Digitalising City Governance in Russia: The Case of the 'Active Citizen' Platform

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Abstract

This essay examines the role of civic tech in contemporary Russian governance through a data-driven analysis of the 'Active Citizen' platform deployed in Moscow. It shows that the way in which polls are conducted on the platform has various consequences, from serving the city administration's PR needs to shuffling the power balance in various policy areas and effectively disempowering certain stakeholder groups, as well as helping the administration to increase control over a policy domain. At the same time, some platform uses actually empower citizens by engaging them in decision-making and offering grounds for further mobilisation.

DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY HAS AFFECTED GOVERNANCE at all levels—from supranational to local—by allowing new participatory formats. This is particularly true in the emerging realm of civic technology, or 'civic tech' (Dunleavy *et al*. 2006; Graeff 2018). We contend that, at its most simple level, governance refers to 'any mode of co-ordination of inter-dependent activities' (Jessop 1998, p. 29), aimed at solving coordination problems in and across a wide range of social systems. Participatory governance, in turn, can be understood as the direct participation of citizens in dealing with the policy issues that affect them (Hertting & Kugelberg 2017). Civic tech usually comes in the form of an online or mobile application that allows citizens to participate in public policy through consultations, opinion polling, ratings, requesting repairs, complaints, participatory budgeting and other similar forms of engagement directed towards the public good (Graeff 2018). While the use of civic tech has been promoted by a variety of actors, governments are usually the key actors: they receive inputs provided *via* the applications, take part in the deliberations that civic tech enables, and increasingly assume the role of civic tech platforms' developers and owners.

The use of digital technology in democratic governance is commonly associated with the promise of increased efficiency in public administration (Dunleavy *et al*. 2006) and the political empowerment of citizens (Mossberger *et al*. 2007). The spread of civic tech has brought new life to the participatory governance promise to extend citizens' role beyond that of 'voter or watchdog' to 'direct deliberative engagement' (Fischer 2012, p. 458) and

thus to enhance governments' legitimacy and effectiveness and to promote social justice (Fung 2015). Yet, the capacity of civic tech to enhance the democratic quality of governance remains a matter of empirical investigation and theoretical debate (Cardullo & Kitchin 2019; Deseriis 2020).

In recent years, the spread of digital technology in authoritarian regimes has added extra complexity to the theory and practice of citizen participation in governance. For instance, China—which understands citizen participation as a tool to bolster regime legitimacy (He & Warren 2011)—has embraced digital technology to develop new participatory instruments. Recent studies of e-petitioning (Jiang *et al*. 2019) and online public consultations (Kornreich 2019) in China have created a benchmark for studying the role of civic tech in authoritarian regimes, offering empirical evidence that digital technologies of participation can improve the quality and responsiveness of governance. Thus, in authoritarian regimes participatory governance could be an attractive alternative to democratic empowerment *via* 'votes and rights' as the Chinese example suggests. Yet, despite its burgeoning civic tech, the political regime remains strictly autocratic.

Current research on the role of government-sponsored civic tech in Russian governance provides inconclusive results (Wijermars 2020). In contrast to the visible success of citizen-led digital initiatives in a set of policy areas (Ermoshina 2014), government-sponsored tools are widely seen as, at best, maintaining the *status quo* (Chugunov *et al*. 2017). Toepfl (2018) studied a case in which federal authorities introduced internet voting to change the procedure for the staffing of an important advisory body, the President's Council on the Development of Civil Society and Human Rights, showing that the digital tool used by the authorities enabled them to disempower the opposition. Other studies also document civic tech misuse,[1] in particular, with the aim of increasing governmental control over civic activities (Asmolov 2015). At the same time, a growing number of studies show that governance processes can, despite the multiplicity of constraints related to rent-seeking and tight political control, be open to civic input *via* government-owned 'analogue' formats (Aasland *et al*. 2016; Kropp *et al*. 2018; Bindman *et al*. 2019; Owen & Bindman 2019). Does this mean, contrary to its offline counterparts, that civic tech is not an exception to Russia's 'bad governance' tendencies[2] but, rather, contributes to civic disempowerment, despite the expectations of 'digital democracy' advocates?

This essay presents an exploratory analysis of the most notable Russian civic tech platform, 'Active Citizen' (*Aktivnyi Grazhdanin*—AC) deployed in Moscow, to better understand the role of civic tech in contemporary Russian governance. We analysed the data of polls held *via* the AC platform from its launch in 2014 until September 2019, conducted five interviews and performed extensive analysis of media, official documents and previous research (Horgan & Dimitrijević 2019). We also observed platform functioning by using it ourselves. Drawing on these data, our analysis follows two sequential steps. First, we offer a panoramic view of the platform's functions through analysing the matters being voted on as well as what types of input the votes solicit. What we discover is the prevalence of inconsequential questions with only a few

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[1]For example, see Gel'man (2016) on the Russian Public Initiative.
[2]See Gel'man, this issue.

exceptional policy areas in which citizen input may have substantial consequences. Second, we combine our vote analysis with data from interviews, media and previous research to outline the main uses of the platform by the city administration. We suggest the importance of the platform as a PR tool, as well as an instrument mobilised with, at best, uneven success to deal with idiosyncratic symbolic matters, such as street naming. We then demonstrate how the platform is used to promote the interests of key actors in the governance networks of some policy domains, while ultimately reducing citizens' overall influence. We also demonstrate how consequential votes on public services, while primarily contributing to the city administration's quest for control over sectoral elites in corresponding policy domains, also gives city residents a say on some issues that matter for them. We conclude that citizen empowerment can be considered as an unintended consequence of the AC platform deployment.

The essay is structured as follows. The second section describes Moscow's governance structure and the place of the AC platform within it. The third section introduces the data and methods used in this study. The fourth section presents the results of the empirical analysis of the quantitative data, while the fifth section draws on a description of key analysed cases to show the various ways in which the platform is used by the administration and city residents. Lastly, we offer our conclusions and outline an avenue for further investigations.

Background: Active Citizen in Moscow city governance and politics

Moscow is the capital of Russia, a highly centralised country, and has significant political, economic and symbolic weight in Russian politics. With a population of approximately 12.5 million people (2017, registered residents), a gross regional product (GRP) of approximately R15 trillion (2017, approx. €212 billion), a budget income of around R2.1 trillion (2018) and the special status of a federal city,[3] Moscow's control over significant resources and power gives the mayor a lot of political weight on the federal level. At the same time, Moscow is a showcase for Russia (Argenbright 2013), and the mayor, currently Sergey Sobyanin, is responsible for making sure the city is governed in a way that fits its status as the country's most developed city, as well as a competitive global city. Moscow is expected to symbolise economic development, be politically stable and connect Russia to the rest of the world. In its quest to develop its status as a modern, global city, the Moscow administration actively engages with technology to create new interfaces for interaction with its citizens. AC is a civic tech platform created by Moscow's mayoral office in 2014 as a key piece in Moscow's digital city infrastructure.

