

## **E-PARTICIPATION IN RUSSIA AT REGIONAL AND LOCAL LEVEL: VIEW OF THE GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS**

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**Abstract.** *In recent years several e-participation projects have been introduced in some of the major Russian cities. However, there is a view that citizens in most other regions don't have as many opportunities to participate in decision-making processes. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the e-participation practices in regional and local government agencies in the Volgograd region in order to develop measures for improvement of the existing system. The study utilizes the following two methods: analysis of e-participation modes offered by regional and local governments and an expert survey. The survey was completed by 48 regional and local government officials responsible for information policy. The findings can be summarized as follows. All existing regional platforms provide opportunities to give feedback or ask questions related to the city's life. The local government website gives opportunities to participate in surveys that help to accumulate users' opinions and improve the quality of life in the city. On the other hand, the studied platforms do not provide collaborative tools (chat, shared agenda, forum, etc.). Their main aim is to give information, but not to involve citizens in decision-making processes. The experts evaluated the level of e-participation in the Volgograd region and identified the most important challenges. It has been concluded that citizens in the Volgograd region have fewer possibilities to participate in decision-making processes than citizens of the country in general. Among the variety of electronic services developed in Europe and the United States only a few (the least interactive as a rule) exist in Russia at the regional level. The most important problem highlighted by a majority of the experts (75%) is lack of clear and detailed e-participation strategy developed in the region. It has been reported that there is a need for developing this strategy at the regional and local level and citizens should be engaged in this discussion process. The other identified obstacles are the insufficient activity of citizens, lack of transparency in the local governments, and the complexity of e-services. Based on the investigations of this paper the following areas of improvement in this field can be proposed: development of an e-participation strategy in the region with citizen involvement in this process, enhancement of the existing e-participation services proposed by regional and local governments and adoption of new services, development of collaborative tools on existing platforms, simplification of e-services, using benefits of social advertising and social media.*

**Keywords:** *e-participation; e-services; local governments; e-democracy; public administration.*

### **Introduction**

The main obstacles for the sustainable development of public administration in Russia are lack of transparency of authorities on the one hand and passivity of civil society on the other hand. The wide distribution of information technologies in the field of governance could solve these problems. The concept of e-democracy developed at the

end of the last century in the USA is widely spread nowadays in Russia as well. Federal and local e-government websites have been introduced and are working successfully. Nevertheless, e-democracy includes not only influence of authority on the society by means of information technologies, but also the feedback of the society, its reaction to government decisions and actions also by using electronic communications services.

Over the last 10 years, some government initiatives have been introduced by government bodies and agencies in Russia. There is a view that e-participation initiatives work successfully only in big cities such as Moscow and St. Petersburg whereas citizens of the most other regions do not have many opportunities to participate in decision-making processes.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the e-participation practices in regional and local government agencies in one of the Russian regions and to develop measures for improvement of the existing system. The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 reviews the e-participation related literature, Section 3 presents the methodology, Section 4 analyses the empirical results obtained and Section 5 presents conclusion and recommendations for improvement in this field.

### **Literature review**

Though the concept of e-participation has become quite popular in recent decades, there is still no single comprehensive definition of this term. It is difficult to understand what this concept includes, as each researcher either tries to create his or her own definition without a regard on the previous contribution or does not give any definition at all (Van Belle & Cupido, 2013). The explanation for this might be that this concept is broad and includes many kinds of activities: not only the most often considered e-voting, i.e., the use of electronic means to participate in the democratic electoral process (Macintosh, 2004), but also many other kinds of participation in governance at all levels: local, regional, national and international, i.e., planning, budgeting, decision-making implementation, evaluating (Grönlung, 2001; Sæbø, Rose, & Flak, 2010).

Based on theoretical consideration and earlier studies we can identify two views on the e-participation concept. Some schools consider e-participation to be a branch of e-government and the result of its development. They define e-participation as the use of electronic technologies for citizens to incorporate their concerns, needs, and values in government decision-making (Bennett, 2015; Bertot, Jaeger & McClure, 2008; Panopoulou, Tambouris & Tarabanis, 2010; Peristeras et al., 2009; Reddick & Norris, 2013). These studies view e-participation as a feedback of e-government, tools which enable communication and cooperation between citizens and public officials. A few researchers are skeptical towards this position and argue that it is not in accordance with some old e-government models. For instance, Layne and Lee's (2001) e-government model includes 4 stages: cataloging, transaction, vertical integration, and horizontal integration. As we can see there is no place for e-participation here.

