

## СОЦИОЛОГИЯ И ПОЛИТОЛОГИЯ

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### **CROWD VOTING VIA ONLINE PLATFORMS AS A WAY OF CITIZENS' PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF MUNICIPALITIES (THE ACTIVE CITIZEN CASE, MOSCOW)**

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Based on the theory of S. Arnstein, the paper considers crowd voting as one of the management levels available to citizens. The authors analyzed the Moscow online voting platform Active Citizen. Proceeding from the open data on the platform, the authors composed the socio-demographic profile of users, evaluated the proportion of active participation, the extent of their engagement in the voting processes depending on the themes of the problems brought to the attention of the townspeople.

**Keywords:** crowd voting; election technologies; E-government; public participation; welfare state.

#### **Introduction**

In Russia, as in other states, the transformation of the social state is taking place, i.e., the state of social security is transformed into a state which provides social services. Refocusing on providing social services to people, along with benefits' assistance to citizens in need, stems from the necessity to overcome state paternalism and the transition to an active social policy aimed at creating conditions under which personal responsibility and activities become a major factor of citizens' social well-being. In the present-day states, an individual initiative harmonizes with a certain level of social security guaranteed by the state and becomes an essential factor for the development of all spheres of public life. The participation of citizens in managerial decisions aimed at creating a favorable living environment for a person is relevant to current trends in social change. Public participation in solving urgent problems determines the interests of different social groups, due to the democratization of the state at the administration of all levels, including the municipal level. In present-day Russian conditions, the development of civic activity is accompanied by an increase in the requirements, both on the part of the public and the highest political leadership of the country. There is an increased requirement for the quality of public services, the creation of conditions ensuring it [1, 2]. In this regard, many researchers pay attention to the fact that the modern transformation of the welfare state coincides with the formation of a new type of society – an informational state. The signs of this transformation are evident through an increased role of information, knowledge economy, changes in the communication methods [3]. The phenomenon of e-democracy is becoming an important sign of the forming information society. Electronic voting and citizens' network communication with authorities are an influential citizens' instrument of control over decision-making by authorities. Mechanisms of online management and opportunities they provide for the participation of citizens in the municipality management are of importance in the

context of the public changes [4]. The municipal level administration, according to some researchers, suffers from current inertia and a weak sensitivity to innovations [1]. Many citizens continuously distrust municipal authorities because of their secrecy, cronyism, commitment to authoritarian management practices, orientation not so much on the local population requests as on the highest power structures. Consequently, the community expects that the introduction of new technologies in the practices of municipalities, which are self-governing bodies according to Russian laws, will have a positive impact on the local bureaucracy. Accordingly, municipal administration is interested in increasing the trust of citizens to ensure the legitimacy of their power, so they are often open to innovative ways to engage with the local online society.

In Russia, at the highest state level, there are important measures targeting the introduction of innovative digital technologies. They are a part of national programs, including the Strategy of Development of Information Society in the Russian Federation in 2017–2030 [5]. According to this program, the Russian state provides access to public services using digital technologies, online interaction tools, and big data analysis tools. These measures correspond to public requests for targeting the improvement of quality and availability of state administrative services and for adequately implementing personal initiatives. The new tools of interaction between government and society assume better flexibility of administrative decisions, the involvement of many civic society representatives in the development of solutions. These measures will contribute to the increase of citizens' confidence in the administrative bodies, improved by the interaction of citizens and the authorities, the mutual exchange of practical experience. However, the transition to new ways of local authorities' communication with the population contains certain risks and creates new challenges to municipal development. Self-government contains opportunities to expanded civic participation, owing to information networking. Simultaneously, interactive

technologies provide municipal officials with new tools to influence citizens. This process may take the form of manipulation. In addition, a large differentiation of areas, and, consequently, municipalities, increases the differences in the scale of public participation in decision-making. Accordingly, it increases the social significance of the issues involved, the spectrum of the social problems, access to the decisions adopted on the territory of municipalities. Finally, public participation depends on a combination of such factors as the population structure, the prevailing political culture, which determines the activity of the people, their interest and motivation to participate in the public decision of municipal problems, and other factors. The above-mentioned factors determined the research field, which inspired the study of one of Moscow's electronic platforms which demonstrates the opportunities and limitations of public participation in one of the largest Russian municipalities.