AC is a high-profile initiative that has made news headlines multiple times as a subject of praise and controversy. According to the AC website, the platform's mission is 'gathering the opinions' of citizens, and 'engaging' them in 'the life of the city and the making of decisions to be implemented by the city government'.[4] The polls conducted on the platform focus

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[3]Moscow is one of three Russian 'cities of federal importance' that are independent federal subjects. The other two are St Petersburg and Sevastopol.
[4]'O proekte', available at: ag.mos.ru/info#, accessed 10 October 2019. Translation by the authors.

primarily on city events and the development, upgrade and beautification of public spaces, as well as the collection of feedback on the Moscow government's policy proposals and strategies (Horgan & Dimitrijević 2019). With more than two million active users, it is often presented as a modern and efficient tool for engaging citizens in city management using the most up-to-date technology—namely, blockchain[5]—to ensure the transparency and legitimacy of its procedures. The use of blockchain has been praised as a great step in promoting 'blockchain democracy', but it has also been criticised by some experts (Holder 2017; Zionts 2018). AC is the most actively used of Moscow's state-sponsored civic tech platforms. In comparison, as of 2019, 'Crowdsourcing' had 175,000 registered users, 'Nash Gorod' 1.4 million and AC more than 2.5 million,[6] which makes it the most popular of the three. Furthermore, the AC platform has been deemed a great success at the bureaucratic level and is now slated to be rolled out across all Russian regions (Golunov 2018). While AC is positioned as a tool to improve city governance through citizen input and to empower citizens in giving them a say in city affairs, the effects of this civic tech platform should be viewed in the larger context of Moscow's city governance and politics.

Moscow politics has a competitive dimension that influences local governance. As Moscow is a showcase for the political regime, the elected mayor, although not challenged in truly competitive elections, is expected to contribute to regime legitimacy through performance and other available means, including engagement with democratic practices. Many Muscovites support opposition politics, as was made evident by protest movements in Moscow, in particular the anti-electoral fraud protests in winter 2011–2012. Interestingly, along with its broader political demands of '*Rossiya bez Putina*' ('Russia without Putin'), the 2012 protests strongly featured slogans in favour of local government, such as '*Nash gorod—Nam reshat*'!' ('Our city—Our decision!') and '*Za samoupravlenie—bez samoupravstva*!' ('For self-government—without arbitrariness!') (Gorokhovskaia 2018, p. 589). In 2013, the city administration even allowed an opposition politician,[7] Alexei Naval'nyi, to compete in the mayoral elections, in which he won 27% of the vote, despite administrative pressure and possible falsifications.

It is difficult to say whether letting Naval'nyi participate in the elections brought legitimacy to the mayor. Yet, it showed to federal authorities the incumbent government's capacity to contain contention and unrest while avoiding blatant forms of oppression. Furthermore, after 2013, the support for opposition politics at the local level kept growing, suggesting the revival of local politics in Moscow both as an arena for opposition politicians with federal ambitions and as a place of local civic activism (Zhuravlev *et al*. 2020). One manifestation of this twofold process is seen in municipal elections. Gorokhovskaia (2018) argued that restrictions on civil society and the unresponsive nature of Russia's hybrid authoritarian regime prompted some civil society actors in Moscow to enter organised municipal politics. In 2012, about 200 opposition

[5]Blockchain is a distributed record system that is, by design, resistant to modification.
[6]As reported on platforms' websites: https://crowd.mos.ru/, https://gorod.mos.ru/ and https://ag.mos.ru, accessed 10 October 2019.
[7]Some media reported that the decision was made at the federal level and that the Sobyanin administration was reluctant to the idea of letting Naval'nyi compete (Rubin 2020).

candidates ran for municipal offices; in 2017 the number increased to roughly 1,000, with opposition candidates winning one quarter of all seats and forming a majority in 17 municipal councils (Gorokhovskaia 2018, p. 590). In a continuation of this trend, the 2019 elections to the Moscow *Duma* attracted numerous opposition candidates and sparked the significant mobilisation of Muscovites after the Moscow City Election Commission refused to register most of the independent opposition candidates.[8] The massive wave of protests in Moscow that followed, now known as the 'Moscow protests',[9] faced a crackdown from the authorities and ultimately tarnished the image of Sobyanin as a progressive and responsive mayor. These events could be seen to symbolise the failure of the experiments in electoral opening as a source of administrative legitimacy.

Despite quite animated electoral politics in the city, the primary means the city administration uses to bolster legitimacy is governance: first, by demonstrating its success in managing the city and, second, by experimenting with instruments to make governance processes responsive to citizen input. These objectives are pursued *via* governance practices dominated by a top-down approach: 'Moscow's city government resembles a mini power vertical, with executive authority—in the form of the mayor and his administration—supported by lower-level administrative structures: the *prefektura* at the level of administrative *okrugs* and *uprava* at the *raion* level' (Gorokhovskaia 2018, p. 597). Since 1991, Moscow mayors have been directly elected, with a hiatus between 2004 and 2013, when they were appointed, and perform three functions: heading the federal unit, serving as city mayor and heading the municipal government. The highest executive power in Moscow lies within its government, which is formed and headed by the mayor, deputy mayors, heads of departments and prefects. The Moscow *Duma* is responsible for all the functions of the legislature as a permanent elected representative body but leaves most of the decision-making power to the mayor, as the *Duma* has limited mandate to affect the budget. At the lowest government level, Moscow has a system of 125 municipalities, two municipal towns and 19 settlements, representing local self-government. The deputies of the municipalities are elected by the citizens but have an extremely narrow mandate, mainly limited to input and oversight in the areas of urban planning (construction, repair, beautification) and socio-economic issues, and very limited resources (municipal budgets constitute less than 2% of the city's consolidated budget). The mayor holds the central position in the administrative system without being constrained by self-governance institutions. As a result, the general design of interaction between the city administration and its citizens implies an active, 'benevolent', paternalistic authority taking care of everything and knowing the best way to do it, with 'passive' citizens simply accepting these decisions.

[8]'Bol'shinstvu nezavisimykh kandidatov v Mosgordumu otkazano v registratsii', *rbk.ru*, 16 July 2019, available at: https://www.rbc.ru/politics/16/07/2019/5d2c8b3b9a794799a7c7d413, accessed 31 October 2019.
[9]'Hundreds Detained in Moscow Protest for Fair Election', *Euronews*, 3 August 2019, available at: https://www.euronews.com/2019/08/02/muscovites-vow-to-protest-again-despite-police-detentions, accessed 31 October 2019.

