Citizens and E-services: On-line Interaction with the Authorities in Russia

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*Abstract - **The article is based on the results of research conducted in 2015–2017. The main conclusion is that in Russia e-services is becoming more and more successfully integrated into the traditional arch of actions used by citizens in their interaction with authorities. This is a result of the government pursuing its own goal—to achieve a target figure set by the Decree of the President of Russia, No. 601. The requirements of the decree led to the restructuring of the initial definition of an e-service, on the one hand, and a vigorous application of marketing approach to e-services promotion – on the other. However, this success is limited to an urban middle class.***

Keywords—e-government; e-services; citizens; state offer; citizen adoption; arch of action.

I. INTRODUCTION

For more than the quarter of a century, the transition towards e-government—i.e., towards the interaction between authorities and citizens mediated by information and communication technologies—has been described as a revolution in government, which should lead to the sharp increase in quality of government services provided to citizens and, simultaneously, to the decrease and, ultimately, full elimination of citizens' alienation from the government. However, there is a considerable gap between the ideological construct of "e-government", as it appears in numerous international and national strategic documents—and the reality of introducing IT solutions into the system of public administration. This gap is reflected in a recurring question of "Why is the interest in e-government so high on the one hand, but its usage so low on the other?» [See, for example: 7].

The theme of deep-rooted under-demand for e-services has become a commonplace in e-government research. It applies not only to the transition economies and developing countries, for which the problem can always be ascribed to the low rate of Internet penetration, but also to the developed nations with the penetration level of more than 70%. For example, L. Carter and V. Weerakkody have documented the existence of this problem for UK and USA [2].

Consequently, one of the main research approaches that emerged in e-government studies is the exploration of factors influencing user adoption of e-services, as well as of the barriers hindering this adoption, with the purpose of producing recommendations that could help to overcome such barriers.

Methodological models used in such research vary according to the author: on the one hand, there a simple Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) used by F. Davis, which takes into account only two parameters, perceived usefulness of a given technology and perceived adoption difficulties [3]. On the other hand, there is a Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT), again developed with the participation of F. Davis and combining eight theories at once [15].

This problem also has a very clearly expressed practical implication, since the growth in e-services demand helps to justify considerable costs of their implementation.

## II. E-SERVICES: WHAT RUSSIAN STATE OFFERS TO ITS CITIZENS?

The main (and, potentially, the only one) instrument used to provide e-services is the Government Services Portal of the Russian Federation launched in 2009 (Edinyi portal gosudarstvennykh i munitsipalnykh uslug Rossiyskoy Federatsii, EPGU) www.gosuslugi.ru.

In recent years, the Ministry of Telecom and Mass Communications of the Russian Federation, which is responsible for the technological side of developing e-government, actively worked to increase EPGU's appeal to the citizens. To achieve this, the registration process was considerably simplified—including the possibility of mobile phone registration]. In 2014, web-pages featuring six most popular services were redesigned. The resulting beta version https://beta.gosuslugi.ru/ immediately received the highest mark in "RuNet Rating" 2014 competition, coming first in the nomination "Non-governmental and Governmental Organizations" [9]. In 2016 the portal's beta version became a basic one for receiving government e-services. In April 2018 another design update has occurred. Developers have added personalized notifications, quick access to life situations services and user support services [14].

EPGU was redesigned based on the most up-to-date trends in usability design: assessment of user needs; minimalism and user-friendliness; "mobile first" and adaptive design approaches. There was research conducted, card sorting performed, information model developed, UI design and navigation design carried out. These were followed by the work on visual design and actual implementation. Web-sites of successful service companies served as a reference point—

justifiably so, considering that from the very beginning e-services adaptation models were based on electronic sales experience, i.e. the relations between government and citizens were paralleled to relations between user/buyer and seller.

Simultaneously, efforts were made to "sell" e-services to the end users. In 2015, Rocketmind expert network was commissioned by the Ministry of Telecom and Mass Communications to organize public service advertising campaign with the goal to promote EPGU e-services (the campaign used such slogans as "Government E-services for All Occasions", "Government E-Services. Easier than Sounds", etc.) Developers relied on a classic marketing approach: "don't spend money on advertising, if you don't understand your client". Therefore, they "conducted a more in-depth analysis of target audiences, developed transparent USPs (unique selling proposition) for key services, focused on value and ultimately created an all-purpose construction kit for building communication messages for any audience and every service" [10]. In practice, the company's promotional materials make it obvious that the developers catered not to every audience, but to the young, well-educated and well-off residents of major cities, who formed the target for promotional materials—see Picture 1, encouraging a recipient to check their pension account.
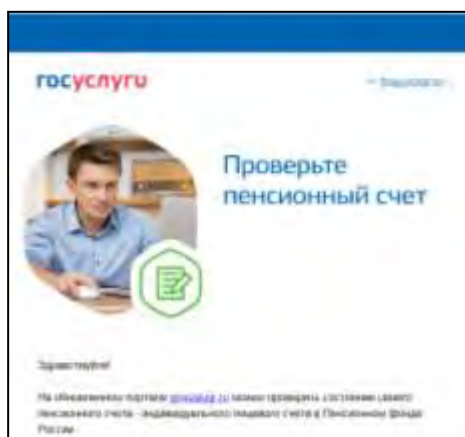
These measures resulted in almost 22.5 Mil citizens who used Unified Identification System (ESIA) as of the end of 2015 [13] and in 68 Mil such citizens as of the beginning of 2018 [8]. This represents about 46% of Russia's population (147 Mil). However according to the Decree of the President of Russia No. 601 dated May 6, 2012 "On the Priorities of Improvements in the System of Public Administration" the proportion of citizens receiving central and local governmental services electronically should by the end of 2018 reach at least 70% [4].

