**The Impact of E-Participation on Decision-Making Process:
Institutional Transformations of Public Administration and Public Policy
in Russia**

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Abstract. Initial normative expectations about the democratic potential of e-participation channels have shifted in recent years to a more restrained view of the real ability of governments around the world to engage citizens in an equitable and meaningful dialogue about public policy. Firstly, according to the researchers, channels of participation are gradually turning from “democratic innovations” into administrative and technocratic, which, in particular, results in their active use by countries with illiberal political regimes. In this case, the mechanisms of e-participation from the institution of "feedback", designed to increase the role of citizens in decision-making, turn into a mechanism for increasing the controllability of the political system. Secondly, since the electronic participation of citizens remains low and many channels remain unclaimed, researchers are thinking about alternative ways to get “feedback” from citizens. One of such methods is the use of social networks and big data technologies, in which it is possible to automatically receive information about the preferences of citizens. Such innovations radically change the philosophy of e-participation, transforming citizens from an active subject of the political process into an object of governance. Thus, the scientific problem of our research is the lack of theoretical and empirical knowledge about the complex impact of e-participation on the institutional transformations of public administration and the subjectivity of citizens as participants in public policy. This scientific problem is of particular relevance in the Russian context, where from 2020 a federal decision has been made to significantly reformat the e-participation system at the regional level: the creation of a single "Feedback Platform" and a system of Regional Management Centers, which makes it possible to track in real time the reactions in social networks. It is necessary to answer the following research questions: how the transformation of regional management practices takes place in connection with their emergence and what is the effectiveness of new tools in comparison with the previous ones approaches.

From the point of view of the methods, the study is based on a mixed qualitative and quantitative methodology (monitoring the development of participation channels and in-depth interviews).

**Introduction**

E-participation in Russia has undergone several significant changes, since its appearance in the country as a series of civic projects, initiated by active citizens around 2010s. Quite soon the governments of the most developed regions, like Moscow and St. Petersburg, managed to create their own portals for accumulating citizens’ feedback and collecting complaints on urban development, which sometimes lead to the open competition between civic and governmental e-participation channels (Chugunov et al., 2017). Creation of e-participation channels became advantageous for regional governors both as a source of input and output legitimacy (Schlaufer, 2020), and as a tool to increase vertical control over municipal authorities and local street-level bureaucracy (Gritsenko & Indukaev, 2021; Kabanov & Chugunov, 2017). In 2020, however, the situation changed once again, marking the third, *federal and centralized phase* of e-participation development (Filatova et al., 2023). Several federal decisions marked that stage. First, in March 2020 a presidential initiative was announced to create a single *Feedback Platform*, based on the federal *United Portal of State and Municipal Services* (*Gosuslugi*), which would include various e-participation services like complaint submission, polls, voting and discussion of policy proposals. The initiative also proposed to create the so-called *Centers of Regional Governance*, supervising interdepartmental interaction to solve citizens’ problems, revealed through the new feedback channels.[[1]](#footnote-1) No less important was the Federal Law which made it obligatory for public authorities to create their official pages in the social media.[[2]](#footnote-2) These initiatives were supplemented by some other federal e-participation portals, like the *Comfortable Urban Environment*, operated by the Ministry of Construction.

Thus, centralization has become the main trend of civic participation digitalization in Russia. The increasing role of federal authorities, first of all, the Ministry of Digital Development, Communications and Mass Media, as well as the centralized system of feedback mechanisms and *Centers of Regional Governance,* contributed to the situation, that the regional governments are becoming more dependent on systemized control from above. If regional tools were used by governors to exercise control over local bureaucracies, showing their attention and rapid reaction to their misconduct (Kabanov & Chugunov, 2017), now this is the governors’ effectiveness which is to be supervised and evaluated.[[3]](#footnote-3) The Ministry of Digital Development now regularly issues various rankings to estimate the regions’ digital maturity,[[4]](#footnote-4) regional digital transformation leadership,[[5]](#footnote-5) regions effectiveness in using the social media[[6]](#footnote-6) and implementing the Feedback Platform.[[7]](#footnote-7)

