

E-Government in Russia as Integral Part of Modern Network Society

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Abstract

Our world is by the day transforming from an industrial society into a new form of network society where the status of e-government reflects the nature of such a society and is one of its main components. The basic definition of e-government is the use of technological communications to provide public services to citizens. It is a multifaceted concept that includes digital interactions between the government, citizens, various government agencies, civil servants and businesses. This article is devoted to analysing the relations between e-government and citizens in the modern network society. Attention is going to be devoted to the sociology of the interaction between citizens and e-government. This article is likewise going to touch upon some of the trends of the development of e-government in Russia and on the possible directions in which some features of e-government should be developed.

Key words: e-government, network society, public administration, strategy, bureaucracy, ICT

The role of E-government in public administration development

As noted by influential sociologists, in the late 20th century our society began undergoing a process of change. The change was influenced by an enormous growth of technological capabilities. This process is by no means over but the consequence of this gradual change can already be seen in our everyday lives. At the heart of the process was, and still is, the growing importance of information. Samuel Huntington included this transformation in his theory of the third wave and many «post-industrialists» link this change with a burgeoning crisis of the industrialised global society (Huntington, 2003). With the advent of such notions, the idea of e-democracy appeared in scientific and political discourse of the 1990's. In 1991 the term "network

society" was coined by the Dutch sociologist Jan van Dijk; according to this concept, a combination of macro and micro networks shape the structure of society, with the latter existing in two dimensions: in the usual, material sense and in the sense of information (social networks, online communications, etc.).

According to Smorgunov, government institutions represent only a part of the decision-making process in a network society alongside private sector players and stakeholders [1]. The aforementioned transformation of society was also evident in the adoption of the so-called New Public Management strategy in the late 1980's by the Anglo-Saxon countries. This was a new, "free market" take on public administration; from thereon the government strived to be more like a "business", in the sense that instead of positioning itself as an institution that rules over a group of people, its new image was of a manager who provides reliable services to clients.

The main focus of public administration shifted to offering high-quality government services. Since the government adopted the logic of a corporation, these services now had to be provided in the most effective fashion possible. That is how ICT and subsequently e-government made its way into public administration. The introduction of ICT into public administration led to the government being perceived as transparent and highly functional. The introduction of ICT as an instrument of public administration later on ushered the era of e-government.

New Public Management was a precursor to the concept of "good governance" that was first introduced in one of the UN strategic documents in 1997 (Smorgunov, 2003). Subsequently "good governance" became one of the four pillars of international development. The main principles of good governance are transparency, effectiveness, participation of citizens and responsibility of the government (Gaman-Golutvina, 2003).

Summarising the evolution of public administration over the last 50 years we can see a gradual shift from classical bureaucracy to corporate-like public management and finally to the modern idea of good governance, which incorporates ICT (e-government) and features of horizontal hierarchy. Currently, we can even witness a slight development of e-government into a paradigm of "open government».

It is considered that the term "e-government" appeared at the beginning of the 1990's during Bill Clinton's presidency. It is a very flexible term and it is common to see synonymous terms such as e-administration, e-governance and digital government. The term itself could be understood from two viewpoints: according to the first one, e-government is the sum of technological instruments of public administration. The second one defines e-government as a social phenomenon and a new form of interaction between the government and society.

Criticisms of e-government

The critique of e-government is usually based on the following arguments: e-government simply facilitates the process of public administration and does not increase the influence of civil society; the channels of information between the government and citizens can, in some cases, be used to increase control over citizens instead of increasing the responsibility of the government towards the citizens (Kashina, 2009); moreover, an abundance of information about the government's actions does not necessarily increase the knowledge of public administration processes and can merely represent information about information; and, finally, e-government does not do enough for the development of e-democracy.

E-government in Russia

The emergence of e-government in the Russian Federation goes hand in hand with the various administrative reforms, which began in the early 2000's and were aimed

at increasing the effectiveness of public administration (Lobanov, 1999). The first legislative document which began the construction of e-government in Russia was adopted in 2002 and was a federal state program called "Electronic Russia (2002-2010)"[2]. The realisation of this program lasted until 2010. The goal of the program was to simply digitalise public administration. It was still too early to speak of a change in the nature of public administration itself. And it was only towards the end of 2009 that the modern concept of e-government began to emerge and services began to be provided online at large.

