermediary in ICT implementation [9]. Without a conceptual scheme that incorporates e-participation in politics, government, institutional structure and behavior, researchers can only ascertain the destructive internecine fighting bureaucracy and individual cases of outstanding innovation, but they are not able to recognize the more general models of institutional behavior.

For effective political participation, A.Kurochkin highlights the presence of a stable institutional environment (legal and informal institutions), defining clear rules for all actors, as well as guaranteeing their freedom of activity in the network [14]. I. Kharechko also draws attention to the fact that e-democracy should be developed and implemented in society in parallel with the electronic board. The author points out the need for a unified national technical platform, adapted to the needs and IT skills of ordinary citizens, as well as the supervisory organizational structure for monitoring and analysis the situation in the regions development [13].

According to J.Parfenova's survey, a low level of trust in public authorities serves a critical factor of e-participation development, affecting the low use of e-participation tools [18]. Foreign researchers, among the reasons for citizens' low online activity, stressed the insufficient politicians' involvement in e-participation projects. This fact entails the reduction of citizens' confidence and disbelief that their opinions are taken into account in policy-making [4].

A. Golubeva and D. Ishmatova noted that the lack of institutional support and political involvement is a major obstacle to the successful implementation of e-participation [11]. Furthermore, it may be institutional and political resistance to the development of new participation forms, since they can undermine the authority of established political institutions, expanding access to decision-making processes and, as a result, changing the political balance of power [16]. According to the European studies, poor support for projects at the institutional and administrative levels, as well as resistance to e-participation development usually influence negatively on citizens' activity [4].

According to A. Golubeva and D. Ishmatova findings, the main reason for the low level of citizens' participation is the lack of confidence in the political process and lack of trust in influence on the state policy. These researchers underline the transparency of e-participation results and its impact on political decisions. Also, the initiation of e-participation projects is likely to face the problem of institutional and political resistance. From the opposite side, the citizens' indifference to political life is another factor impeding the development.

Thus, in the field of e-participation regulatory and institutional environment, a contradictory situation is observed in Russia. On the one hand, ICT is a powerful tool for civic and political participation, and on the other - an effective instrument for political control. This view is also supported by the Russian researchers A. Sokolov and E. Grushina, [21] who say that "the spread of the Internet, power delegitimizing, the protest increases, and social tension - all this results in Internet activities' growth. At the same time, the "anti-piracy" law, an attempt to introduce roll-call identification lead to restriction of Internet activity".

Based on literature review, we analyzed research results and revealed more than 30 factors detected by foreign and the Russian scientists. Then we organized an expert research group and systemized them into the following lists of factors that influence the e-participation development:

- human capital characteristics [19],
- scale of technological development [2],
- level of democracy, nature of participation [12],
- decision-making procedures and its legal acceptance [17];
- institutional and political resistance [16] / reform orientation [1];
- different stakeholders' involvement [24];
- digital divide and level of adequate skills [12] and regional differentiation [7];
- privacy concerns and autonomy, identification procedures [10, 6];
- trust to e-participation tools [20] and government institutions [4];
- level of income and social welfare [15];
- existence of the monitoring system [3].

The analysis of research publications leads to the conclusion that the variety of factors makes an impact on e-participation development in both directions, positive and negative. In this research, we used this data to create a questionnaire for experts to assess different factors influence on e-participation in Russia.

3 Research methodology

In this survey, we understood e-participation as “the process of engaging citizens through ICTs in policy, decision-making, and service design and delivery in order to make it participatory, inclusive, and deliberative” [22].

With the aim to detect the factors that influence positively and negatively on e-participation in Russia, we conducted an expert poll survey. The poll has been organized in August- September 2016. The list of experts being invited to the survey included representatives of federal, regional and municipal authorities, scientific structures and IT-companies. The listed consisted of 121 respondents. We also checked the data on active e-participation portals, revealed its’ activists and contacted them directly with the purpose to involve this part of the targeted audience in the survey. Ultimately, 41 experts took part in the survey: 39%- from government, 32%- from science and education, 12% - from business, 10% - from NGOs and 7%- active portals’ users.

The majority of experts have been working in e-governance and e-participation sphere for 3-10 years. Moreover, 14.6% of them had more than ten years’ experience in this field.

The research addressed the following issues:

- detecting the purpose of e-participation tools development;
- determine the factors influence positively on e-participation development in Russia;
- revealing the barriers of e-participation development in Russia.

An automated questionnaire was designed for the survey. The experts received the questionnaire containing questions of closed and open types. According to research methodology, we created lists of barriers and positively influence factors which experts could evaluate using a special scale. The correspondence between the list of factors revealed from the literature review and those appeared in the questionnaire is presented at table 1.