### **The theoretical framework of the study, literature review**

There is a large body of literature relevant to our study. The first group of resources, forming the basis of the research, describes the concept of the welfare state and its present-day transformation from the social welfare type to the service-providing state. The changes target the strengthening of citizens' personal initiative and responsibility for their well-being, which is determined by their participation in management, in decision-making, and affecting the interests of all public groups [6–8]. We also consider the theoretical provisions of M. Castells, according to which the process of horizontal links strengthening among the subjects of information society results in the development of a communicative networking society [9]. We propose that the civic network changes the communication architecture of the social state. Interaction between citizens and power institutions utilizing interaction reduces the vertical, bureaucratic relationships, forming a more flexible network management model. Of much critical value for our research are the ideas of S. Arnstein, who suggested and proved several provisions of the strategies/levels of civic participation in the public administration depending on the scope of powers given to citizens [10]. Within this concept, crowd voting should be considered as one of the stages of a civic participation “ladder” when moving/ascending towards actual civic regulation. Of critical importance to our research is the attempt to raise the question of citizens' actual genuine participation in administration.

National and foreign researchers pay much attention to citizens' engagement in power administration with the help of electronic technologies. Studies are dedicated to describing electronic platforms and the opportunities they offer in central and provincial regions [11]. Researchers indicate the low level of public participation in decision-making, primarily in provincial Russian regions. This may be accounted for by the continuing information limitation, closed administration modes, and the unwillingness of people to participate in a dialog with authorities [12]. Researchers develop criteria of

constructive communication, exploring the factors of increasing the electronic engagement of citizens, paying attention to the need for harmonizing the norms, and normative-legal base of information interaction between authorities and citizens [13, 14]. Evidence suggests that electronic platforms for public participation generated by local authorities should meet the basic principle of administrative bodies' accountability to local citizens through the development of public control mechanisms. In this case, researchers propose models of citizens' electronic participation in decision-making; the implementation of the model can provide real participation of citizens in administration, without creating a mere visibility of management democratization [15]. Most authors believe that the online platform is the most promising direction of administration democratization in the context of Russian conditions, which can increase citizens' trust in municipal authorities [16].

### **Research design**

For the empirical assessment of the scope of public participation in the development of municipalities through online platforms for crowd voting, we chose the online resource Active Citizen (<https://ag.mos.ru>), which is a part of the crowdsourcing system of the Government of Moscow. The full system of crowdsourcing online platforms in Moscow was analyzed in a previous research by the authors of this article [17].

The Active Citizen project emerged as a platform for electronic voting on urban development issues. The voting in Active Citizen can occur in different forms ranging from adopting Moscow departmental normative legal acts (e.g., to ban the sale of alcohol energetic beverages) and Moscow Government regulations (e.g., to increase the eco class of buses in Moscow) to special infrastructural projects (e.g., parks improvement projects).

The choice of this platform for the research was justified by the presence of many registered users, completed projects, decisions made, and systematic reporting.

In May 2020, according to official statistics, Active Citizen registered 3 238 176 users who conducted 4 605 votes, adopted 141 356 536 opinions, made over 3 000 decisions for implementation. The anonymity of polls and surveys is provided by blockchain technology. The advantage of this technology is the impossibility to change or delete data, it is only possible to add new ones, which provides an opportunity to trace the entire chain of opinions, even if they fluctuate in the course of time.

The databank contained on the portal, including users opinions, allows us to describe the socio-demographic profile of its user, estimate the proportion of active citizens to the number of Moscow residents, their activities depending on the voting topic/discussion/survey as well as the scale of public participation in decision-making based on the analysis of ballots on urban topics.

### **Results**

Active Citizen is the most massive platform of crowd voting in Russia. The number of registered users exceeds 3 million people, accounting for about 25% of Moscow

residents. The dynamics of users' number increase is presented in Table 1.

As we can see from the table, the proportion of the registered users to the population of Moscow increases annually. According to the information provided in the annual reports of Active Citizen, the main way of popularity increase is the information in public places (schools, kindergartens, libraries, other municipal organizations and their web resources). The second effective way is "by word of mouth", i.e., the information distributed by friends and acquaintances. The third way is the media, including the Internet. Unfortunately, Active Citizen does not publish detailed statistics about the channels for attracting new users. Citizens can indicate this information by answering the question: How did you find out about the Active Citizen project? However, the results of this vote are not publicly available.