III.   E-SERVICES: HOW THE STATE CONSTRUCTS THEM FOR ITSELF

Although by the beginning of 2018, the number Portal users comprised over 46% of Russian population, it became obvious that, if this growth rate remains unchanged, it would be impossible to reach the 70% figure projected by the Decree No. 601. Therefore, various government agencies took a number of steps aimed not to increase the demand but to reconstruct discursively the concepts of a) e-service and b) e-service user.

According to "The Concept for Development of the Instruments for Providing Central and Local Governmental Services Electronically" designed in 2013 [12], a formerly single governmental service—such as obtaining a driver license—was divided into the "action components": receiving information on the service procedure and timing; making an appointment; finalizing the request; receiving and registering the request; paying state duty; receiving the result (in digital and hard copies), receiving information on the service progress. Each of these actions, therefore, became an independent "reporting unit" — a fact that promises to substantially increase the number of services.

On the other hand, the Directive No. 676 dated December 30, 2015 of the Federal State Statistics Service (Rosstat) [5] established that the key figure "Proportion of citizens receiving central and local governmental services electronically" should be calculated based on the question "Over the past 12 months, have you received central and local governmental services and what tools have you used for this purpose?" [3, section III]. A positive answer sounds as "Yes, over the Internet (using official web-sites and portals for central and local governmental services, mobile applications, self-service kiosks)". This allowed including into the list of government e-services such actions as "making an appointment to a doctor, cancelling or reviewing appointment", "checking existing traffic fines", "making an appointment for visiting tax office", "enrolling in a kindergarten". Strictly speaking, all these actions do not constitute "services" per se: a citizen makes an appointment to visit tax office in order to subsequently receive tax office service, etc. These are just actions constituting parts of a service—which, however, are counted as standalone services. As a result, at the end of 2017, national average proportion of people using government e-services rose to the 64.3% of Russian population [11], which is considerably closer to 70%.

Paradoxically, all these bureaucratic maneuvers purporting to achieve the required figure have brought "e-services" as a bureaucratic construct substantially closer to the citizen's understanding of these services (and, therefore, brought administrative supply closer to an actual consumer demand).

IV.   E-SERVICES: HOW THEY ARE USED BY CITIZENS

A number of our research projects conducted in 2010–2017 demonstrated that, when interacting with authorities, citizens use a whole range of ways to achieve the desired result. More precisely, they construct an "arch of action" that includes both traditional and electronic services. At the same time, the majority of users perceive electronic interaction as a complementary way to contact authorities (in addition to personal communication), not as an exclusive mode of interaction.

This was confirmed by the results of our research project titled "Citizens and E-Services" conducted in Sverdlovsk Oblast in 2015-2017 (when the government made particularly strong efforts to "sell" e-services). The first stage of the project was implemented in May 2015; the second one—in April 2016. The survey was conducted among Sverdlovsk Oblast residents aged over 18. The sample size was 1000. The stratified probability sampling method was applied. Quantitative

methods were supplemented with qualitative research: in April 2016, we conducted a series of focus groups on the research topic.

V. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The survey established the considerable growth, over the course of one year, in the number of Sverdlovsk Oblast residents, who considered using Internet for dealing with governmental authorities — see Table I.

TABLE I.

If you had a choice in how you could officially contact a government agency, would you prefer to contact them...	April 2015	April 2016
only over the Internet	13.3	11.4
sometimes in person, sometimes over the Internet - it depends.	20.7	30.6
Total:	34.0	42.0
visit and contact in person	64.0	54.4
were undecided	2.0	3.6

The share of e-communication supporters was driven up by the respondents who said that "it depends" on the situation whether they would use online communication or not.

What types of interaction of authorities the survey participants actually practiced? (Table II).

TABLE II.

During the last six months...	April 2015	April 2016
viewed information on fines. debts etc.	18.7/1	22.8/2
searched for an information on actions when consulting government agencies	16.7/2	24.0/1
search document templates in order to download them and fill them in	16.3/3	19.8/3
made an appointment to visit a government agency	7.3/4	13.2/4
received receipts for paying taxes. fines and other fees	6.3/5	9.8/6
electronically submitted documents into a government agency	5.7/6	11.0/5
did nothing of the above	66.0	56.8
were undecided	1.7	1.0

Table II clearly demonstrates that preliminary or preparatory actions were the most popular ones. but not the interactive e-communication with government agencies: 24.0% of the surveyed searched for information of what to do when contacting authorities, while only 13.2% made appointments; 19.8% searched document templates to download and fill them in. while 11.0% sent documents electronically.

