

E-Participation Development: A Comparative Study of the Russian, USA and UK E-Petition Initiatives

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ABSTRACT

This article considers the results of a comparative analysis of three e-petition portals in: Russian, the UK and the USA. The authors have developed a set of comparison criteria and identified similarities and differences in the will expression process development of citizens from various countries on the Internet. The advantages of the UK portal are as follows: simple registration, open petition publishing, clear attachment to the petition-reviewing authority. The US portal is considered to be much more practical when compared to the non-electronic petition filing procedure in the country and, moreover, it continues to collect signatures after the submission to the authority. The Russian portal is notable for its clear separation and representation of initiatives on the federal, regional and municipal levels.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

K.4 [Computers and Society]; K.6 [Management of Computing and Information Systems]; H.1 [Models and Principles]; H.4.2 [Information Systems Applications]: Type of systems – e-government applications

General Terms

Experimentation, Human Factors, Legal Aspects, Measurement, Performance, Security, Theory.

Keywords

E-participation; Comparative Analysis; USA; United Kingdom; Russian Federation

1. INTRODUCTION

In international practice, the development of public life e-participation mechanisms for citizens and political decision-making are no longer considered as new research topics. In Russia, the electronic portal intended for applications of citizens started to operate in 2013, therefore it is only now possible to get the first trends of how the process is advancing in Russia.

The comparative research execution becomes particularly relevant due to the fact that the indicators of “Strategy for Information Society Development in Russia” implementation include items relating to the position of Russia in major international e-development indexes. For example, dynamic actions towards the development of e-services and e-participation provision allowed

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Russia to come 27th in the 2012 EGovernment Index and to enter the list of promising regions [1].

In early 2013, in Russia, this topic became the subject of discussions within the State and among the scientific, educational and professional communities. Russia’s intention to join Open Government Partnership has led to an interest in researching e-participation in Russia in comparison with other countries.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review in the research subject area revealed, on the one hand, the variety of works devoted to e-participation and, on the other hand, gaps in areas of analysis, as well as in the regional analysis of this phenomenon.

The Web of Knowledge Database of scientific publications contains 184 published items on the e-participation topic [2]. Thus the majority of publications refers to the 2006-2013 period.

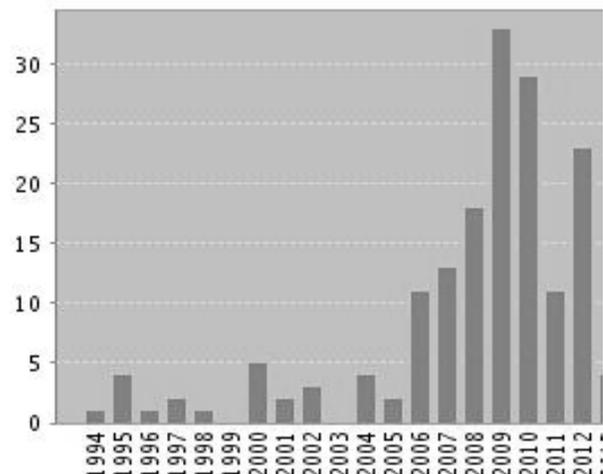


Figure 1. Published Items in Each Year on “E-Participation” Topic, Web of Knowledge Database

The data presented in Fig. 1 demonstrate a decline in published items after 2010, and thereafter a recovery in 2011-2012. This trend is associated with the emergence of Open Government Partnership in September 2011 and the increased attention paid to this issue in the scientific and expert communities.

Among these works, a number of studies that summarize and systematize the diversity of research in this area should be noted. In their study, I. Susha and A. Gronlund identified prevailing theories, which the authors use in their e-participation study: political theories and media studies [3]. R. Medaglia analyses publications on e-participation, identifying them as belonging to a

single scheme consisting of the following categories: e-participation activities, e-participation actors, e-participation effects, contextual factors, e-participation evaluation [4].

S. Alathur and colleagues have identified several forms (channels) of e-participation, which may become the subject of research [5]: ICT development to unite citizens and create online education communities; ICT use for group conversations and discussions; ICT use to attract supporters, voters; Social media for voting and polls; Economic forums, e-business; Knowledge sharing platforms; Networks as monitoring systems.

However, the scientific literature lacks virtually any research on the comparative analysis of e-participation initiatives development in various countries. The difficulty of cross-country comparison is determined by the time-diversity of the process at the different stages.

O. Fedotova and colleagues examined the relevance of the e-participation platform for citizens in Portugal and revealed that local e-participation initiatives have a predominantly informing character and there was a lack of high level initiatives [6].

The pilot project called Hub Websites for Youth Participation in Estonia, Germany, Ireland and the UK [7] is also worth mentioning. The study proved that, despite the importance of personal, face-to-face communication of citizens in discussions, debates on bills and decision-making, online participation tools are able to exert influence on democratic processes in the society.

