Iryna Lunevich

(DIS)EMPOWERING TECHNOLOGIES?
SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION
OF ELECTRONIC PARTICIPATION TOOLS

Abstract

The paper aims to analyze the "Active Citizen" project, an electronic platform for e-referenda launched by the Moscow City Governments. The platform allows residents of Moscow to propose and vo.te on issues related to provision and management of urban services and infrastructure. Thus, the launch of the project represents the attempt of the Moscow Municipality to engage citizens in urban governance. Despite the municipal authorities' claims of that the new e-governance platform stimulates the participation of citizens in urban governance, it is questionable whether the problem of the democratic deficit in public administration and urban planning could be solved by technical means only.

The paper aims at dealing with the problem of public participation in urban governance both conceptually and empirically. The article puts the question of public participation in urban governance in the limelight of the STS debate about citizen engagement in technical decision-making. Furthermore, it applies the Social Construction of Technology (SCOT) approach to the analysis of the "Active Citizen" platform in order to answer the following research question: how does the "Active Citizen" transform the relationship among different actors involved in the process of urban development.

Keywords: technoscientific controversies, urban governance, public engagement, electronic participation tools, Active Citizen, SCOT

Iryna Lunevich

Introduction

This paper attempts to analyze a particular initiative to engage the public in urban decision-making that was undertaken by the Moscow City Government. In 2010, the then President Medvedev appointed Sergei Sobyanin a new Mayor of Moscow. Sobyanin's administration tried to promote Moscow as "a seemingly more open and democratic city" (Büdenbender and Zupan 2016:11). First of all, the Mayor filled key administrative positions with Western-educated professionals. Secondly, Sobyanin's administration started organizing open architecture contests to increase transparency of the urban development process. Finally, Sobyanin introduced a number of "depoliticized" participation tools for urban planning (Büdenbender and Zupan 2016:11).

These participation tools include various electronic platforms that help to maintain a constant dialogue between the authorities and the public. The most popular service among them is the "Active Citizen" platform[1] that was launched by the municipal authorities of Moscow in 2014. It allows residents of Moscow to vote on issues related to the provision and management of local services, design, and planning of neighborhoods and public spaces. The authorities claim that the "Active Citizen" application helps engage citizens in a policy-making process and support their participation in urban governance. Thus, the launch of the "Active Citizen" application represents an attempt of the Moscow municipal authorities to make the process of urban governance more democratic.

Despite the city administration's claims that the new platform stimulates participation of citizens in urban governance, it is questionable whether the problem of the democratic deficit in public administration could be solved by technical means only. Thus, in order to understand how (if at all) the "Active Citizen" application enables a participatory urban planning process, it is necessary to open the "black box" of the e-governance platform and examine its effects on how the city authorities of Moscow, urban planners, architects and citizens collaborate with one another. This paper, therefore, aims to address the following question: how does the "Active Citizen" transform the relationship among different actors involved in the process of urban development.

The paper aims at dealing with the problem of public participation in urban governance both conceptually and empirically. It conceptualizes urban management as the technology governance arena. Therefore, the paper puts

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[1]   I will also refer to this as application, electronic referenda service or technological artifact

the question of public participation in urban governance in the limelight of the STS debate about citizen engagement in technical decision-making. In addition, it presents STS perspective on forms and methods of public engagement in technical decision-making and discusses the role of ICTs in supporting citizens' participation in the governance process.

Next, the article applies the Social Construction of Technology (SCOT) approach to the analysis of the "Active Citizen" platform. The SCOT approach allows to identify the meanings that various stakeholders attribute to the referenda platform and, therefore, to understand how they measure its success. Furthermore, the SCOT approach draws attention to the social, political, and economic context, in which technological artifacts are designed and used. Thus, the paper aims at reflecting on how the specific context of the post-socialist city, in which the platform operates, shapes its development.