While city administration has the capacity to carry out policies without much constraint, the governance configurations still vary across different policy domains. In the 1990s and early 2000s, the administration developed a symbiotic relationship with economic elites, notably the construction industry. This led, in the context of limited space and high prices for real estate, to pervasive 'pinpoint' construction[10] and the destruction of historical monuments, as well as hostile and intimidating approaches to local residents and activists who oppose construction projects.[11] In general, the urban development was seen as largely unconnected with Muscovites' actual needs. Sergey Sobyanin, appointed in 2010, tried to show himself as a progressive mayor open to citizens and their grievances. This ambition, initially aligned to President Dmitrii Medvedev's promise of modernisation, was reinforced by the protests in 2011–2012, resulting in policies catering to the 'creative class' believed to be the driving force of protest (Zhelnina 2014; Kalyukin *et al.* 2015). In his push for more progressive urban development, Sobyanin relied primarily on the co-optation of the new generation of professionals. At the same time, the administration's close ties with economic elites, such as the construction lobby, were maintained, as made evident by the launch of the Renovation programme in 2017 (*Programma renovatsii*).[12] However, the administration wielded more control and imposed more constraints on the construction industry's appetites, cancelling many of the controversial projects inherited from the previous mayor, Yurii Luzhkov.

Another area of reform prioritised by Sobyanin was that of public services, such as secondary education and healthcare. Known by the term 'optimisation' and intensified after 2013, these reforms promoted a service-centric approach balancing between reducing costs and increasing user satisfaction.[13] Importantly, the reforms also increased the power of the administration *vis-à-vis* sectoral professionals, which led to widespread dissatisfaction among the latter, with occasional public conflicts, as reported by the media (Grigor'yev 2015; Kozlova 2020). In sum, while characterised by a top-down approach, Moscow governance varies significantly across policy domains—from borderline clientelist arrangements in the construction sector to power struggles in the sectors that are subject to reform.

As mentioned in the discussion of Moscow's place in federal politics and Muscovite political life, the city administration cares about legitimacy and seeks popular support of its rule. The main tactic of the administration is to gain support *via* popular urban development projects, improved public services and the avoidance of controversial construction projects. To achieve these ends, the administration also puts additional emphasis on its communication and interaction with citizens. First, significant effort has been made to promote the positive coverage of the administration's activities through both traditional and social media. A piece of investigative journalism showed that, in addition to maintaining its own media outlets and having close relationships with federal state media, the Moscow administration allocated a significant part of its budget to paid-

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[10]'Pinpoint' construction (*tochechnaya zastroika*) is residential housing construction on infill lots inside existing neighbourhoods.
[11]See Khmelnitskaya and Ihalainen in this issue.
[12]See Khmelnitskaya and Ihalainen in this issue.
[13]For a discussion of comparable reforms at country level, see Holm-Hansen *et al.* (2019).

for content in the media and engaged in quite sophisticated activities on social media. These include using 'astroturfing'—the imitation of genuine civic support by fake or incentivised social media users—as well as the manipulation of news aggregators such as Yandex.News (Kovalev 2017). This spectacular PR effort has gone together with more substantive changes too. The portal Nash Gorod (gorod.mos.ru) offers Muscovites the opportunity to report on local urban management problems such as potholes. The portal is actively used and the administration claims that it has increased the quality of governance.[14] It is important to note that this instrument is also seen by the administration as a response to opposition activities. As reported by the media, Anastasia Rakova—deputy mayor in the Sobyanin administration and a key supporter of governmental civic tech in Moscow—said that Nash Gorod has succeeded as an alternative to the online citizen projects launched by the opposition, such as rosyama.ru—Naval'nyi's pothole reporting system (Ermoshina 2014; Sinergiyev & Bekbulatova 2016, p. 6). Furthermore, Rakova has attributed even greater importance, in terms of preventing conflicts between citizens and the administration and in increasing the legitimacy of the mayor's decisions, to another civic tech project: AC. The remainder of this essay focuses exclusively on this emblematic platform.

Methodology

Data

For this study, we pulled data from several online sources and conducted five interviews. The information about the functionality of the AC platform was primarily obtained through scraping the data available on the portal website ag.mos.ru. We mainly used the website section 'Results', where the administration systematically reports on the activities that were carried out on the basis of input from polls on AC. As of 2019, this section included a few thousand entries, all formatted in the same way. Each entry in the 'Results' section contains the following information: the dates of the poll; the title and subtitle of the entry; an 'Outcome' subsection reporting the total number of voters and the percentage of votes that each answer received; and a 'Decision' subsection with a textual description of what was done with the poll results, sometimes including photographs or infographics. We scraped all the textual information using rvest and RSelenium packages in R.[15] Most of the entries refer to polls that were carried out at the district level. We focused only on the entries corresponding to the polls carried out at the city-wide level. As a result, we obtained a dataset of 763 entries, corresponding to the polls that took place from May 2014 to August 2019. We will refer to these entries as 'polls' for the remainder of this essay.[16]

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[14]'V odin klik', *Rossiiskaya Gazeta*, 24 April 2014, available at: https://rg.ru/2014/04/24/mosportal-site. html, accessed 28 May 2021.

[15]The website allows scraping, according to robots.txt file.

[16]It is important to note that several decisions could be made in response to the same poll. For example, if a poll included multiple questions on how to make the operations of a municipal health centre (*poliklinika*) more efficient, each action, such as a change in working hours or the opening of a playroom for children, could be reported as separate decisions in the 'Decision' subsection. Thus, the basic unit of analysis in our research is not a poll but a decision, defined as an action by the city administration that was influenced by a poll and reported on the *Active Citizen* website in the 'Decision' subsection of the 'Results' section.

Information on the structure and operations of the Moscow government was acquired from the official website of the mayor and government of Moscow.[17] This website is a blend of city news, an event calendar and a government information portal that lists public services; it explains the government's structure and mandate and contains a document database of administrative decisions and city laws that can be freely accessed. We used the Moscow Open Budget website[18] to extract information about the structure of the city budget, with a special focus on the budgets allocated to the various departments of the city government and to the state programmes implemented in Moscow. We used the official website of the Moscow *Duma* to review the legislative work of this assembly for the period 2014–2019, with a particular focus on the variety and scope of policy issues this representative body deals with.

The data we collected have the advantage of providing a comprehensive 'panoramic' overview of the uses of AC on the level of the entire city. However, the data have significant limitations. The data do not include any information on the specific context of the issues that spurred the polls and thus provide little evidence for the effects of the use of AC. Moreover, some widely debated uses of AC, such as in the Renovation programme, are not reported in the website's 'Results' section. To overcome these shortcomings, we complemented the collected data with diverse qualitative data. First, we looked at the coverage of the AC platform in online and news media, including popular digital editions, as well as mentions of the platform on the independent petitions website change.org. Second, we conducted long, semi-structured interviews with an early developer of the platform and with a Muscovite concerned by the Renovation programme (Moscow, June 2018), as well as three short, issue-focused interviews regarding the AC vote on school vacations (by phone, May–June 2020).[19] Finally, we relied on the insights and interviews presented by Horgan and Dimitrijević (2019) who conducted qualitative activist research on the AC platform in summer 2018.