In this context, the future of pre-existing e-participation channels, created by the regional authorities, remains unclear. By 2020, there had already been 205 regional and 155 municipal e-participation channels in Russia (Chugunov et al., 2020). The new federal policy does not automatically abolish them, and their functioning is heavily dependent on the decisions of the regional authorities. The latter, however, may take this decision, using different considerations. On the one hand, when many of e-participation channels’ functions are now duplicated by the federal platform, it seems reasonable to abandon regional channels and reallocate financial and human resources. On the other hand, the shift of control from the regions to center may incentivize the former to use a more sophisticated strategy, when regional feedback platforms coexist with the federal one, and thus “lock” negative feedback at the regional level. Hence, the decision over e-participation is becoming dependent not only on resource-driven accounts, but also on the political calculations within the Center-region interactions. This issue in the transformations of the Russian e-participation has not been addressed by the literature, yet. In this article, we attempt to fill in this gap, by looking at the quantitative and qualitative changes of e-participation in the Russian regions. In particular, first, we report the results of the monitoring of e-participation channels in Russia from 2020 to 2022, and second, the results of the semi-structured interviews with the public officials, in charge of digital transformation in the regions of Russia. By analyzing the empirical data, we aim at answering the following research question: What are the qualitative and qualitative changes in the functioning of the regional e-participation channels in Russia, within the context of the new federal initiatives?

**Review and Framework**

E-participation as a format and technology of institutionalized citizen-government interaction has been drawn attention from scholars of various disciplines, as a possible tool to democratize public policy processes (Macintosh, 2004; Medaglia, 2012; Sæbø et al., 2008).

However, normative expectations of e-participation are not necessarily met in reality, since policy outcomes and democratizing potential of such innovations are usually dependent on the socio-political conditions under which they are implemented (Grönlund, 2011; Pirannejad et al., 2019). As argued by some scholars, in some contexts their democratizing potential is replaced by administrative and technocratic capabilities: “the decision to experiment with participatory governance can reveal a pragmatic logic of enhancing public administration capacity and, ultimately, output legitimacy” (Woo & Kübler, 2020, p. 348). Thus, introduction of e-participation falls into the logic of administrative reforms and public service provision (Owen & Bindman, 2019; Rodan & Jayasuriya, 2007), rather than citizens democratic engagement. In this logic, e-participation tools shift their role from citizens’ feedback collection to governmentality enhancement. Since the use of e-participation remains low, in general, researchers start thinking about alternative engagement instruments. Such an instrument have become the social media (Alarabiat et al., 2016; Oliveira & Garcia, 2019; Pirannejad et al., 2019), as well as the big data analysis methods, which together allow to automatically collect and process the information on citizens’ preferences and take policy decisions based on algorithms (Katzenbach & Ulbricht, 2019). All these political and technological innovations raise questions regarding the role of e-participation within democratic and technocratic (administrative) development.

Probably, China is the most indicative case of how citizens engagement tools (including the social media) are used for increasing state capacity (He & Warren, 2011; Qiaoan & Teets, 2020). Through online and offline participation channels, the government receives vital information on public attitudes and possible misconduct of low-level officials (Dimitrov, 2015). As shown by Chen, petitions play an important role in the Chinese multilevel governance system: they “help to alleviate the information asymmetry problem that arises when the central government has less information than lower level governments do” (Jing Chen, 2016, p. 2), thus ensuring governability of the decentralized state and legitimacy of the central government vis-à-vis local bureaucrats. For the same purposes, the government may use the social media, by allowing to criticize low-level officials’ relatively freely and without extensive censorship (Gunitsky, 2015; King et al., 2013; Lorentzen, 2014). At the same time, if the incentives of the central government and benefits for the public are clear, the motivation of local bureaucracies may much lower, which in case of China results in the limited, or selected responsiveness (Jidong Chen et al., 2016; Su & Meng, 2016). Since local officials may be punished for misconduct, they are incentivized not to transfer information to a higher level, to conceal criticism raised by the public towards the local government and to report mostly positive feedback (Pan & Chen, 2018). This surely limits the effectiveness of public participation as a source of information for the central government.

Though political systems in China and Russia differ significantly from each other, the trends of e-participation transformation in Russia might follow a similar logic. Russia is a federal, yet highly centralized state, where administrative decentralization is complemented by the lack of financial and political autonomy of the regions from the Center (Busygina, 2018; Starodubtsev, 2018). The system of governance in Russia is known as the *power vertical*, i.e., “the hierarchical subordination of regional chief executives … to the Kremlin” (Gel’man & Ryzhenkov, 2011), which make the regional authorities directly accountable to the federal government. Such system inevitably creates the principal-agent relationship between two levels of government, with the consequent problems of information asymmetry undermining its effectiveness (Busygina & Klimovich, 2022; Klimovich, 2023). In this context, centralization of citizens feedback mechanisms becomes a logical move, which should minimize this information asymmetries by adding another fire-alarm mechanism (Lupia & McCubbins, 1994) and strengthen the *power* *vertical*.