The next landmark in the development of e-government in Russia occurred in 2009 and consisted of an official update to the state program of 2002 which stressed on creating the necessary technological infrastructure for e-government. In 2010 those updates were turned into a new state program: "Information society, 2011-2020"[3]. As stated in the official document, the goal of this program is to continue the inclusion of ICT instruments in public administration and to improve the quality of digital services provided to the citizens. In 2011 a federal law allowing the use of electronic signature was passed. Later the same year the Government approved the «Program of the development of digital government and municipal services». The program included goals which were synonymous with e-government such as digital municipal services and the digital openness of government and municipal bodies.

After the presidential elections of 2012, the idea of e-government transformed into the idea of an "open government". In 2012 a Government Council tasked with coordination of the construction of open government was created. The system of "open government" is considered to be the final step in the development of e-government and is characterised by an even greater transparency and by the inclusion of various horizontal networks. "Open government" was developed in four directions: public control, trust of citizens, increase in public responsibility, increase in the quality of public services. In a sense, the open government was more of an ideological breakthrough than a purely technological one - the government turned

towards the people and promised them to be more responsible and to provide services of the highest quality. It is important to mention that the open government program was in part a reaction to the protest activities of 2011 and 2012.

Sergey Stepashin noted that the majority of the participants of these protests wished to express indignation at the lack of dialogue between the government and its citizens [4]. A similar thought was reflected in president Putin's article which was published in 2012 and was titled "Democracy and the government's quality". In this article the president proposed the creation of a system where laws would be discussed by citizens on the Internet; the president even used the term "crowdsourcing"[5]. In the following years, the focus of e-government shifted to creating a political dialogue between the government and citizens.

Currently, the Russian government has managed to achieve an impressive growth in digital interactions with citizens [6]. The creation of a unified identity portal where one can receive a large array of services online has greatly hastened the growth of e-government in Russia. Interaction between various government bodies has also been facilitated through a unified system of digital interaction. There has also been improvement in automating the classical paperwork systems of government institutions.

Despite the achievements of e-government in Russia, there has not been a significant transformation in the nature of public administration. The technological innovations remain what they are - instruments, but do not per se influence the relation between the government and citizens. While in some regions and municipalities the above may prove false, in most cases e-government has simply facilitated the provision of public services without altering the basic "social contract" in terms of public administration.

E-government needs to be proactive because the various networks of citizens on all levels are constantly evolving and growing. E-government has to not only offer online public services but formulate the online agenda. It needs to participate in civil society projects, in activist's petitions, in creating platforms where people can voice their opinions and concerns. It cannot be passive and simply become a subsidiary actor of the Internet dimension. As per Smorgunov, modern societal networks have a tendency to instantly create new links and substitute passive actors (Smorgunov, 2014). The meaning behind this idea is that if the e-government does not take charge in creating information streams, those streams will be influenced by other players. And since the global society is one enormous network such influences can even undermine national security in the long run. Judging by the influence of social media on protest activity, e-government should be around every Internet corner, enticing citizens to give feedback and showing desire to improve through the study of that feedback. It cannot afford to take an unassertive position in the network of information.

Conclusion

E-government cannot simply exist for the sake of reducing paperwork. In the modern network society e-government has to be dynamic in contributing to the online agenda. The easiest method to do that is to integrate the different online projects of civil society into the architecture of the existing e-government. Such an addition will ameliorate government-citizens relations by making citizens feel valued through the process of crowdsourcing and in general make more vibrant and active the very notion of e-government. The e-government has a two-fold nature: it can be used as an instrument of facilitative nature, but can also serve as an instrument for action and proactivity. To ignore the latter side of e-government is a mistake. To make use of the potent potential of e-government it is necessary to devise a strategy that would combine public administration and civil society and would simultaneously appear in all government bodies on both the federal and regional levels.

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[6] [URL: <https://digital.gov.ru/ru/activity/statistic/rating/elektronnoe-pravitelstvo-v-rf/>].