Methods

At the stage of data analysis, we set two research objectives. The first was to describe the general organisation of the platform, identify the policy issues appearing on the AC platform, classify them in relation to city government mandates and outline the variety of governance subsystems where the platform is used. The second was to explore the types of input collected *via* votes as well as how this input is used by the administration within different governance contexts, while also accounting for citizens' reactions. To fulfil these objectives, we deployed a mixed-methods approach to the analysis of the data we collected. To analyse types of policy issues that appear on AC and link them to specific

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[17]Ofitsial'nyi sayt Mera Moskvy, available at: www.mos.ru, accessed 31 October 2019.

[18]Otkrytyi byudzhet goroda Moskvy, available at: www.budget.mos.ru, accessed 31 October 2019.

[19]We performed subject searches through informal channels and got interviews on the condition of anonymity. The key subject selection criterion was involvement in the development of AC or in two selected issues that were voted about on the platform: the Renovation programme and the change of school vacation schedule in Moscow. We will use pseudonyms instead of reals names and omit any details that allow for identifying the interviewee.

governance subsystems, we pursued a thematic classification of decisions based on a predefined set of categories. To explore the types of citizen input, we classified the decisions according to the type of poll that led to the decision. To situate the usages of the votes in governance contexts, we focused on a limited set of exemplary cases.

Since 2018, all the decisions published on the website have been explicitly labelled by the administration as belonging to one of 17 categories, such as public health, education, parks, construction or city events. These categories largely correspond to the local administration's mandate and can thus be mapped, with some exceptions, onto the organisational structure of the city administration. As explicit labels for thematic categories were only available for 2018–2019, we used a simple machine-learning algorithm and human validation to label the whole dataset. The data for 2018–2019 decisions, with the category information, were used as the training dataset. We applied a multinomial Naïve Bayes algorithm to train the classifier, using decision, title and subtitle as features. The classifier achieved an accuracy of 0.6 for 17 categories. After applying the classifier to the rest of the unlabelled data, we performed manual validation for the entire dataset. The classification procedure has a limited accuracy: even when the categories are specified by the portal administrators, they do not always describe the policy issues raised in the poll in a precise manner. However, the resulting categorisation quality is sufficient to pursue our research objectives. Using these categories in the analysis gives us an opportunity to account for both the thematic domain of a poll (that is, the policy issue at stake) and the administrative unit, in most cases a city administration department, in charge of this policy domain.

The type of input that civic tech platforms collect, and in particular, how consequential the input is, depends on what kind of questions are being asked. Through close readings of a random subset of the data we established a list of six poll types launched on the AC. First, there are 'symbolic polls' from which decisions are made about symbols, designs or names, such as the name of a new metro line or the colour it will have on the metro map. Second, there are 'ranking polls' such as polls to determine the best teacher, doctor or the most popular city park. Third are polls related to decisions on temporary or one-time activities or services provided by the city administration; for example, a programme of events to take place at the local library or the musicians to be invited to a free city concert. The fourth group of polls is on long-term services, such as the working hours of a health centre. The fifth type of polls includes questions about physical objects and material infrastructure, for example, asking citizens for input on the location of a new public service office or the equipment to be installed there. Sixth, some polls are devoted to deciding on rules, such as the appropriate time for noisy renovation activities in private apartments. To determine the type of poll, we first annotated 100 decisions manually, then trained a Naïve Bayes classifier on these data, applied the classifier to the rest of the data and, finally, validated the results manually. We used the title, subtitle and the decision content as features for the classifier, achieving an accuracy of 0.64 on this six-class classification task.

To assess the patterns of platform-use across policy areas and corresponding governance subsystems, we calculated the number of voters per thematic category per poll type. As already noted, a unique poll can lead to multiple decisions, so that merely summing up the number of voters reported for each decision would lead to a significant overestimation. Extra data processing was done to move from an individual decision to a

poll as a unit of analysis. Using the poll start and end dates and the number of voters, we identified all decisions corresponding to a single poll and aggregated them to keep only one record per vote.[20] This quantitative information was then combined with the official available data on the Moscow administration's operations, such as the budgets of the various departments.

Having established a 'panoramic' view on the kinds of citizen input collected in specific governance subsystems, we continued with the exploratory analysis of the uses of citizen input in selected areas, focusing on a limited number of cases. To do that we triangulated data from interviews, available information from social and traditional media, and existing research on the AC platform in Moscow.

The design and main characteristics of the 'Active Citizen' platform

Platform design and management

The design of the platform and the way it is managed by the city administration set the general framework for the platform's operations. The platform is available *via* both a traditional website and a mobile app. The app can send push-notifications to users, asking them to vote. A poll can also include visual materials and 'expert opinions' on the issue to educate and inform voters. The minimal requirement for registration on the platform is having a Russian mobile phone number. The votes can be 'city-wide' or 'territorial'. To participate in the latter, a user has to input their address in their profile information. One person can list up to four addresses: their official registration, their *de facto* dwelling, their place of work and their place of home ownership. While this information is not checked, a user cannot change their addresses more than three times a month. The administration has gradually increased the possible uses of AC, adding a 'public hearing' function and an 'owner assembly' function for apartment buildings. These two types of votes require users to prove their address.

The city administration has absolute control over the selection of issues polled on the platform and how they are framed, including the formulation of the questions and the answer options (all polls are conducted as multiple-choice questions). Likewise, the use of poll results is controlled by the administration. Citizens or other social actors cannot submit questions to AC, and it is not directly integrated with other city platforms open to citizen input, such as crowd.mos.ru. Almost every vote has the option, 'this should be decided by experts'; not having an opinion is not an option.

Voting is rewarded in the form of points that can be exchanged for services, such as Metro rides or museum tickets. This feature is highly problematic as it may compromise the results' objectivity. A piece of data journalism by *Novaya gazeta*, titled 'I will sell my vote for a sweatshirt', used individual-level voting data to provide convincing evidence that many users vote for issues on which they have no opinion (Zayakin & Smagin 2018). For

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[20]Some polls, however, included multiple questions, often of different types, which led to a situation in which the same poll was used in decisions mobilising different types of participation. In such cases, we considered decisions of different type as belonging to different polls.

example, a large number of users in various parts of Moscow evaluated the upgrades made to city parks. The parks are spread out across the city and it is highly improbable that so many voters visited them all and had an opinion on the quality of the renovation. Moreover, a significant share of voters with no opinion on a polled issue can increase the poll organiser's discretionary capacity to skew the vote outcome *via* phrasing of questions and answer options, as well as the order of answer options.

There is no oversight of the city administration's interpretation of poll results or the decisions it makes based on these interpretations. In general, the most popular choice guides decisions yet, occasionally, less popular choices are also taken into consideration. Some polls do not lead to any action, as seen in the 'Results' section, even for votes held many years before the study. The choice between the options, which is already framed by the administration, is then reinterpreted during the implementation phase by the administration, thus solidifying its almost complete control over the platform's operations and uses.