The analysis of the "Active Citizen" application is based on document analysis and interviews with key actors. The document analysis covers a wide range of sources: the official web page of the "Active Citizen" project, legal documents, interviews with the "Active Citizen" administration in the largest government-owned and independent newspapers published between May 2014 and July 2016. The document analysis was complemented with interviews with key actors involved in the debate over the design of the "Active Citizen" platform: a representative of the "Active Citizen" project as well as critics and users of the platform. All the twelve interviews were made during a research trip to Moscow in April, 2016.

Public Participation in Technical Decision-Making and Urban Governance

Since the mid-1990s, STS scholars have been increasingly calling for public engagement in science and technology decision making (Callon, Lascoumes and Barthe 2009; Jasanoff 2004; Nowotny 2003). According to them, technoscientific controversies raise not only technical questions but social, political, economic and ethical concerns. Consequently, STS researchers have argued that citizens should participate in discussions about nuclear power, environmental risks, genetically modified organisms, etc., as their opinions are as valid as claims of scientists and technical experts (Callon et al 2009; Jasanoff 2004; Irwin and Michael 2003; Nowotny 2003).

Urban planning theorists and practitioners were also a part of this tendency (Healey 1992; Innes and Booher 2004). According to Patsy Healey, a specialist in planning theory and practice, urban planning is an interactive process that draws on expertise of actors "each with its own meaning systems and hence knowledge forms and ways of reasoning and valuing" (Healey 1992:242). Therefore, she argues, formal techniques of urban planning should be supported by unconventional methods that allow different groups to achieve understanding. Urban planning theorists Judith Innes and David Booher add that procedures that seek to address interests of all affected stakeholders allow to resolve potential conflicts, improve the quality of decisions, build trust and increase the satisfaction of the public (2004: 427–428).

Partly in response to the STS scholars' criticism, governments have attempted to increase citizen participation in management of science and technology (Irwin 2006:300; Leach, Scoones, and Wynne 2005:215). The shift towards democratization of decision making took place not only within scientific institutions, but also within the sphere of urban planning and governance. Urban planning theorists Helena Leino and Markus Laine remark that city governments have recently opened up the planning processes and used diverse methods such as thematic groups and workshops to support deliberative planning practices (2011: 90).

Despite the participatory turn that has recently happened in numerous disciplines including urban planning and governance, STS scholars question whether new participatory procedures allow for greater public engagement. Social anthropologist Melissa Leach and her colleagues (2005) suggest that there is still a significant gap between political rhetoric and institutional practice. Leach et al (2005) assert that despite the stated intentions of allowing the public to participate in a debate about science and technology, some groups are still excluded from technical decision-making.

The degree of citizen involvement in technical decision-making also depends on the structural features of a particular participatory mechanism (Rowe and Frewer 2005). The authors show that public hearings and focus groups allows little space for dialogue between different parties. Furthermore, these methods are time-consuming as they require participants to be physically present at a meeting place. In turn, such methods as referenda and public opinion surveys are less time-consuming and, therefore, they allow to engage larger groups of populations. However, Rowe and Frewer (2000) assert that the

quality of decisions, which arise from the implementation of these methods, might be relatively low.

Driven by the shortcomings of conventional methods of public participation, scholars, policy-makers, and urban planners have recently turned their attention to examining the potential of electronic participation tools. These tools include such technologies as electronic voting systems, group decision support systems, and discussion forums (Sæbø, Rose and Flak 2008). Proponents of e-governance tools argue that ICTs help overcome a number of limitations of conventional participatory procedures. Scholars in the field of e-governance research agree that one of the main advantages of electronic participation tools is that they eliminate time-space constraints (Brabham 2009; Höffken and Streich 2011; Kleinhans, Ham and Evans-Cowley 2015) and allow citizens "to participate in decision-making 'on the go'" (Ertiö 2015:306).

In addition, urban researchers Reinout Kleinhans, Maarten Van Ham and Jennifer Evans-Cowley (2015) claim that mobile and social media tools help engage such groups as youths and young adults that are normally indifferent to urban affairs and, therefore, excluded from decision-making. According to Stefan Höffken and Bernd Streich (2013), scholars studying the phenomenon of mobile participation, these instruments use creative mechanisms, e.g., gaming techniques, to encourage citizens to participate in urban governance.