Yet, as shown previously by the case of China, as well as by the principal-agency theory (Miller, 2005), regional governments may not be incentivized to transfer all information about their performance to the higher level, which poses a question, what strategies regional governments will employ under new rules: integration of existing systems into the new one (following the difficulties in maintaining interoperability), termination of the current projects (with possible reductions in resources, allocated for their administration), or co-existence of the systems (potentially causing technical and administrative conflicts, as well as resource deficits).

On the one hand, increasing “top-down” control may be a strong incentive for regions to comply with the federal standards. The single platform is a remedy for those regions that lack resources to build or maintain their own e-participation mechanisms. E-participation in Russia might take a similar path, followed earlier by e-government in the country, where eventually centralization and federal standards overcome some of the regional disparities in e-services provision (Gritsenko & Zherebtsov, 2021; Kabanov & Sungurov, 2016). Such centralization in case of e-participation may contribute to the equality and efficiency of e-participation provision. Some regional projects can be abandoned, especially where channels of e-participation are duplicated by the Feedback Platform. At the same time. In this situation, high-capacity regions may gain advantage, as they have resources to simultaneously comply with federal requirements and developing their own tools. So, the question of diversity and inequality in e-participation across the regions remain open.

Another dilemma comes from the shift of control. While regions may be forced to be more responsive under external control, as we have mentioned already, there might be incentives to avoid oversight from above. While high-capacity regions are able to create regional feedback platforms to “lock” negative feedback, low-capacity regions may attempt to disincentivize citizens to participate whatsoever. It is unclear if the centralized system will overcome these problems, and what are the consequences for citizens engagement, in general.

To sum up, the research puzzle comes from ambiguities of new policies’ impact on the regional e-participation and, more broadly, on the multilevel governance system in Russia. At the moment, there is a lack of theoretical and empirical knowledge on how e-participation affects institutional structures, intergovernmental relations and citizens-government dialogue.

Quantiative Transformations of Regional E-Participation

To reveal transformations of regional e-participation in Russia, we first estimate quantitative changes in its provision. Since 2020 we have conducted an annual monitoring of e-participation tools in the regions and large cities of Russia. The methodology of the monitoring is based on the system approach and was developed in 2019 (Chugunov et al., 2020) to evaluate quality of the six most widely used e-participation channels in Russia: (1) initiative / participatory budgeting; (2) open budget; (3) e-petitions; (4) crowdsourcing; (5) complaint mechanisms and (6) e-voting. As a basis of the methodology, we use the approach of David Easton (Easton, 1957), who distinguished several crucial elements of political systems: (1) the system itself (the "black box"), (2) the inputs (demands and support from citizens); (3) the outputs (decisions, policies); and (4) the feedback (inputs - outputs correspondence) (Easton, 1957). We argue that this simplified model portrays the key elements of the e-participation workflow. Citizens formulate a demand (complain, petition, etc.) and submit it to the "black box", where the system processes the request and provides an output - a certain policy or action. This stimulates the "feedback", and, if necessary, another input. Each of these four concepts corresponds to a criterion. These criteria include: (1) openness for the "black box", i.e. how open, transparent and comprehensive the available information about the eparticipation process is; (2) availability for the input, i.e. how e-participation allows the access for various groups of citizens; (3) decision-making capacity for the output, i.e. the availability of the information related to the outcomes of e-participation; (4) feedback quality, denoting the spectrum of opportunities for the citizens to give feedback on e-participation results. These criteria are universal for all six types of e-participation tools under analysis. Additionally, a fifth criterion - Specific requirements - was developed to evaluate unique features of each type. Every criterion was then decomposed to 3 indicators. The selection of this indicators has been based both on the previous studies (Chugunov & Kabanov 2018) and after a series of consultations with the experts on e-government and e-participation. So, the methodology consists of 15 indicators in general (Table 1). Each indicator is evaluated from 0 to 2 points: "0" - the indicator is not present, "1" - the indicator is partially present and "2" - the indicator is fully present. Hence for each e-participation tool a region could get a maximum of 30 points (22 points for open budget portals) (Chugunov et al., 2020).