Researchers V. Lysenko and K. Desouza studied the potential of social media usage in Moldova and came to the conclusion that the skilful use of ICT may not just ensure the participation of citizens in the political life of the country, but also may drive an Internet revolution without any involvement of organizations and groups, which are not represented on the political scene [8]. A team of J. Astrom's researchers was engaged in the interpretation of e-participation index indicators in non-democratic countries [9]. An analysis of the results led to the conclusion that, in non-democratic countries, e-participation mechanisms are being developed to retain a political status quo, but citizens may have no access to these technologies and tools.

A review of the scientific research allows one to summarize that the development of e-participation mechanisms constitutes a global trend [10]. Comparative studies in the development and use of e-participation tools in various countries will bring new epistemological knowledge and elaborate practical recommendations for the implementation of e-participation tools for other countries and regions.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The general research methodology is determined by the systems approach principles. Within this approach, the citizen e-participation portal is viewed as a system of interrelated characteristics. The comparative analysis objective was to identify the role and position of building blocks in the development of e-participation mechanisms across countries.

3.1 Research Objects

In the present research, three e-petition portals are selected as the subject of analysis:

1. The UK E-Petition Portal (<http://epetitions.direct.gov.uk/>), launched in 2011, coordinates the operation of the UK Parliament portal, in particular the Backbench Business Committee. It is not a

single portal, the British Government and the Scottish Parliament are also the resources of e-petitions.

2. The USA E-Petition Portal (<https://petitions.whitehouse.gov/>), launched in 2011. It supervises the portal operation and review of petitions by the US President and the White House.

3. The Russian Public Initiative (<https://www.roi.ru>), appeared in April 2013. The portal is operated by "Foundation for Information Democracy", a non-profit organization led by former RF Deputy Minister of Communication.

3.2 Evaluation Criteria

For the analysis, the research team has developed a system of comparison criteria. Since e-petition portals were selected as the subject of analysis, various contextual aspects correlating with the classification of R. Medaglia were identified as evaluation areas [4], namely: 1) Organizational development; 2) Technological parameters of the portal; 3) Regulatory support, review procedure; 4) Openness of procedures for citizens, feedback possibilities.

The e-petition portal evaluation scheme (Table 1) includes a set of indicators developed by the authors of this research. In addition to the selected criteria, the content analysis of petitions posted on this website is considered particularly relevant. To conduct this analysis, the authors were required to apply qualitative techniques to content analysis.

4. KEY RESULTS

Results of the e-petition analysis in the USA, the UK and Russia allowed the authors to distinguish similarities and differences in the procedures for the filing and reviewing of petitions, coverage of government branches, technological parameters and the level of openness and simplicity.

4.1 Coverage of Government Branches

The three selected countries have different ways of addressing the coverage of their government branches. The US portal is clearly linked to the activities of the Government, the executive body. In the UK, the petition-reviewing process involves the legislative branch represented by the House of Commons. In Russia, combining the responsibilities of legislative and executive branches has been attempted, which is why the expert group includes representatives of both branches.

In the US the focus on improving the operation of federal bodies and laws is clearly declared. The UK initiatives potentially address the national level, but the House of Commons addresses issues at all levels of government if these are of national interest. The Russian portal is distinguished by the available division into federal, regional and municipal initiatives. Thus, a citizen may vote for the initiative in their region or municipality, and the range of potential initiatives becomes as extended as needed.

4.2 Review Procedures

E-petition review procedures share similar mechanisms in the UK and Russia. In both countries, the petition needs to collect 100,000 signatures within one year so as to be passed for review by the expert group. In the U.S., petition-reviewing conditions are more strictly subject to terms. Firstly, to have the petition published as publicly available, its author must previously have collected 150 signatures within 30 days, and then the petition must obtain 100,000 votes in just 30 days.

The UK e-petition review procedure is as follows: once the petition gains the required number of votes, it is submitted to the

lower house of the Parliament, i.e., the House of Commons. The petition is reviewed by the Backbench Business Committee, which specifies the subject for weekly debates in the Parliament. The result of the petition discussions will be openly published on the portal.

In the U.S., once the petition gains the required number of votes, it is submitted to the Government, i.e., the White House. When the US Government decides on the petition, each and every citizen who has signed it receives a response to his/her e-mail.

In Russia, the mechanism of working with applications is followed: once the petition gains 100,000 votes, it is submitted to the governmental working group composed of 34 people. The expert group includes representatives of executive and legislative bodies, the business community, non-profit organizations, scientific institutions and foundations.

4.3 Portal Technological Parameters

Technological aspects of the studied portals' are quite similar. The accuracy of the information provided on the U.S. portal is ensured by technical measures (Captcha, IP, e-mail) to some extent, as its importance in this case is not too high. A petition portal is just a tool to initiate the application review, which is much more practical in comparison with the consideration of paper documents. In the UK, only citizens and residents may vote for petitions; at registration, you must specify a residential address within the UK and an email. To cast a vote on the Russian Public Initiative Portal, it is required to register on the Common Government and Municipal Services Portal. This procedure is more time consuming, as it requires the pre-registration and authorization.