With the aim to improve and develop the old concept a new e-government model has been developed. Bennett (2015) presents Siau and Long's model including 5 stages, where the fifth stage involves online tools such as e-voting, polling, and surveys to facilitate citizen participation. The authors call it e-democracy, but it also can be indicated as e-participation.

A number of contemporary studies broaden the concept and focus on a human factor in e-participation more than on its technological characteristics. They view e-participation as a way to engage citizens for the purpose to improve government activity and to strengthen representative democracy (Macintosh, 2004). Another aim is to improve communication between government agencies and citizens as well as among citizens themselves. Eccles and Kryus (2010) formulated the principles the connection between an entity and their stakeholders should be based on – collaboration and engagement.

It is in line with the concept of corporate dialog promoted by Bonson et al. (2012) which implies a fair equal relationship between all the participants of the communication process. We find it highly important for Russia where traditionally individuals are perceived as passive consumers of government services. The adoption of digital technologies in government can diminish the significance of the dichotomy of producer and audience (Hanssen, 2008) and increase the role of citizens.

One of the objectives of the study was to investigate and evaluate the e-participation modes and mechanisms offered by Volgograd regional and local governments. It should be noted that there are apparently not so many attempts in the contemporary literature to systematize electronic services and participation modes used by government agencies. The researchers usually concentrate on a few e-participation tools they intend to consider in their studies, but they do not try to summarize all the tools. For instance, Hanssen (2008) investigates and compares four e-participation forms in his research – e-mail, chat-groups, online-meetings, e-debates. Bonson et al. (2012) analyze utilization of technologies Web 2.0 and social media by municipalities. They summarize their data in the table according to their features and utility and demonstrate the newest e-participation tools: widgets, blogs, mashups, social networks etc. Anduiza, Gallego and Cantijoch (2010) investigate three modes of online-participation: contacting officials, donating money, signing petitions. However, the most authors focus on one or two tools and analyze its or their benefits and challenges for using. Van Belle and Cupido (2013) are concerned with using mobile phones as a platform to encourage public participation and engagement. A growing number of researchers from different countries regard examples of e-participatory budgeting adoption in local governance (Alfaro et al., 2010; Lironi, 2016; Matheus et al., 2010; Peixoto, 2009; Sampaio, Maia & Marques, 2011), participatory urban planning by digital tools (Rudd, Malone & Bartlett, 2017; Saad-Sulonen & Horelli, 2010; Wang et al., 2007), online participation in the legislative process (Coleman, 2004; Glencross, 2009; Lironi, 2016).

Based on the recent studies the following e-participation modes can be identified: submitting legislative initiatives; public consultations; evaluation of governments activities; e-budgeting; participatory urban planning; surveys and polls of citizens; e-voting; e-petitioning; e-referenda.

Most of these modes have been used to some extent in some of the Russian cities. Analysis of regional and local practices could be of a particular interest to compare and contrast the Russian experience with the situation in other countries. Therefore, this paper investigates finding and challenges of e-participation in Russia in view of the presented issues.

## Methodology

Our strategy was a combination of qualitative and quantitative research. To achieve the main purpose this study utilizes the following methods.

1) Analysis of e-participation services proposed by regional and local governments. Data were collected by doing an analysis of the official websites of the Volgograd region local governments to obtain information about opportunities and channels they provide for citizens to participate online. The services were investigated according to the developed criteria: information related to the main aspects of city life, feedback, initiator of creation, timely updating, the simplicity of the graphic interface and navigation system, accessibility for citizens, possibilities to participate in decision-making processes through the sites.

2) The quantitative analysis was supplemented by a questionnaire expert survey [N=48]. This research tool is known for its sufficiently valid and reliable results and provides opportunities for researchers to study topics for which there is only scarce information (Hooghe et al., Bakker, 2010). A questionnaire was drafted to be filled by the experts. The survey was completed by 48 regional and local government officials responsible for information policy. The aim was to investigate their attitude towards citizen participation. The questions were selected based on the preliminary analysis of literature focused on e-participation practices in Russia and abroad.

The developed questionnaire consisted of four blocks: e-democracy situation in Russia and the Volgograd region, the most popular forms and sectors of e-participation, problems, and obstacles that might limit access to e-participation initiatives, actions of local governments to solve these problems. The respondents had the opportunity to complement their answers with written comments. To achieve the most reliable results the survey was conducted face-to-face. The meetings were organized during fall and winter 2017-2018.