Table 1. The correspondence of the factors used in the survey with the list of factors revealed from literature review

Literature review	Questionnaire	
	Factors for development	Barriers
Human capital characteristics	Citizens’ computer literacy Citizens’ benefits	Low computer literacy
Scale of technological development	Easy use Quality of information Quick confirmation, alerts	Insufficient usability
Level of democracy, nature of participation	Leaders and activists’ existence	Administrative barriers Lack of motivation
Decision-making procedures and its legal acceptance	Proper regulations Civil servants’ responsibility for timely response	Administrative barriers
Institutional and political resistance/ reform orientation	Political activity Promotion	Political indifference
Different stakeholders’ involvement	Business involvement NGO’s involvement Civil servants’ active involvement	Lack of motivation and benefits
Digital divide and level of adequate skills	Citizens’ motivation	Digital divide

Privacy concerns and autonomy, identification procedures	Easy registration procedure	Liability for Internet publications
Trust to e-participation tools	High trust	Low trust
Level of income and social welfare	Citizen's level of income	Citizen's low level of income
Existence of the monitoring system	Assessment of users' satisfaction	Lack of monitoring and evaluation

In addition, experts were encouraged to supplement the questionnaire with their own suggestions and comments, as well as to provide solutions on the current barriers.

4 Research findings

The experts were asked to detect the purpose of e-participation tools' development in Russia. This question supposed to show not the experts' knowledge in the regulations but their personal opinions and feelings about the current situation. It's interesting to note, that 1/5 part of experts underlined the optimization of the administrative process, focusing more on civil servants' side than on citizens (fig.1). It also should be noted that the 3rd most popular answer touched the ostentatious nature of this phenomenon in Russia: the experts supposed that some of the actions in the field of opening governments and involving citizens' in the political process just seemed to act like real e-participation tools. However, these tools don't work well in real life. Some of the experts also made an accent on the fact that institutions of direct democracy (treatment, civil initiatives) are still more popular in Russia. In this way, the developing tools repeat the political landscape of the state very much.

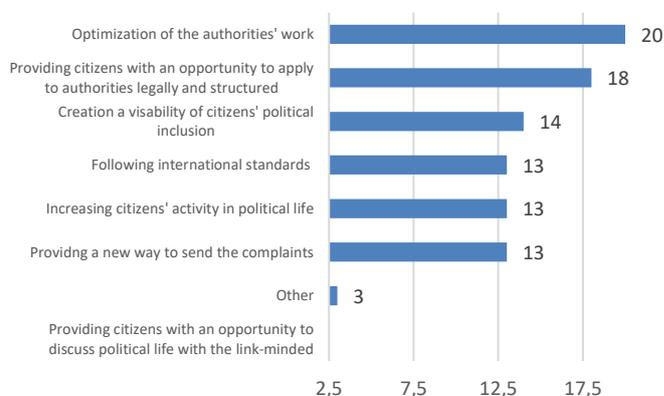


Fig. 1. Expert's answers to question "What is the purpose of e-participation tools development in Russia?", %

The experts from business companies were rather skeptical about the increasing citizens' activity in the socio-political life of the country. The respondents from science and education sphere often mentioned the desire to meet international standards.

While answering this question, the experts could also give their comments on e-participation tools development. Some experts noted the uneven development of regional e-participation tools, together with the established quite formal purposes. "The

goal of creating visibility of public participation and the possibility to make proposals is a dominant at the regional level, with exception of top-ranked regions ", - said the expert - a representative of a scientific structure.

The respondents evaluated the importance of the possible factors e-participation tools development, using a 5-marks scale, where: 1 - not significant, and 5 - very significant. Figure 2 represents average marks which experts gave to all the factors from the proposed list. The study found that the greatest significance belonged the following factors: easy use of tools (about 90% of respondents noted these factors as very significant), civil servants' responsibility for the timely reaction to citizens' requests, and quick feedback. Almost 78% of the respondents indicated a positive impact on e-participation tools development in the case when citizens got real benefits from their involvement in new services creation.

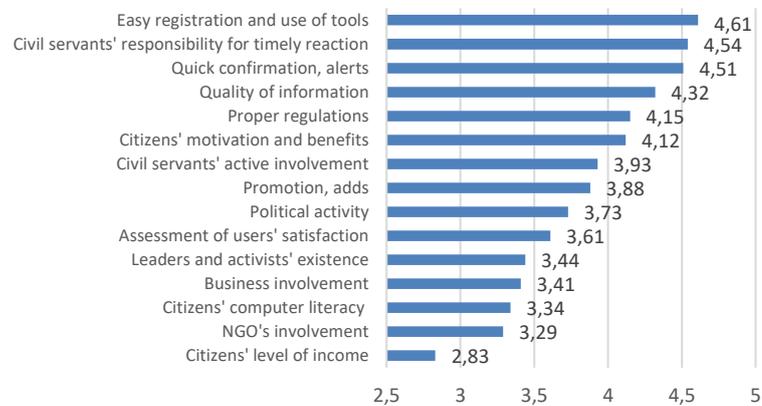


Fig. 2. Factors influencing positively on e-participation development in Russia, experts' evaluation

Among the other important factors listed by the experts, we should note the following:

- a significant number of e-participation successful cases resulted in decision-making;
- mandatory actions on supported decisions,
- 100% mandatory publication of the decisions taken by officials and their public evaluation.