If we restate this table in terms of the Government Directive No. 236, it will become obvious that citizens preferred to use e-tools only for some of the actions out of the full range of "action components": they received information on procedures and timing for services, made appointments, finalized requests for a service. All these actions were aimed to simplify traditional (personal) interaction with government agencies employees.

We observed an obvious difference in the intensity of preparatory e-actions between those respondents who recently had to repeatedly visit various government agencies and those who did it only once.

Those respondents who had to visit governmental agencies repeatedly over the last six months were more active in using options provided by official web-sites and portals to prepare for such visits: within this group. almost half (45.1) of the surveyed said that they searched in advance for an information of what was required for such visits; further two fifths (39.3%) of the surveyed searched for and downloaded official document templates to fill them in. For one-time visitors. less than a quarter of respondents performed similar preparatory actions.

Only a third (31.2%) of repeated visitors never used the Internet in their interaction of authorities. while for the one-time visitors. this figure was two thirds (60.6%).

It is important to note that compared to 2015 the proportion of respondents who complemented their repeated visits to government agencies with electronic interaction has grown considerably: in 2015, 45.2% of survey participants said that this was something they never did.

Frequency of use has increased for all "preparatory" forms of interaction: viewing information about working hours, downloading document templates, making appointments, sending documents electronically.

Overall, we can conclude that high frequency of visits to governmental agencies encourage citizens to be more active in adding various types of e-interaction to their "arch of action" in order to facilitate and speed up their personal contacts, but certainly not to replace traditional interaction with an exclusively electronic one. The basic arch configuration persists: "pre-visit preparation—personal visit (implying the correct. result-oriented behavior)—assessment of visit outcomes—either conclusion or the beginning of a new cycle". According to a formula that emerged during one of the focus groups, "thanks to the Internet, you are going there well prepared".

During the focus-groups citizens have repeatedly elaborated in detail this new version of their "arch of action":

"We are living in an e-world. They have everything on their Portal lists of all required documents, what you need to submit and when. And the schedule, and you can even book your place in a queue, an electronic one — make everything easier, so to say. And to obtain the foreign passport too: you just login into Gosuslugi, fill in everything, then they simply summon you, take your photo and issue this passport. That is, an e-world—it's simply made people's life easier" (Yekaterinburg. female, 46 y.o., secondary professional education, specialist, private enterprise).

Focus groups participants obviously felt, superior compared to those government agencies visitors, who have not yet learned to utilize the Internet in their preparatory stages.

"About the foreign passport. We were doing all this online, submitted an application, and then they wrote us telling when to come. And all of this was great and wonderful. So we came—and oops! And those poor people there—who did everything without the Internet—they had been actually sitting there for hours. That's just horrible!" (Nizhny Tagil, female, 28 y.o., higher education, sales manager, private company).

Moreover, they sometimes felt themselves superior even compared to the agencies' personnel:

"If I have to visit somewhere. I would look on the Internet in advance, fill in all these [documents], and then I go... It happens that sometimes you come and realize that you already know about the answers to your questions than they do!" (Ekaterinburg, female, 54 y.o., higher education, secondary school teacher).

Vigorous incorporation of e-services into the traditional arc of action was typical for the residents of major Sverdlovsk Oblast cities: Ekaterinburg and Nizhny Tagil. In small towns, focus groups participants were much less likely to engage in comparable actions. For them, the improvement in governmental supply's quality was primarily associated not with EPGU but with the establishment of the Multifunctional Centers for Providing Central and Local Government Services. It was the Multifunctional Centers that, according to the participants, *"made things easier, smoother, no queues"* (Rezh, Svedrlovsk Oblast, female, 37 y.o., higher education, economist, private enterprise).

A clear correlation also persisted between the frequency of e-services use and the respondents' age, education and financial situation: such services were most often used by the younger, more educated and more financially secure surveys participants.

VI. CONCLUSION

Overall, administrative supply of e-services is becoming more and more successfully integrated into the new arc of action—a result of the government pursuing its own goal to achieve the target figure set by the President Decree, No. 601. This resulted in the restructuring of the initial definition of a "service", on the one hand, and a vigorous application of marketing approach to services promotion – on the other.

However, while declaring the principle of "e-services for everybody", the actual promotional campaign targeted urban "middle class", which is the main beneficiary party of e-government. Characteristically, the new version of EPGU was used most often by the residents of Moscow, Saint-Petersburg and Moscow and Sverdlovsk Oblasts — that is to say, by the metropolis populations. Likewise, the most popular services are the middle class services: checking road inspection (GIBDD) fines and the state of their personal mandatory pension insurance accounts; checking tax and court debts; applying for driver licenses. Thus, it is the members of major cities' middle class — well-educated and financially secure —who most actively utilize e-services to complement their arc of interaction with authorities.

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