## Findings

### *E-participation tools on the regional and local government platforms of Volgograd*

All e-participation platforms can be divided into two groups: initiated by governments and created by citizens. In Volgograd, only the examples of the first group can be found. In 2012 E-government of the Volgograd region was created with the ultimate aim to establish a united information space and infrastructure for successful communication between government and citizens. The objectives were also to facilitate transparency of government agencies and establish online liaison offices where every citizen could receive feedback from a local official. Thus, according to the plans, only two levels of e-participation were intended to be implemented: e-information and e-consultation. So, one of the important aspects of e-participation: e-decision-making (following the scheme developed by Macintosh, 2004) was left untouched while still in the planning stage.

According to the plans two platforms were established to implement the stated objectives: the official portal of regional government <http://www.volganet.ru/> and the site of Volgograd city government <http://www.volgadmin.ru/>. The portal of regional

government provides links to the sites of local governments throughout the region. We present here the analysis of the platforms according to the developed criteria described in the previous section.

On both platforms, various kinds of information are available related to the main aspects of region life (education, health, social welfare, labor information, and environment). In addition, on a regular basis, government officials submit reports on the work they have done. The platforms have reference links to legislative texts, yet do not have any FAQ-pages.

Both platforms provide feedback opportunities to ask questions related to the region's or city's life. The website of the city government gives opportunities to participate in surveys that help to accumulate users' opinions and improve the quality of life in the city. Survey results are summarized in tables which are presented on the site.

As a general rule for any website, the navigation system should be simple to save users' time maximally. Both sites are updated on a regular basis, have good usability and a relatively clear navigation system. They offer a wide range of information which is well organized. But on the other hand, the platforms sometimes use complicated professional language and bureaucratic terminology which can limit access to the content for some participants. Besides, some tools require additional explanation for senior users which is not provided. Though the Volgograd region is considered to be multinational, access to government websites is possible only in one official national language. Special options for partially sighted persons are available on both platforms.

Social media enable the government to give people a large amount of useful information such as the location of offices or important events. Besides, social media are one of the ways to facilitate communication between government agencies and citizens due to available feedback tools. The official portal of Volgograd regional government has a social media presence on VKontakte (the most popular Russian social network), Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. In most cases, they duplicate the information provided on the sites. Comments opportunities of the social media often remain unclaimed. Only a few posted citizens' comments have been ignored by local officials.

The analysis shows that the studied platforms do not provide collaborative tools (chat, shared agenda, forum, etc.). It can be concluded that their main aim is to give information, yet not to involve citizens in decision-making processes.

The results of the analysis are summarized in Table 1.

As we can see, in the Volgograd region only one level of e-participation has been implemented – e-information. Only two points “Information related to the main aspects of city life” and “Timely updating” have a maximum score. The analysis identified the chief problem: lack of possibilities to communicate with government officials and participate in decision-making processes. It is in line with conclusions made by American researchers about misbalance of functions performed by governments' websites which provide good information and deliver great services, but offer limited citizen-engagement opportunities (Zheng & Schlachter, 2018).

**Table 1. Evaluation of the presented platforms (author's own elaboration)**

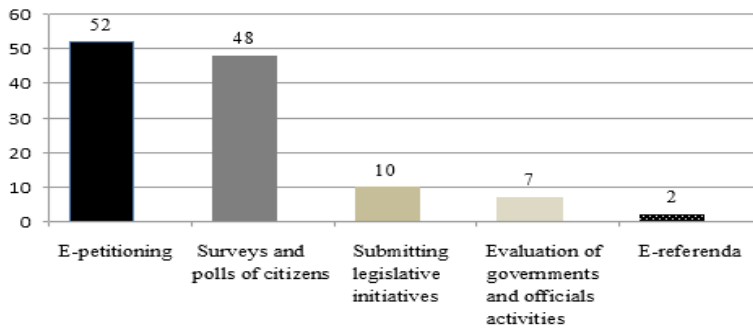
Government platform	Information related to the main aspects of city/life	Feedback	Initiator of creation (G or C)	Timely updating	Simplicity of the graphic interface and the navigation system	Accessibility	Possibility to participate in decision-making process	Social media presence
1	+++	+	G	+++	+	++	-	+
2	+++	+	G	+++	+	++	-	+

***Evaluation of the e-participation experience by government officials***

The second step of our research was to collect information covering experts' evaluating the current situation as well as their needs and expectations towards e-participation adoption at regional and local level. The survey target group were regional and local government officials responsible for information policy who agreed to participate in the survey. The survey was completed by 48 experts during the survey period.