4.4 Openness of Procedures for Citizens

On all the analyzed portals, citizens' petitions are open and publicly available. The UK portal publishes names of petition applicants. The US portal respects the principle of partial anonymity; a list specifying the author and signatories is published for each and every petition, but their first and last names are replaced with initials. The Russian portal demonstrates the highest level of anonymity; neither the applicant's name, nor the data about those who voted for a petition are available to users.

Table 1. Electronic petitions portals' comparison

Indicators	UK	USA	Russia
A. Organizational development			
A1. Powers of executive bodies	-	+	-
A2. Power of legislative bodies	+	-	+
A3. Powers of judicial bodies	-	-	-
A4. Preliminary designation of the responsible agency	+	-	-
B. Technological parameters			
B1. Pre-moderation	+	+	+
B2. Post-moderation	+	+	+
B3. Use of e-signatures	-	-	+
B4. Signature collection period	1 year	30 days	1 year

C. Regulatory support, procedures			
C1. Available operating procedure for dealing with applications	+	+	+
C2. Single/ additional mechanism of petition filling	-	-	-
C3. Federal level coverage	+	+	+
C4. Separation of regional and municipal level	-	-	+
D. Openness for citizens, feedback possibilities			
D1. Open publishing	+	+/-	+
D2. Anonymity	+	+	+
D3. Available feedback	+	+	+
D4. Simplicity of petitioning	+	+	+

The proposed scheme has been tested by the authors, and can be used to analyze the portals in other countries, providing information in local languages.

5. DEMAND AMONG THE CITIZENS

During their operation, portals have shown a certain level of demand among citizens.

The topics of discussions can give insight to the level of public mood. The five most popular initiatives on the Russian portal (in June 2013) are represented as follows:

- The ban on officials buying cars worth more than 1.5 million rubles (75,000 votes, 0,06% of the population);
- Returning the minimum permissible level of alcohol in the driver's blood (60,000 votes, 0,04% of the population);
- The empowerment of self-defence in an attack on one's home (27,000 votes, 0,02% of the population);
- Changes to the work of the Russian Post (25,000 votes, 0,02% of the population);
- The cancellation of the registration of residence (18,000 votes, 0,01% of the population).

Conversely, in the US citizens are more concerned with religion, deportation, the development of democratic freedoms issues. The five most popular American petitions are the following initiatives:

- Legally recognizing Westboro Baptist church as a hate group (360,000 votes, 0,1% of the population);
- The democracy crisis in Malaysia: foreign workers were employed for fraud voting in Malaysian General Election (273,000 votes, 0,09% of the population);
- The investigation and deportation of Jasmin Sun who was the main suspect of a famous Thallium poison murder case in China (148,000 votes, 0,05% of the population);
- Immediate action requested for the deportation status of the Romeikes-Grant family, a German home-schooling family (125,000 votes, 0,04% of the population);
- The pardoning of Edward Snowden (120,000 votes, 0,04% of the population).

Among the top initiatives in the UK, one can note the issues of environment, migration, health:

- Stop the badger cull (248,000 votes, 0,4% of the population);
- Stop mass immigration from Bulgarians and Romanians in 2014, when EU restrictions on immigration are relaxed (148,000 votes, 0,2% of the population);
- Save Children Surgery at the EMCHC at Glenfield Leicesters (109,000 votes, 0,2% of the population);
- Save UK Justice (84,000 votes, 0,1% of the population);
- Promote cycling by implementing the recommendation in the 'Get Britain Cycling' report (66,000 votes, 0,1% of the population).

However, based on the experience of two years of the US and the UK portals' operation, not all of the initiatives which collected the required number of votes, have been submitted as a bill. The rejection of charges on UK roads after collecting 1.8 million signatures, as well as the beginning of contemplating the ban on arms sales in the U.S.A. are good examples of legislators listening to public opinion.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The advantages of the UK portal should be taken into account when considering the Russian portal: simple registration, open petition publishing, as well as clear attachment to the petition-reviewing authority. It is also valuable to consider the US portal's advantages: a much more practical presence as compared to the non-electronic petition filing procedure in the country and, moreover, it continues to collect signatures after the submission to the authority.

The Russian portal is notable for its clear separation and representation of initiatives on the federal, regional and municipal levels. In addition, the Russian portal aims to collect initiatives related to competences in both the legislative and executive branches.

The comparative analysis showed the trends connected mainly with the portals' offers and functions. The relationship between the portals' data and actual political processes and the influence of initiatives on state internal development is still a controversial question. The value of the portal is an important area for research. In this regard, qualitative research should be conducted, as well studies of rule making and a collection of interviews with legislators. These issues should be the subject for further research in this direction.

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