Not only do electronic participation tools increase the degree of public engagement in decision-making, but they also improve the quality of citizen participation. Scholars studying the e-governance phenomenon stress that digital participation tools allow people to create their own content (Bonsón, Torres, Royo and Flores 2012). Public administration scholar Dennis Linders (2012) asserts that electronic participation tools make it easier for citizens to share their knowledge and expertise with government. Thus, he argues, digital tools break down traditional hierarchy and redistribute power and responsibility between policy-makers and citizens (Linders 2012:451).

Although there has been much enthusiasm about the potential of electronic participation tools to engage the public in decision-making, many scholars doubt that electronic technologies enhance citizen participation. One of the main concerns of the sceptics is that ICTs might exacerbate digital divide (Bélanger and Carter 2010). The results of Lemuria *Carter* and France *Belanger's (2010) research about* the relationship between the digital divide and the Internet voting indicate that lower-income groups, older citizens and people who rarely use the Internet are less likely to participate in electronic

voting. The scholars assert that the lack of skills of using electronic tools are the main reason for exclusion of the abovementioned groups from electronic participation.

STS scholars also point out that ICTs might limit possibilities for public participation in the offline world. Thesociologist of technology Sally Wyatt (2005) takes the example of the car industry to demonstrate how a growing technical network might limit possibilities for some groups of populations. She shows that the increase in a number of car drivers leads to the expansion of the car infrastructure. When the infrastructure grows, the car-free space shrinks, which, in turn, limits possibilities for pedestrians (Wyatt 2005:78). Wyatt suggests that it might be the same case with the Internet networks.

Finally, the critics question to which extent the e-governance model has been implemented in practice (Norris and Reddick 2013). The research by the public administration scholars Donald Norris and Christopher Reddick (2013) shows little evidence that electronic services support a direct interaction between citizens and policy-makers. The authors argue that one of the reasons why empirical results are inconsistent with the claims of the "cyber-optimist" is that the latter were based on technologically deterministic assumptions.

The discussion in this section also demonstrates that scholars studying the electronic participation phenomenon often assume that it is possible to transform the relationship between citizens and policy-makers merely by introducing electronic technology. Furthermore, the reviewed articles suggest that researchers often perceive electronic participation services as neutral tools. However, as the philosopher of technology Langdon Winner (1980) claims, technological artifacts are shaped by the social and political context in which they are embedded. According to the author, social intensions are deliberately translated into the design of artifacts, and these intensions have concrete social consequences.

Furthermore, most of the reviewed studies tend to focus on the technological aspects of electronic participation tools but do not consider the context in which they are implemented. However, Albert Meijer and Manuel Bolivar (2015) emphasize that technology itself cannot change the policy-making process. The authors note that technological change should be accompanied by institutional transformation. The scholars note that to understand the nature and effects of e-governance platforms on urban governance institutions one should study interactions between technology and social structure (Meijer and Bolivar 2015:13).

Social Construction of the "Active Citizen" platform

Introduction

The "Active Citizen" application was launched on the initiative of Sergei Sobyanin, Mayor of Moscow, in May 2014. According to the official web page of the "Active Citizen" project (https://ag.mos.ru/), the main goal of the platform is to provide Muscovites with an opportunity to participate in city governance and to express their opinions on a wide range of urban issues including the quality of urban environment, design of public spaces, and provision of urban services. The city administration believes that the project has been successful in terms of engaging citizens in urban governance since more than 1.3 million people have joined the project and voted on more than 1,500 questions since May 2014.

However, from the perspective of the SCOT approach, quantitative indicators cannot serve as a criterion for the success or failure of a certain technology. In order to understand if technology is successful, it is necessary to identify the criteria that different groups use to evaluate the effectiveness of a particular technology. The paper uses the model for analyzing the developmental process of an artifact described by the SCOT's founding fathers Trevor Pinch and Wiebe Bijker (2012) to examine how various relevant social groups view the service, which meanings they attribute to it, and how they measure its success.