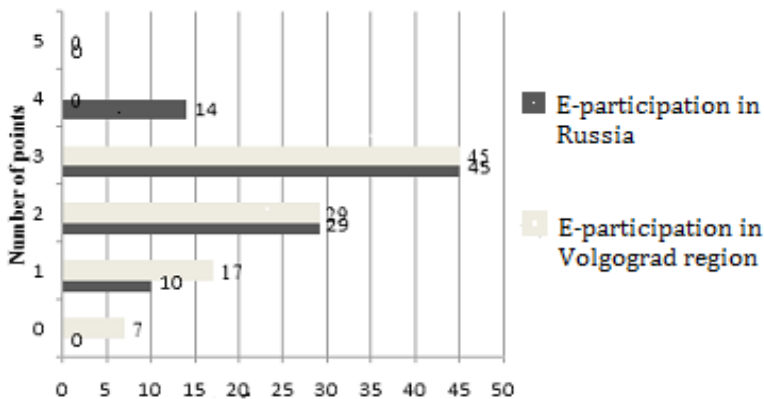
The developed questionnaire consisted of the following blocks: e-democracy situation in the country and region, the most popular forms and sectors of e-participation, problems, and obstacles that might limit access to e-participation initiatives, proposals of local governments to solve these problems. The survey focused not only on statistical indicators of data but above all on the estimates and views of local officials on current situation related to e-participation opportunities in the Volgograd region. This sector is presenting an analysis of answers and inputs provided by survey respondents.

The aim of the first block was to indicate the most beneficial e-participation modes according to the respondents. Among the presented e-participation modes e-petitioning (52%) and surveys/polls of citizens (48%) were identified as the most useful. This is in accordance with current Russian studies marking high demand in these e-participation forms in Russia (Bershadskaia & Racheva, 2015; Chugunov & Bershadskaia, 2013; Demushina, 2016). Only a few experts chose such forms as submitting legislative initiatives (10%), evaluation of governments and officials' activities (7%), e-referenda (2%). None of the respondents marked e-voting, e-planning or e-budgeting. Total percentage exceeds 100% because up to three options could have been chosen. The results are summarized in Figure 1.



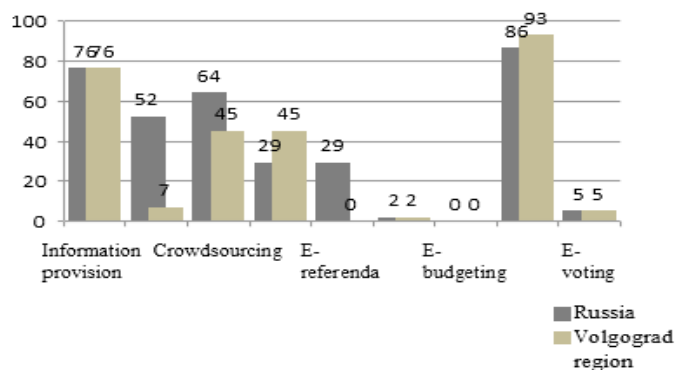
**Figure 1. The most beneficial e-participation modes in the Volgograd region (%) (author’s own elaboration)**

Respondents were asked to rate the effectiveness of e-participation practices existing in the country and region on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 representing "very bad" and 5 representing "very good". 45% of the respondents gave 3 points to the e-participation practices both in the country and in the region. The rest evaluate the situation as "bad" or "very bad" (1 or 2 points). The results are presented in Figure 2.



**Figure 2. The effectiveness of e-participation practices existing in the country and region (author’s own elaboration)**

To evaluate e-participation progress at the national and regional level, the survey included questions about existing platforms and tools. The replies allow concluding that the Volgograd region has a significantly lower level of development in comparison to other Russian regions. The survey participants identified the following e-participation modes and mechanisms existing in Russia: information provision, surveys, and polls of citizens, crowdsourcing, public consultations, evaluation of governments’ activities, e-petitioning, e-referenda. Among them, the only two - information provision as well as surveys and polls of citizens are in demand in the Volgograd region in the view of most respondents. In addition, the experts note that some of the popular e-participation forms in Europe have not been developed in Russia, for instance, e-voting, e-planning, and e-budgeting. Figure 3 shows that these forms have been chosen by the least number of the respondents.



**Figure 3. E-participation modes and mechanisms in Russia and the Volgograd region (%) (author's own elaboration)**

Several barriers to providing e-participations have been identified by the respondents such as insufficient civic engagement, the complexity of electronic platforms and tools, lack of awareness of computers in general and of e-participation projects and tools in particular. The important problem highlighted by a majority of the experts (75%) is lack of clear and detailed e-participation strategy developed in the region. However, the officials admit that they share responsibility for the low level of e-participation development and mark insufficient transparency of governmental agencies as an important challenge.