Table 1  
The number of registered users of the Active Citizen platform in 2014–2020

| Time period | The number of users, people | The users' number to the population, % | Increase in the proportion of users to the population during the previous time period, % |
|-------------|-----------------------------|--|--|
| May 14      | 1 000                       | 0.01%                                  |  |
| Nov. 14     | 500 000                     | 3.94%                                  | 3.93%  |
| Mar.15      | 1 000 000                   | 7.88%                                  | 3.94%  |
| Feb. 17     | 1 500 000                   | 11.82%                                 | 3.94%  |
| Jan.18      | 2 000 000                   | 15.76%                                 | 3.94%  |
| May 19      | 2 238 000                   | 17.63%                                 | 1.88%  |
| Jan. 20     | 3 193 167                   | 25.16%                                 | 7.53%  |
| Apr. 20     | 3 201 492                   | 25.22%                                 | 0.07%  |
| May 20      | 3 224 250                   | 25.40%                                 | 0.18%  |

If we analyze the annual reports of Active Citizen, we can draw up a socio-demographic portrait of the user of this resource and highlight the motivation for participating in such an activity. Major users are employable citizens aged 18 to 44, office workers, laborers, and students.

Registered users receive points for their activities, which include voting and public speeches, reposting news, filling in the profile. Users can spend the points in the platform "bonus store". They have access to unique souvenirs, tickets to sporting and entertainment events, public transport and parking space discounts, and more. This well-planned bonus system, of course, is a good external motive for the platform activity. The feedback from active users allows us to highlight the subjective motivation of Moscow residents to participate in municipal voting. The opinions of the platform users were initially received in Russian and then translated into English. In order to demonstrate individual discursive features of authors, we accompany quotations with the original version in Russian for the convenience of our readers.

1. A possibility to express their citizenship position

"I really lacked the opportunity to express my opinion. I had comments on various issues, and I did not know whom to address" / «Мне очень не хватало возможности высказать свое мнение. У меня были свои замечания по разным вопросам, а я не знала, кому их транслировать» (a young woman, a user since 2014).

"My participation in the project is one of the manifestations of my civic position. Yes, even if I don't

go anywhere, my civic position is expressed in the fact that I simply choose an answer in the vote application on the platform" / «Мое участие в проекте – одно из проявлений моей гражданской позиции. Да, пусть я никуда не хожу, и моя гражданская позиция выражается в том, что я просто выбираю вариант по вопросам в приложении» (a man, a user since 2014).

2. The desire to know more information about the life of the city

"With the help of the project, you can learn more about the hometown, its new activities" / «С помощью проекта можно узнавать больше о родном городе, о том, какие активности появляются» (a man, a user since 2014).

3. The opportunity to correlate your civic position with the opinions of other residents of the city

"There is a tool here that, at a minimum, makes it possible to understand that your opinion is different from the majority of opinions. Or vice versa, that your point of view is shared by thousands of people. One way or another, participating in the vote, people are involved in the discussion, in urban life, in general, and this is to the benefit of the people themselves and the city in which they live" / «Тут есть инструмент, который, как минимум, позволяет понять, что твое мнение не сходится с мнением большинства. Или наоборот, что твою точку зрения разделяют тысячи людей. Так или иначе, участвуя в голосовании, люди вовлекаются в дискуссию, в городскую жизнь, в целом, и это на пользу самим людям, и городу, в котором они живут» (a young man, a user since 2017).

4. An opportunity to feel involved in the authorities' activities

"Participating in the project, you feel, figuratively speaking, as if you were sitting in the Moscow Government Office and helping to solve urgent city issues" / «Участвуя в проекте, ощущаешь себя, образно говоря, как будто ты сидишь в Правительстве Москвы и помогаешь решать актуальные городские вопросы» (a young girl, a user since 2016).

"And I even consider myself an assistant to the mayor and the Government of Moscow, to some extent, thanks to this project" / «И даже считаю себя помощником мэра и правительства Москвы, в какой-то степени, благодаря этому проекту» (a man, a user since 2014).

5. A desire to be a part of a change in the urban environment

"You walk with friends in the center, you walk along the street, and someone remarks, 'Oh, what nice lights are here!' And you answer, 'Yes, we together chose that here, in this street, there were just these lanterns and not others.' This causes interest among friends, and I'm very pleased" / «Гуляешь с друзьями по центру, идешь по улочке, и кто-то замечает: «Ой, как-кие симпатичные фонари здесь!». А ты отвечаешь: «Да, мы вместе выбирали, чтобы на этой улице были именно такие фонари, а не другие». Это вызывает интерес у друзей, и самому приятно» (a young man, a user since 2014)

"I remember there was a vote on the improvement of the New Arbat ... And then I went and looked at how it worked" / «Помню, голосовали по благоустройству Нового Арбата ... И вот я потом сходил и посмотрел, как сделали» (a man, a user since 2014).