The management of the platform is not completely transparent either, but there are many features that allow a level of traceability for its activity. First, all the votes are saved; they are available online and can be found, albeit with some skill and effort. Second, since the second half of 2015, the vote page has provided detailed vote statistics, including a temporal and spatial distribution of the votes. These data can be used to detect irregularities in votes, and some activists and journalists have used them in this way.[21] The very existence of these data limits, to some extent, the possibility of the platform being manipulated. Moreover, every user can check that their vote was properly counted. In short, the city administration has wide discretionary power over the platform's design and management, but a certain level of transparency is built in.

Types of issues appearing on 'Active Citizen'

Our first empirical research objective was to explore the poll data to identify policy issues and the types of votes most prominent on the AC platform. We first classified the decisions into 17 thematic categories, and then mapped these categories onto the departments of the city government to better understand how they relate to the city government's mandate. Except for the 'City Events' category, which has a generic character, since events can be organised by a variety of departments, the polls could be linked to a particular department. The opposite does not hold true: not every department of the city administration can be related to a thematic category, meaning that not all of them appear to use AC to interact with citizens.

To explore which issues were typically polled on AC, we analysed the distribution of votes against the decision categories (see Table 1). Consequently, we can not only state the number of times a certain issue type has been put onto the agenda but also reveal how much traction it generated on the platform. The category that received the most votes cast

[21]'Aktivnyi grazhdanin'. Neud po vsem stat'yam', *Lomonosovskii MO*, available at: https://medium.com/@lomonosovskiy/активный-гражданин-неуд-по-всем-статьям-cd996ecc5132, accessed 1 September 2020.

TABLE 1

NUMBER OF VOTES ON ACTIVE CITIZEN BY THEMATIC CATEGORY AND TYPE OF POLL IN THOUSANDS (2014–2018), BUDGETS OF ORGANISATIONAL UNIT IN CHARGE OF A CATEGORY IN MILLION RUBLES (2018)

Category	Rules	Objects	Service (Temporary)	Service (Permanent)	Rankings	Symbols	Total votes by thematic category	Budget of an organisational unit in charge
Tourism	0	0	0	406	180	0	585	–
Information technology	0	157	0	221	0	289	668	49,239
Economic development	0	0	131	0	554	0	686	16,459
Veterinary	235	0	564	0	0	0	799	644
Commerce	657	270	0	0	0	0	928	13,026
Social security	0	0	1,495	232	0	210	1,937	277,771
Cultural heritage	0	803	768	43	770	0	2,385	4,143
Construction	535	113	1,222	0	414	426	2,709	524,824
Public services	240	591	0	1,585	568	105	3,089	351
Sport	434	0	2,588	0	0	274	3,296	32,705
Nature and environment	227	211	2,932	21	0	18	3,410	9,795
Culture	397	1,328	1,477	2,478	743	1,182	7,605	60,662
Transportation	454	1,523	393	1,901	313	3,254	7,838	190,091
Education	1,071	423	1,905	4,208	341	456	8,404	266,544
Public health	206	279	216	4,894	2,662	312	8,568	220,557
Housing and utilities	0	8,710	206	0	346	194	9,457	210,728
City events	681	410	9,919	443	234	1,593	13,281	–
Total by type of poll	5,138	14,817	23,818	16,432	7,124	8,314	75,644	–

Source: Authors.

on the platform between May 2014 and August 2019 is 'City Events' with 13.3 million out of a total of 75.6 million, followed by the 'Housing and Utilities' and 'Transportation' categories.

Thematic mapping allowed us to take into account the departmental mandates and their respective budgets when analysing the vote distribution (see Table 1). The first observation we made is that there is no strong relationship between the financial resources at a department's disposal and the level of voter engagement. The 'champions' in terms of posing questions that attract high numbers of votes are the departments of Housing and Utilities, Transportation, Education, and Public Health, all characterised both by large budgets and active use of the AC platform. By contrast, the two departments with the largest budgets—Construction and Social Security—ran far fewer polls than the departments mentioned above, while the departments of Culture, Sports and, in particular, Nature Use and Environmental Protection, combine lower budgets with a high number of participants in their polls. The Committee for Public Services, with a budget of a mere R350 million in 2018, attracted around three million votes, more than the Department of Construction, which has a budget of R525 billion, that is 1,500 times higher. This might be explained by the fact that its mandate is directly related to the improvement of public services and the use of AC.

Another noteworthy observation is that AC is most actively used in policy areas that specialise in providing services with high client numbers, who interact frequently with the corresponding public service, such as Housing and Utilities, Transportation, Education, Public Health, Culture, and Sport. The Department of Social Security's relatively low use of AC might also be explained by the fact that most of its services are provided to elderly people, who are statistically less represented on online platforms. Moreover, departments that are central in determining the most tangible dimensions of city life, such as the departments of Nature Use and Environmental Protection, and Construction, have mixed track records, with the Department of Construction the least engaged in 'electronic democracy' despite its tangible effects on daily life. Our observations can also be supported by looking at the kinds of votes held within each policy domain.

Types of votes appearing on 'Active Citizen'

The simple fact of voting does not provide much information on the ways citizen can influence, or not, a given policy area. To investigate this question further, we classified each vote and decision according to the poll type and calculated the number of votes by poll type for the entire dataset. Despite the administration's rhetoric, which frames AC as a tool that allows Muscovites to 'influence decisions at all levels of the administration',[22] most polls launched on the platform concern matters of minor importance and can be considered inconsequential.

Of the 75.6 million total individual votes in our dataset, 23.8 million were cast in polls about a decision on time-limited services. While some of these polls can be considered

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[22]'"Aktivnyi grazhdanin"': I ty ne odin!', *Komsomol'skaya pravda*, available at: https://www.kp.ru/best/msk/aktivnyj-grazhdanin/, accessed 31 October 2019.

consequential (for instance, the Department of Social Security's poll on courses and training events to be provided to young mothers or vocational school students, and the like), almost 9.9 million votes were used to decide the content of various festivals and fairs organised by the city. While being able to choose the programming of a festival, such as the Moscow Jam Fair, may be important for some 'active citizens', it does not represent a meaningful level of digitally enabled civic participation. The same can be said about rankings. Accounting for 7.1 million votes, these polls ask users to choose the best movie theatre, doctor or teacher.

The third poll type, which we labelled 'symbolic', asks citizens for input on naming various elements of the urban landscape, such as streets and metro stations, or to decide on the visual identity of some objects, be it the colour of a new metro line or the design of a sign to commemorate the 'Best General Practitioner of Moscow'. While some symbolic questions can be considered inconsequential, others have provoked major controversies and mobilised considerable participation. In total, approximately 8.3 million votes were cast in response to polls of this type in our period of study.