Table 1: E-Participation Evaluation Framework. Source: Authors' Elaboration

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| Concept | Criterion | Indicator & Explanation |
| "Black box" | Openness | 1.1. Topicality: Has the website been updated within the last month? |
| 1.2. Availability: Is there information about the goals, objectives and operators of the portal? |
| 1.3. Comprehensiveness: Are there infographics / opportunities to get the basic information within 2 clicks? |
| Input | Availability | 2.1. Special conditions: Is there a version for people with disabilities? |
| 2.2. Mobility: Is there a mobile version / app? |
| 2.3. Alternative: Is there an offline alternative to e-participation? |
| Output | Decision-making capacity | 3.1. Legislation: Is there a regional legislation regulating this portal?  |
| 3.2. Reports: Are there reports on activities available? |
| 3.3. Routing: Are there any markers on this portal allowing to trace the stage at which the application is? |
| Feedback | Feedback Quality | 4.1. Contact: Is there contact information? |
| 4.2. Evaluation: Are citizens able to evaluate their satisfaction with this portal or leave a feedback? |
| 4.3. Loop: Can citizens re-apply if they disagree with a decision? |
| - | Special Requirements | 5.1. - 5.3. Narrow technological functionality questions pertinent to types of e-participation portals (e.g. for e-complaints we assess the availability of the GIS to position complaints, the classifier of complaints and the "public control"). Full list is in the online annex (https://clck.ru/MkdWF). |
| Notes: **indicators 2.3, 3.3., 4.2, 4.3. are not applicable to the Open Budget portals, as they do not allow direct citizens' involvement.** |

If we look at the results of the monitoring for the last four years, we will see the following dynamics on the regional and municipal levels:



**Fig. 1.** The number of e-participation channels in regions (blue) and cities (red), 2020-2023

As of 2020, before the centralization, we had revealed 353 e-participation channels on both levels. The most widespread had been open budget channels, present almost in all regions, followed by initiative budgeting channels and complaint mechanisms. Other three types of e-participation were less widespread and present in few regions.[[8]](#footnote-8) By the beginning of 2021, the number of channels increased to 357: despite the publication of the new federal regulation, the existing channels continued their functioning, as well as some new, previously planned, were launched. For example, in 2021, six new e-complaint mechanisms were launched, thus bringing the total number of channels in the country to 56, against 54 initiative budgeting portals, the number of which decreased significantly (Kabanov et al., 2021). In general, 2021 may be considered as a continuation of the previous, initiative-regional stage of e-participation development: at the beginning of 2021, the regions were still joining the Feedback Platform, and the regional authorities had not yet decided on what to do with existing channels. Thus, the policy of centralization had not yet affected the quantity and quality of regional and municipal e-participation channels. However, the number of e-participation channels significantly decreased from 357 to 316 during 2021, which we revealed in early 2022. What is important, 34 out of 41 closed channels were those, which functions were duplicated by the single Feedback Platform: in particular, 16 complaint channels and 18 e-voting channels were closed. At that stage we formulated a hypothesis, that the trend of centralization would negatively impact the quantity of e-participation channels, provided by the regional authorities. Conversely, in 2023 the general number of channels surprisingly increased to 327. The total number of complaint channels remained the same (40), and only one more e-voting channel was closed (the total number is 22 as of 2023). What is more, in both cases, the reduction was profound at the municipal level, but at the regional level the total number even increased.

The number of e-petitions and crowdsourcing channels did not change significantly from 2022 to 2023. At the moment, the process of centralization does not cover these types of e-participation, there are no federal resources that would cover such functions.



**Fig. 2.** Number of e-participation channels in 2020-2023, by types of channels, in regions (left) and municipalities (right). Legend: open budget (dark blue), initiative budgeting (red), e-complaint (green), e-petitions (purple), e-voting (blue), crowdsourcing (orange).

 In sum, within the context of the new federal policy towards e-participation, we may see some fluctuations on the regional level (especially in case of e-complaint and e-voting channels), while at the municipal level the number of channels is mostly decreasing, what might be due to fewer resources available there. One more reason may be that municipal authorities are less autonomous and thus are more involved into federal initiatives, while federal authorities have relatively more autonomy and resources.