Using the same scale, the experts rated the barriers of e-participation development in Russia. Figure 3 summarizes this assessment. The higher average rank in the graph means a higher importance of the existed barrier in Russia.

The most significant barriers to e-participation development, according to experts, linked with the administrative barriers, as well as the absence of a legal framework covering the authorities' working procedures with citizens' electronic applications (80.5% and 75.6% of experts respectively marked them as "very significant" or "rather significant").

The second group of important barriers addressed the human capital issues, such as low level of trust in e-participation tools, lack of motivation while communicating with authorities via the Internet, and insufficient usability level of existed services.

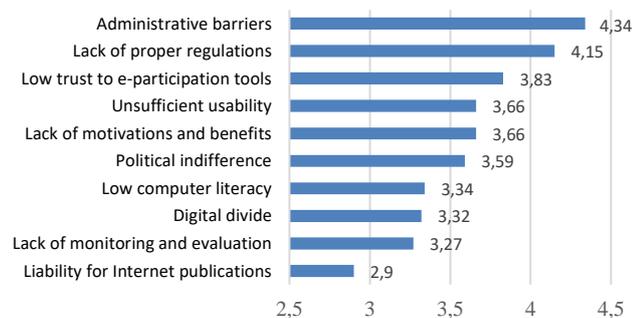


Fig. 3. Barriers to e-participation development in Russia, experts' evaluation

During the research, we have summarized experts' proposals to address the most critical issues. The respondents suggested the development of regulations with penalties for the late response to citizens' applications or incomplete feedback. Some experts, however, believed that such mechanisms had already existed and functioned, but due to the lack of responsible civil servants' qualification and/or their insufficient number, the authorities could not cope with the flow of requests effectively.

As a possible way to overcome the low trust, the experts proposed a stronger advertising and promotion of e-participation tools, including information about successful cases of real participation in decision-making processes. It's very important to show not just the cases from international practice, but national stories as well. The experts paid special attention to the transparency and openness of e-participation mechanisms in order to improve the level of citizens' confidence, as well as the feedback efficiency. One of the experts expressed the following opinion: *"if participation is anonymous, citizens are willing to participate. While publishing their data caused fears that this information could be used against themselves"*. As a possible way to improve the situation, the expert pointed out the necessity to save the anonymity of published petitions. Also, the expert highlighted the idea of block-chain technology and external audit introduction in the authorities.

5 Conclusions

The study found several administrative, regulatory, institutional and human-capital related barriers for e-participation development in Russia.

The experts confirmed that the declared purposes of e-participation tools development in Russia related to the improvement of authorities' administrative procedures and providing a way to apply the authorities online. However, the inner nature peculiarities of these initiatives in Russia lead to their low-performance and don't create any benefits

for stakeholders. That all results in a low citizens' inclusion in the decision-making processes.

The study showed a correspondence between the key barriers of e-participation tools development and the factors which should be managed to improve the situation:

- administrative barriers and the need to actively involve civil servants' in e-participation tools' usage;
- lack of proper regulations and the need to establish civil servants' responsibility for timely reaction to citizens' requests,
- low citizens' trust and the proposal to increase personal benefits and motivation in e-participation tools,
- insufficient usability and the necessity to provide quick feedback and alerts system.

The research results lead to the assumption that institutional development could provide a positive impact on more comprehensive e-participation tools creation. Another important conclusion is about the opposite effect: if citizens see personal benefit in the proposed e-participation services and their possible ability to influence on state policy, they are ready to overcome the serious administrative and technical barriers on their own. Conversely, the absence of significant values makes administrative and technical barriers insurmountable due to the lack of citizens' interest.

The conducted research has some limitations due to the focus on experts' assessment. Taking into considerations the opinions of active e-participation tools' users (involved in the survey), we tried to reveal those respondents who already used such tools, because it isn't very much popular now. But the opinions of the citizens who don't use the tools, or even don't use the Internet stay unstudied now.

The experts also noted the importance of drawing up a comprehensive evaluation criteria for e-participation assessment including the following parameters: citizens' demand, the tools' credibility, transparency, social needs, qualitative changes as a result of e-participation tools, citizens' level of trust, level of motivation, the degree of influence on the actual decision-making.

The authors are going to continue the future research in the following directions:

- to expand the scope of the study to cover various target groups among the population;
- measuring political, social and economic impacts from e-participation tools' use by citizens to find the emerging benefits and opportunities for public values creation;
- detailed analysis of successful and not successful e-petitions for detection the public mood and forecasting the most critical issues and possible protests.

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