The polls concerned with the characteristics of standard, ongoing services provided by the city administration included many questions relating to how citizens would interact with public sector organisations and civil servants. This was part of a larger reform process launched by Sobyanin's administration. Since Sobyanin's appointment, Moscow city administration has pioneered the transformation of citizen-facing public sector organisations to follow a service model, focusing primarily on customer experience. One of the best examples of this is the reorganisation and merging of various post-Soviet bureaucratic organisations, such as those delivering state IDs and passports, which had been plagued with corruption, inefficiency and opaqueness, into multi-function service-provision centres 'My Documents' (*Moi dokumenty*). Continuing this trend, AC polls on services can be seen as one more tool to improve service provision and customer satisfaction in the logic similar to private service provision. However, as we will show, the 'service design' paradigm omits important dimensions of citizens' participation in the public governance of the corresponding policy domains.

Finally, we identified one poll type that enables civic participation in the most direct and obvious way: by asking citizens to provide input for the establishment of rules for common living. The Department of Transportation quite often asks citizens how parking in a given area should be organised, whether fees should apply on the weekend, and so on. Yet, this rule-making type of poll is the least common in our dataset, accounting for only 5.1 million votes.

Active Citizen: analysis of typical uses

PR for the city administration

Our analysis highlighted the city administration's desire to maximise the number of users and votes. This quest for popularity could compromise AC's efficiency as a tool for preference aggregation, as voting to accrue rewards brings votes from users with no actual preferences on some issues, and many votes are thus inconsequential. The reason for the maximisation strategy is, most probably, the need to showcase and build the administration's image in the eyes of publics outside Moscow. In an interview conducted

by one of the authors with an early developer of the AC platform, it was explicitly stated that the platform, together with other elements of the city's digital infrastructure, was a significant addition to Moscow's capacity to compete with other 'global cities' around the world. For the interviewee, this competitiveness would be achieved through increased efficiency and 'usability' of the city.[23] However, this competition also clearly takes place at a symbolic level, allowing the city administration to craft a narrative about its virtues and display itself as modern, progressive and open.[24] For example, the abovementioned blockchain implementation earned AC mentions in international media without actually resolving issues of trust and accountability. The Russian-based office of the international professional services giant, PricewaterhouseCoopers, which provides multiple services to the Moscow administration, published a report in which Moscow is presented among the world's leaders of 'data-driven cities', and AC is cited among the projects contributing to this distinction.[25]

While it is difficult to judge whether AC has indeed contributed to Moscow's attractiveness in global city competitions, it is highly probable that the tokens of Moscow's international success were primarily used to demonstrate the city administration's efficiency to federal authorities. AC is frequently used to showcase Moscow to the federal government as an internationally competitive city, as well as a leader in developing civic participation in a controlled manner that does not threaten the regime. This image is in line with some of the federal authorities' strategic priorities, since 'state-directed civic participation in governance is central to the functioning of Putin regime', with an emphasis on citizens' engagement with local authorities (Owen 2017, p. 381). The fact that Moscow policies in the sphere of digitally enabled participation, including AC, have been promoted by the presidential administration as a model to be replicated in the regions shows that the carefully crafted numbers and stories framing AC as a success have convinced the right people in the Kremlin (Sinergiyev & Bekbulatova 2016, p. 6).

AC is, however, more than a showcase for the public external to the city life. It is actively used as an agenda-setting and PR tool addressed to Muscovites. We observed that a large number of polls, in particular those related to time-limited decisions about events and services, seemed to be used as a way of informing citizens about something that the administration wants to promote. For instance, a poll can inform voters about upcoming events by asking inconsequential questions in relation to the 'City Events' category. Another similar example is a poll that promoted a new online system for fine payment by asking whether citizens were familiar with the service. The title of this poll was 'Service X helps Moscow car drivers', making its PR nature transparent. A comparable case is when an action that has already been thoroughly planned by the administration is opened to a plebiscite-like approval vote. With no alternative project being proposed, the probability of the project being supported is quite high. Respondents in research

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[23]Interview with Anton, former developer of AC platform, Moscow, 1 August 2018.
[24]For the discussion of ICT uses in Russia for the symbolic construction of legitimacy see Asmolov (2014).
[25]'Data-driven Cities', PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2016, available at: https://www.pwc.ru/ru/publications/data-driven-city.html, accessed 13 September 2020.

conducted by Horgan and Dimitrijević expressed a similar sentiment, indicating that they felt the AC platform was being deployed to legitimise decisions that had already been made while simulating openness around decision-making (Horgan & Dimitrijević 2019, p. 7).

It is informative to compare the policy issues brought forward by the city *via* the AC platform with the issues that were most often raised by citizens in their letters and appeals to the Moscow City *Duma* (2014–2019). During the same five-year period, more than 68,300 written appeals were submitted by Moscow residents. Apart from the 16% of appeals dealing with the functioning of the *Duma*, 16% were concerned with utilities and beautification and 15% with housing, while transportation and construction both accounted for about 7% each. Importantly, 11% were concerned with the protection of the rights of citizens and questions of law and order.[26] While these issues clearly fall within the scope of the city administration, they do not appear on the AC platform. In contrast, questions about arts and culture featured in only 3% of appeals, while their proportion on the platform is significantly larger. We interpret this as another indication that AC is an agenda-setting tool for the administration and that some relevant citizen concerns are completely omitted on the platform.

Engagement with politicised issues

Despite the abundance of superficial polls that only nominally mobilise citizens, the city administration also uses AC in cases in which the decision is not essentially predetermined or inconsequential. For example, polls on symbolic issues that are easily politicised are actively used by the administration to solicit input from citizens. The Department of Transportation is at the forefront of mobilising citizens in this way, with more than 3.25 million votes cast, mostly on symbolic issues. As Moscow actively develops its transportation system, naming parts of the transport infrastructure is a city-level decision that attracts widespread interest from citizens. In a political context in which meaningful representation for citizens is limited, creating a forum for participation in symbolic choices can be understood as an exercise in enhancing legitimacy. In addition, some of these symbolic choices have been politicised. For example, one of the most popular polls in our dataset was on 'The choice of a tree to represent Moscow on "Russia Alley" in Sevastopol'. Launched in the summer of 2014, a few months after the annexation of Crimea and amid a patriotic surge, this poll carried a clear political message by inviting citizens to reflect on the form of the symbolic tie between Moscow and the newly annexed Sevastopol. The poll was the most popular one that year, attracting 367,511 votes.