Pinch and Bijker (2012) identify three stages in the social analysis of a technological artifact. In the first stage, a researcher should analyze the "interpretative flexibility" of an artifact. The authors define "interpretative flexibility" as a stage of the artifact's development at which it is open to numerous interpretations. In the second stage, a researcher should analyze the stabilization of an artifact. At this stage of the artifact's development the interpretative flexibility decreases and one meaning becomes dominant. Pinch and Biker identify two ways of achieving the stabilization or "closure" of the artifact: rhetorical closure and closure by redefinition of the problem (2012:37-38). Rhetorical closure means that one does need to convince relevant social groups that the problems they have with regard to a certain technological artifact are solved without necessarily solving them. The redefinition of the problem means that instead of changing the design of the artifact, its designers or users invent a new problem that can be solved by the initial design. After the artifact's stabilization is analyzed, a researcher should relate a technological artifact to the wider context in which it operates.

The "Active Citizen" Platform

The "Active Citizen" platform is a system for electronic multiple-choice referenda on urban issues. Polls might be initiated by various departments of the Moscow City Government. Referendum questions and answers to them are formulated by the administrative body that launches a poll together with the "Active Citizen" administration. After the referendum is announced, people have two weeks to cast their votes. Usually, the administration of the platform launches two or three referenda a week.

Users can vote on referenda only after they register in the system. The registration procedure works as follows: firstly, a user has to register his/her phone number in the system, then, s/he receives a text message with a registration code that activates the account. Once the registration is completed, the user can fill out his/her profile name, date of birth, gender, marital status, occupation, home address and the address of the place where s/he works. Although none of these fields are mandatory, the information in the profile is used to determine whether the user is eligible to participate in a certain poll. While everyone can participate in the city level referenda, only people who live or work in a particular district can participate in polls related to the neighborhood.

People can earn points for participation in referenda. Users are also granted points for filling out their profile, inviting their friends to join the project, and sharing information about the polls in social media. "Active Citizen" users can exchange earned points for real-world goods such as tickets to museums or services (e.g., free parking in the city center).

When the voting period is over, votes are counted, and results are sent to the governmental body that initiated the poll. The city officials claim that all the questions put on referenda on the "Active Citizen" platform are solved in accordance with the users' will. In order to let the user control how decisions are implemented, the project administration publishes detailed reports about each referendum and its results on the official web page of the project.

The Relevant Social Group of Producers

The description of the platform allows to identify two relevant social groups: producers and users. The group of producers is represented by the representatives of the Mayor of Moscow, Sergei Sobyanin, and the Moscow Government. According to the Moscow Government Decree on the "Active Citizen" project,

the main governmental bodies involved in the project are the Moscow State Services Committee and the Department of Information Technologies. While the former coordinates the overall execution of the project, the latter is responsible for the development of the platform software. Although the information about people involved in the project and their responsibilities within it is quite limited, it is enough to conclude that the project team belongs to the upper echelons of the municipal administration.

According to the official webpage of the project, the main goal of the "Active Citizen" service is to provide citizens with an opportunity to "… directly influence decisions made by the local authorities" (https://ag.mos.ru/). However, the interview with a person working in the project (Interviewee № 1) helps to reveal other meanings that the group of producers ascribes to the platform. She explains that the service allows the municipal authorities to gauge Muscovites' opinion on a wide range of topics, to reveal their preferences, and to get their feedback about already implemented projects. This statement is supported by the fact that it is the city authorities who formulate referenda questions. According to the *Frequently Asked Questions* section on the official web-site of the project, "in the framework of the "Active Citizen" project, the issues that are within the competence of the Moscow Government and the executive authorities of the city of Moscow are put on vote" (https://ag.mos.ru/). The absence of possibility for citizens to put their own questions on vote proves that the Moscow city authorities view the service as a tool for surveying public opinion rather than an instrument for maintaining a dialogue.