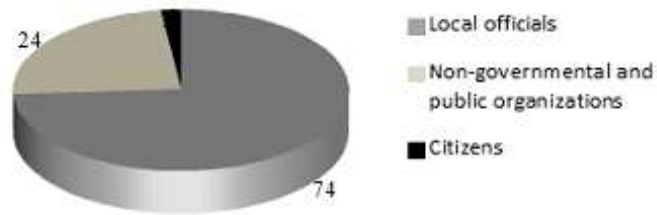
The participants were asked about the reasons for insufficient civic engagement in Russia. All the replies can be divided into two groups: explaining it by the unwillingness of citizens to communicate with governments and by the inability of citizens to participate. The given replies are summarized in Table 2.

**Table 2. Reasons for insufficient online civic engagement offered by the respondents (author's own elaboration)**

Unwillingness of citizens to communicate with governments	
1	lack of trust in government
2	lack of confidence in the possibility of change the situation
3	negative attitudes toward local officials
Inability of citizens to participate	
1	low level of computer literacy
2	lack of awareness of e-participation tools
3	Internet access problem and lack of infrastructure
4	lack of appropriate e-participation tools

Noting insufficient civic engagement, the experts do not endeavor to provide the citizens with an opportunity to be involved in building up e-participation strategy. 74% of the respondents argue that the initiative to develop e-participation in the region should be taken by government officials. 24% see non-governmental and public organizations in that role. Only 2% of the survey participants consider citizens to be responsible for issues regarding e-participation (see Figure 4).

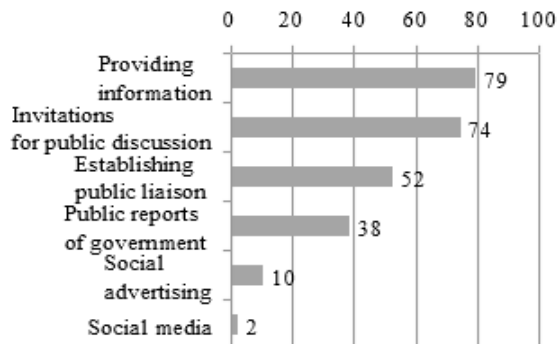




**Figure 4. Who should be the initiator of building up e-participation concept in the region? (author's own elaboration)**

Nevertheless, the respondents are positive about the involvement of the public in decision-making at regional and local level. 79% of the survey participants approve citizen engagement, 10% replied in the negative. Remaining respondents found difficulty in replying.

Several measures for involving citizens in communication with governments have been proposed by the officials: providing citizens with information about governments' activities, invitations for public discussion, establishing public liaison offices, public reports of government officials, social advertising, social media (see Figure 5).



**Figure 5. Measures for involving citizens in communication with governments (%) (author's own elaboration)**

## Conclusions and implications

The purpose of this paper was to analyze the e-participation practices in regional and local government agencies in Russia. The findings of the study have both theoretical and practical implications. On the one hand, the study contributes through systematization of electronic services and participation modes used by government agencies. On the other hand, some recommendations for improvement of the existing system have been developed on the base of the conducted research, which can be used by regional and local government agencies to enhance the quality of public administration.

The analysis shows a lower level of e-participation development in the Volgograd region in comparison to other Russian regions and foreign countries. Most of the existing in the Volgograd region platforms do not provide collaborative tools. According to the analysis, their main aim is to give information, but not to involve citizens in the decision-making process.

The following barriers to providing e-participations have been identified by the respondents such as insufficient civic engagement, the complexity of electronic platforms and tools, lack of awareness of computers in general and of e-participation projects and tools in particular, lack of clear and detailed e-participation strategy developed in the region, insufficient transparency of government agencies.

On the base of the conducted analysis some areas of improvement in this field could be proposed: development of an e-participation strategy in the region with citizen involvement in this process, enhancement of the existing e-participation modes offered by regional and local governments and adoption of new services, development of collaborative tools on the platforms, simplification of e-services, using benefits of social advertising and social media.

Based on the conducted study, the following directions for further research can be proposed: to carry out a local population survey in order to find out the local citizens' opinions and attitudes towards the existing local e-participation services; to compare and contrast the Russian experience with the situation in other countries.

**Acknowledgments:** We thank the Russian Foundation for Basic Research for support, which enabled to prepare the presented paper (Project 16-13-34002 "E-participation: analysis of possibilities and development prospects in the Volgograd region").

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