The use of polls to determine symbolic matters as a quest for legitimacy faces, however, serious limitations. The best example of this is the renaming of the metro station Voikovskaya. Petr Voikov was a Soviet revolutionary, later one of the first Soviet diplomats, and took part in the execution of the Romanov family—according to some accounts, enthusiastically. Yet, because of the absence of definitive historical evidence, the

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[26]'Informatsiya ob obrashcheniyakh grazhdan', *Moskovskaya gorodskaya Duma*, available at: https://duma.mos.ru/ru/submenu/198, accessed 13 September 2020.

interpretations of his role in Russian history are conflicting (Mikhailov & Salyaeva 2016). In 2015, the city administration launched a poll on AC asking whether the station needed a new name, which resulted in the controversial decision to keep the old name. Removing Voikov's name from Moscow's toponyms had been supported by many human right and opposition activists for a long time, and many opposition politicians, including Alexey Naval'nyi, were convinced that the poll results were manipulated.[27] While we are not in a position to know if any tampering took place and found no conclusive study of the case, it is important to note that there were no signs that the administration had been in favour of keeping the old name. Moreover, not only opposition activists but also the Russian Orthodox Church, the political weight of which is unquestionable, were in favour of renaming. Instead of focusing on the controversy around the alleged vote manipulation, we suggest seeing it as a demonstration of the limits of potential uses for AC votes. When used to address questions with explicit political dimensions, based on conflicting interpretations and perceptions of past or present events, AC can easily become the target of criticism. In the context of a general decline of fora for conflicting opinions, the legitimacy of an instrument such as AC has been difficult to defend. The Voikovskaya controversy led to a questioning of the role and trustworthiness of AC and ended up significantly eroding the legitimacy of the platform, showing that in an atmosphere of deadlocked political debate, a digital voting platform cannot be expected to settle the disagreement.

(Dis)empowerment of certain stakeholders

Another use for the AC platform has been to shuffle the balance of power by disempowering certain stakeholders. Polls concerned with urban planning and material infrastructure provide a prime illustration of this use. While this policy domain seems like a perfect fit for improving the quality of governance through citizen participation, the track record of AC usage is, at best, mixed. The cases in which powerful actors were able to influence policymaking through informal and non-public channels appear as the most contentious in this context. This hypothesis can be illustrated by the case of the much-criticised Renovation programme launched by Sobyanin in 2017. The programme aimed at replacing the old housing stock—mainly, Khrushchev-era five-storey apartment buildings —with new buildings, while offering the owners of the demolished apartments a new property.[28] While some of the buildings targeted by the programme were indeed dilapidated, others were not. Many analysts believe that the scale of the programme was due to concerted actions of Moscow's construction industry lobby, which has a close connection to the city administration (Smyth 2018). The programme also clashed with the desire of some apartment owners to keep their property and to stop the demolition of their buildings.

According to the Housing Code—the federal legislation in force at the time—the decision to include a building in the Renovation programme had to be made by the general meeting of

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[27]'"Aktivnyi grazhdanin": ne tol'ko fiktsiya, no i ugolovnoe prestuplenie', *Leonid Volkov*, 26 November 2015, available at: https://www.leonidvolkov.ru/p/86/, accessed 28 May 2021.

[28]See Khmelnitskaya and Ihalainen in this issue.

the owners of the apartments. These meetings are held in person, require attendance of at least half of residents entitled to participate in decision-making, and imply in-person discussions and votes. By a local legislative act,[29] the city administration included a vote on AC as an option for decision-making, suggesting that a vote *via* the platform is a substitute for a face-to-face general meeting. Many testimonies suggest that such a use of AC had an impact on the voting results (Horgan & Dimitrijević 2019). Indeed, it excluded institutionalised forms of collective deliberation and reduced the procedure to a yes/no vote. According to an interview with one apartment owner who mobilised against his home being included in the renovation, face-to-face communication was essential to secure the majority's opposition to the demolition, in the context of the city administration's frenetic PR effort in favour of the renovation.[30] Additionally, people who were unable to vote on the platform were invited to vote at the 'My Documents' offices where, allegedly, they were encouraged to vote for the renovation. Finally, the voices of those who did not vote were to be counted as cast in favour of renovation. While this practice was eventually deemed problematic and abandoned,[31] it reveals the pro-renovation bias in the administration's actions. One can be quite confident in saying that the AC platform did not elaborate a fair and accountable decision-making process, and actually reduced citizens' capacity to exercise their property rights, as also reported by Horgan and Dimitrijević (2019). Construction has conventionally been dominated by developers who maintain close relationships with the administration. The introduction of a digital voting tool in this case was instrumental to further increasing the power of the construction industry. A comparable observation can be made in the case of public hearings carried out *via* AC, which bypass traditional channels of deliberation and consequently disempower citizens through a reduction in the quality of their participation.

Channelling citizen input in decision-making

While the example of Sobyanin's Renovation programme reveals the potential for the reconfiguring of governance networks in favour of organised interests, the city administration has used AC in a way that is aimed at channelling citizens' input into the policymaking process. This has been particularly true in the case of polls on the rules of common living. Even though this use of AC is not as frequent as the others, it has been regularly deployed by various departments. Many of these polls are concerned with situations in which the proposed rule is intended to deal with something annoying, dirty or dangerous, such as noise during renovation works in apartments, night deliveries to stores, dog owners not cleaning up after their dogs, and the accessibility of cocktails blending alcohol and energy drinks. Most of these situations require restricting individual

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[29]'Postanovleniye Pravitel'stva Moskvy ot 2 maya 2017 goda N 245-PP Ob uchete mneniya naseleniya po proektu renovatsii zhilishchnogo fonda v gorode Moskve (s izmeneniyami na 14 iyunya 2017 goda)', available at: https://docs.cntd.ru/document/456061231, accessed 28 May 2021.

[30]Interview with Vladimir, apartment owner, Moscow, 2 August 2018.

[31]'Golosa "molchunov" po programme renovatsii budut uchityvat' proportsional'no—Sobyanin', Kompleks gradostroitel'noi politiki i stroitel'stva goroda Moskvy, 2 June 2017, available at: https://stroi.mos.ru/news/golosa-molchunov-po-proghrammie-rienovatsii-budut-uchityvat-proportsional-no-sobianin, accessed 28 May 2021.

liberties for the sake of the common good. We suggest that the administration understands these polls as a way to secure popular support for restrictive measures.

However, these polls, quite often, cannot be seen as the administration seeking to accommodate the aggregated preferences of its citizens. In some cases, the polls put in opposition an active minority with strong opinions seeking change and the general population, indifferent to a given issue and supporting the default option offered by city administration. Two issues are emblematic here: the removal of dead leaves and the care of grass. Those preferring 'wild' unmown lawns—not standard practice in Moscow— represent an active community, with groups on social media. They are also opposed to the removal of dead leaves in autumn. However, polls to waive the requirement for the removal of dead leaves have never succeeded on AC (Golunov 2018). While those in favour of removing leaves do not form a community in the same way that those in favour of letting them lie do, the majority acceptance of the *status quo* has helped the administration maintain this costly and controversial practice. While in the case of grass mowing, some blocks voted in favour of 'wild' lawns, the use of AC helped the city administration to legitimise its preferred routine in most districts.