**Qualitative Transformations in Regional E-Participation: Results of the Expert Interviews**

As was previously mentioned, centralization is not the only new challenge for regional e-participation. The second one is associated with the active and obligatory introduction of the social media into the practices of public administration. Alongside the Feedback Platform, the Centers of Regional Governance were created, the key element of which is the Incident-Management system, allowing to track citizens’ feedback in real time. Though the use of the social media monitoring for tracking public opinion, attitudes and social problems is not novel per se (Ruggiero & Vos, 2014; Sobkowicz et al., 2012), in Russia it has substantially changed the way regional authorities use the social media to communicate with citizens. It is crucial to understand, how they use new communication channels, and how they generally evaluate the recent changes in e-participation system. In order to explore this problem, in October-November 2022 we conducted several expert semi-structured interviews. Overall, we have collected interviews with 34 experts, who are in charge of digital transformation in the regional public authorities. Each semi-structured interview lasted from 15 minutes to 1 hour.

All experts interviewed gave a positive response to the question, whether transformations in the sphere of e-participation are visible to them. “*Yes, of course, very visible. I think, it is visible to everybody. We are walking by leaps and bounds*”, as one respondent emphasized. “While the transformation process is underway, many requests are still received through traditional communication channels (letters, mail, e-mail), but nevertheless, more and more requests are received through the Feedback Platform and the social media. We have switched to the format of systematic work, it has become a tool for the daily activities of an official”, adds another interviewee, highlighting the fact that electronic interaction with citizens has become as a daily routine job, as the main task, because “*we are moving where the citizens are. Citizens are in the social media, and from the social media we collect negative, positive remarks and process them*”.

More difficult to interpret were the answers to the following questions:

**1) Are the regional and municipal authorities capable to use the new methods of problem detection via new channels and use the information to develop more effective policies?** An average question is the following: “*It depends on a particular authority. We personally are ready, but somebody is not so ready. He drowned in his routine, drowned in the fact that he has one clinic in the village and, accordingly, he has no time for electronic communication channels, he would cure children*.” Several respondents highlighted that in general the system of governance is not always effective. But mostly interviewees gave positive answers to the question and exemplified their answers with cases of effective use of new channels.

**2) How effective are new tools (Centers of Regional Governance, Feedback Platform) in comparison to previous instruments?** Half of the respondents confirmed the effectiveness of the Centers of Regional Governance, a bit less than one third of them confirmed the effectiveness of different e-participation channels, some mentioned the effectiveness of their own channels of public opinion analysis. In general, as one respondent said, “*the effectiveness in comparison to previous approaches is significantly higher. I think, 60-70 %*”. Practically all emphasized the role of the governor and the head of the digital transformation in the region, and the approach they use. As one interviewee responded, “*the head of digital transformation must be the queen on the chessboard to change the rules of the game”.* It was also mentioned many times that municipal and regional governments are very interested in collecting as much information from the citizens as possible. In order to collect it using other means, than e-participation, one needs to waste a lot of time and resources.

Generally, experts claim that the social media is the most open, transparent and effective way to get feedback from citizens: “*Social media are an ongoing process of informing about the problems that exist. If a person does not hide behind a screen of templates or screams, but correctly paints everything, then it’s easier to work with it ... I won’t say that this is ubiquitous, but often problems that have not been solved before can either be solved or formed in a person understanding why it is not solved.*”

As for the question, if centralization trends might cause concerns within the regions of Russia, about two thirds of the experts confirm this, while one third of experts do not consider it real.

**Conclusion**

Since 2020 a new institutional framework of e-participation is unfolding in Russia, which poses many theoretical and empirical questions, requiring new studies of the regional e-participation in Russia. Using mixed-method approach, we have found out that transformation of existing e-participation practices is going, but its effects are different in different regions. It is not possible to clearly evaluate the effectiveness of the new e-participation tools so far, however, the authorities seem to realize the necessity of their effective use. The analysis of the data collected from the monitoring of the regional and municipal e-participation tools, shows an ambiguous picture. In 2023 we did not observe reduction of e-participation channels, which was clear in 2022. An exception here are municipal channels, where some channels, duplicated by the new e-participation tools, were closed. On the regional level we see that the governments continue to use existing tools and sometimes develop new ones. It is so far an open question, why regional governments keep those channels, and what strategies within the Center-regions relationship they pursue. Based on the expert interviews, we may conclude that the governments in Russia now use the social media more effectively, than two years ago. Though the regions are not equally active in their use of the social media, in general, they are ready to employ new models of communication with citizens. Our study is still on an early stage, and further research is needed, using the combination of qualitative and quantitative methods.

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