6. A desire to participate in the decision-making at the municipal level

“Each of us can influence the solution of a particular task. Every active citizen participating in this project has a chance to resolve the problems that exist in the city” / «Каждый из нас может повлиять на решение той или иной задачи, которая ставится. У каждого из активных граждан, кто участвует в этом проекте, появляется возможность решить те проблемы, которые существуют в городе» (a man, a user since 2014).

Table 2 presents the statistics of users' activities over the entire functioning of the Active Citizen project.

Table 2

Voting statistics by year

| Parameters                                       | 2014–2015 | 2015–2016 | 2016–2017 | 2017–2018 | 2018–2019 |
|--|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Number of votes                                  | 580       | 1 080     | 971       | 966       | 526       |
| Number of opinions registered                    | 25 000    | 23 156    | 26 930    | 23 595    | 19 209    |
| The average number of participants in one voting | 43 103    | 21 440    | 27 734    | 24 425    | 36 519    |
| Number of decisions made                         | 250       | 600       | 714       | 235       | 1 201     |

Table 3

Voting topics that are of the greatest interest to the platform users

| Voting topic                                      | The number of voters |
|---|----------------------|
| Decoration of free territories at metro stations  | 541 050              |
| The future of the central streets of the city     | 410 328              |
| The procedure for cleaning autumn foliage         | 326 663              |
| The name of the third circuit of the Moscow metro | 315 262              |
| The location of city ecological exhibitions       | 272 149              |
| Million trees (2015–2016)                         | 271 475              |
| Million trees (2016–2017)                         | 271 475              |
| Apartment renovation time                         | 266 095              |
| Lawn mowing rules                                 | 265 198              |
| Integrated development of the Tushino airfield    | 263 704              |
| Contact zoo development                           | 257 165              |
| Time for citywide parental online meetings        | 254 994              |
| Bike lane organization                            | 250 775              |
| Million trees (2017–2018)                         | 230 000              |
| SMS notification in libraries                     | 229 209              |
| The name of the new metro train                   | 220 281              |
| Wi-fi services in the subway                      | 214 455              |
| Playgrounds for musicians in the subway           | 214 002              |
| Dancing in the parks                              | 204 745              |
| Assessment of city improvement                    | 200 000              |
| Selection of events for city festivals            | 193 351              |

The average data of each vote is 20–40 thousand Moscow residents. However, there are topics, which attract a greater number of active citizens (Table 3).

The most popular topics are the improvement of the city and the organization of social events, as well as the general issues of the city's life.

## Conclusions

1. The analysis of the theme interviews allowed us to conclude that the degree of civic participation of Muscovites in municipal management is very conditional. Voting problems are of local nature. They do not require any special knowledge and competencies from the voters. Very few voting sessions raise the questions of social services in the field of medicine, education. Basically, users talk about the evaluation of the authorities' activities and the development of the city infrastructure (the introduction of new transport routes, the landscaping of residential areas, the development of urban digital services, the organization of urban institutions' activities, recreational and park development in the paid-in areas, etc.).

2. In our opinion, the network form of self-government bodies is not fully realized in these crowd voting resources since they only create the appearance of interaction with the citizens in the decision-making process. Delegating the right to participate in the solution of minor local problems, authorities make strategic decisions on their own, without relying on the resource of a “smart crowd”. This simulation allows the government to reduce citizens' dissatisfaction and increase the loyalty of citizens to the municipal authorities, as a whole, particularly their activities.

3. The analysis of the empirical data is suggestive enough to demonstrate that the functioning of the effective electronic model of decision-making, citizens' control of municipal administration activities and the regulation of local state power bodies are out of the question now.

4. As a result, we would like to note that the massive involvement of citizens in electronic communication interaction is the basis for the information society. An increased engagement, in its turn, assumes a present-day infrastructure, providing access to actual information and innovative technology. Unfortunately, the digital inequality of citizens (as well as cities and regions) limits the development of crowd voting via online platforms. These and other issues may be a part of future perspective research.

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