In many polls on public services organisations, the image of a monolithic city administration providing services and taking citizens' preferences into account is misleading. As the governance context in sectors such as public health and education is one of administration-led reform, AC can be seen as a tool that the administration uses, at least in some cases, in its quest to increase its control over professionals in these sectors providing public services. The case of the school holiday schedule is illustrative. In 2014, the Department of Education launched a poll, 'Choosing a unified holiday schedule for Moscow's schoolchildren', asking parents to choose between the 'module', 'quarter' or 'trimester' holiday schedule. The *status quo* before the vote was that the schools were able to choose their own schedule. While the majority used the traditional 'quarter' system, some had adopted a 'module' system with shorter, more frequent breaks. Those opposed to the vote emphasised that the proposed 'unification' jeopardised this form of school autonomy, as well as being illegal. One interview subject, a teacher from a school that had adopted the 'module' system years before the vote, testified that the vote was seen by the school administration as an attempt to force them, and other schools, to abandon the new system.[32] Another interviewee, the mother of a schoolboy from a school using the 'module' system, reported being anxious about the system being changed.[33] Moreover, votes were spread quite evenly for the two most popular options: the 'module' and the 'quarter' system. The Department of Education decreed that schools would be able to decide between the two. As a result, the 'module' system has spread to almost half of Moscow's schools.[34] Another mother interviewed had pushed for the adoption of the 'module' system when her son went to a new school using the 'quarter' system and was eventually successful.[35] What we see is that the Department of Education did not

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[32]Phone interview with Karina, Moscow, 8 June 2020.
[33]Phone interview with Elena, Moscow, 11 June 2020.
[34]'Pochti polovina stolichnykh shkol pereidet na modul'nuyu sistemu obucheniya', *Moskva24*, 10 April 2015, available at: https://www.m24.ru/articles/shkoly/10042015/70858, accessed 1 September 2020.
[35]Phone interview with Olga, Moscow, 8 June 2020.

achieve its initial plan of unification and adopted a more diverse approach instead, a decision clearly influenced by the poll outcome.

Citizen responses to the use of 'Active Citizen'

The story of the school holiday schedule did not end with the 2015 decision to let the schools choose. A few years later, the department decided to make some adjustments to the 'module' system that required reducing the duration of holidays. No vote on AC was planned this time. However, many parents were disappointed. A petition against the modification, launched by parents on the change.org platform, gathered more than 100,000 signatures.[36] The petition insisted that the 'module' system had been voted for on the AC platform and should not be modified. Three out of five most popular comments under the petition stressed the argument that the system parents voted for should not be changed in a top-down manner. The protest succeeded, and schools were left free to decide on how to manage the 'module' system. This story shows us that AC, as an instrument, plays an even larger role than that envisioned by the administration. While the possibility of influencing the decision-making and policymaking processes can sometimes be limited by AC, citizens have seized the opportunities that the tool provides and tried to create new ones.

Furthermore, citizens can, within the limits of the system, provide input. This capacity is especially valuable when there is a social movement or mass mobilisation associated with the issue. Even if incentivisation and possible manipulations affect the poll, the large volume of genuine votes cannot go unnoticed. When the public hearings for a very large construction project in the Moscow district of Zuyzino were moved to AC under the pretext of the COVID-19 pandemic, a local grassroots politics veteran, Konstantin Yankauskas, wrote a detailed analysis, critiquing the decrease in the quality of democracy due to the use of AC.[37] He was among the advocates for a petition against the AC being used in such a way. At the same time, he encouraged all the district's inhabitants to participate in the public hearing *via* AC. This example, as well as that of the school holiday schedule, reveals two key paths for genuine citizen input through AC. First, citizens use the platform while being aware of its imperfections and sometimes even obtain meaningful results. Second, in a related process, a poorly organised poll on the platform or even the lack of a poll can serve as an impetus for citizen mobilisation and provide an extra argument for an official request to be heard. In this way, one could claim that the general contours of AC's design and function makes civic empowerment an almost unintended consequence of the platform's diverse set of uses.

Concluding remarks

The goal of this essay has been to make an empirical contribution to the understanding of the possible roles of civic tech in contemporary Russian governance by providing an analysis of

[36]'Izmenit' prinyatyi na 2018–2019 uchebnyi god grafik modul'nykh kanikul na staryi!', available at: https://www.change.org/p/изменить-принятый-на-2018-2019-учебный-год-график-модульных-каникул-на-старый, accessed 1 September 2020.
[37]Post on Konstantin Yankauskas's Facebook page, 7 April 2020, available at: https://www.facebook.com/konstantin.jankauskas/posts/10221869096147169, accessed 1 May 2020.

polls on the Active Citizen platform and their diverse uses. Our first objective was to analyse the substance of and the process behind the polls on the AC platform. We found that at the city-wide level, most polls held *via* AC are inconsequential, and of these, the most consequential concern the public services sector.

Our second objective was to explore the main uses of the AC platform. Our analysis identified five repeated uses. AC plays a role in showcasing Moscow's status as a global and modern city, leading to the administration's concern over the number of users and votes, which is ultimately detrimental to the quality of preference aggregation. In addition, while AC has been used experimentally to make decisions on highly politicised issues, it has neither settled these issues nor contributed to building legitimacy for the government's preferred option. Even more problematically, some uses of AC, rather than empowering Muscovites, reduce their capacity to defend their property or influence their immediate living environment *via* participation in public hearings. Other uses permit Muscovites to vote on rules of common living and decide on the operation of some public services. While these uses of AC are often motivated by the administration's desire to curtail the influence of some actors, such as activist groups or professionals in public education and health, the votes do occasionally increase the capacity of citizens to influence matters that they care about. This capacity —and again, only in some cases—emerges nevertheless as an unintended consequence of the administration's use of AC.

Our analysis suggests that it would be misleading to see the AC platform as a direct response to a demand for more citizen participation or as experimentation with direct democracy. Instead, the platform is used in multiple ways, so its effects on civic participation can only be understood within the larger context of its application. Yet, we discovered that AC as a digital instrument of civic participation has a significantly different effect on governance than offline participatory formats. Government promotion of offline civic participation in Russia has clearly led to a greater opening of governance networks and policy change as one intended consequence. In contrast, AC often reproduces and reinforces local governance practices that exist offline in Moscow and helps consolidate the central place of the administration in governance networks. Also, our study provides limited evidence in support of the idea that digital tools can have a negative effect on the quality of participation. Importantly, this is not a technologically determined claim, as the administration's *modus operandi* suffices to explain such an effect (Deseriis 2020). But, to end on an optimistic note, the city administration's control of the platform is not ubiquitous. Even its tightly controlled participation format has created unintended channels for civic engagement.

Our study leaves some questions unanswered. Perhaps the most interesting is whether AC could be an indirect vehicle for Muscovite civic engagement, helping them to take a more active posture *vis-à-vis* local governance. As in the case of the proposed changes to the school holiday schedule, the very fact of voting on AC has potential for further mobilisation. Understanding the motivations and evolving identities of AC users is, thus, a question of great interest. Can the 'incentivised' voter, opening the app only to claim bonuses, encounter a question on which they have a strong opinion, vote, become dissatisfied with the result and seek new channels to make their voice heard? One cannot

exclude this possibility. A vote, even a casual one, always has the possibility of being a critical turning point towards civic engagement or the beginning of a wave of civic activity.

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