Furthermore, the project administration introduced the rules that help limit the thematic scope of referenda. First of all, according to the rules, referenda questions should not require expert knowledge to answer them. As a consequence, electronic polls rarely address significant issues. Usually, they touch upon such topics as a street or building design or leisure activities in the city. The producers of the "Active Citizen" application also have to meet certain requirements when suggesting response options to multiple-choice questions. According to the FAQ section on the official web page of the project, the authorities are allowed to offer only options, which they can guarantee to implement: "… users have to decide which of the already found solutions will be implemented by the executive authorities" (https://ag.mos.ru/). Not only does the rule limit the number of responses, but it also limits the number of polls where voters can offer their own solutions to a particular problem.

The poll on the location for a 24-metre monument to the medieval prince Vladimir the Great demonstrates how the project administration limits the number of answer choices. At the beginning of 2015, the Moscow City Parliament approved the plan to erect a giant statue to Vladimir the Great on Sparrow Hills (one of the most famous landmarks of Moscow). Since the decision caused a massive public outcry, the city officials launched a referendum on the "Active Citizen" platform. The city administration offered three alternative sites. However, Muscovites were not able to vote against the erection of the monument, as there was no such option as "not to erect at all".

Finally, the officials view the "Active Citizen" application as a tool for informing Muscovites about what is going on in the municipality. As the project representative says,

"We explain why a certain question is discussed, why a decision on this question has to be taken and why the decision might be rather ambiguous. Moreover, we allow Muscovites to understand our (municipal authorities') way of thinking" (Interviewee №1, 14.04.2016).

The interview with the project representative as well as the analysis of the "Active Citizen" web page allows to conclude that there is an inconsistency between the declared and the actual goals of the "Active Citizen" service. While the platform producers represent it as a tool for engaging citizens in a decision-making process, in practice they use it as an instrument for collecting feedback and informing citizens about the issues the municipality is working on. As it will be shown below, the misrepresentation of the project goals often leads to conflicts between the group of producers and other groups concerned with the service.

The Relevant Social Group of Users

Although the city administration considers the whole population of Moscow to be potential users of the service, in April 2016 only 1.4 million of Muscovites participated in electronic referenda, which constituted around 10% of the Moscow population. In March 2019, the number has grown to slightly over 2 million people (around 16% of the Moscow population). Overall, the group of users is rather anonymous. According to Elena Shinkaruk, the coordinator of the project, people between 18 and 45 years old constitute 80% of all the application users (Moscow Municipality Information Center 2015). However, any

other demographic information about the project participants such as gender, level of education, and income level is not available. Therefore, the interviews with the users and the analysis of their communication in social media were the only sources of information about the group.

The interviews reveal that the user's perception of the "Active Citizen" project is based on the image of the application created by the producers. All the interviewed users believe that the platform enables them to shape (at least to some extent) the process of urban development, as they can see positive changes that have occurred in Moscow because of the decisions taken on the "Active Citizen". Interviewee №2 provides the following examples:

> *I can recall the situation when one of the Moscow metro stations wasn't renamed only because the majority of the "Active Citizen" users voted against this decision. Finally, the authorities took into account our [citizen's] opinion when they decided on the location of the statue for Vladimir the Great* (12.04.2016).

Moreover, the users are sure that, in the absence of other platforms for expressing their will, the "Active Citizen" service is the most effective tool for citizen engagement. Furthermore, the users emphasize the inefficiency of conventional public participation tools such as public hearings. According to interviewee №2, the majority of Muscovites are not able to take part in this kind of procedures as public hearings format is too time-consuming. In turn, the "Active Citizen" platform allows citizens to participate in the discussions "on the go" (Ertiö 2015:306). According to the interviewees, it usually takes around two to five minutes to read a question, look through expert opinions, and vote. Thus, they believe that the "Active Citizen" platform allows engaging more people in the decision-making process.

At the same time, users admit that the service often fails to establish a proper dialogue between the city administration and Moscow residents. The interviewed users identify two main problems in relation to the platform. First of all, they complain that most of the referenda on the "Active Citizen" platform address questions of little significance. According to interviewee №2, "They [the city authorities] should provide Muscovites with an opportunity to express their opinion on matters that are more important than the color of benches" (12.04.2016). At the same time, they are perturbed by the absence of polls regarding such issues as infill development, land use conflicts, or the expansion of paid parking areas in the city center.

Another reason for criticism of the "Active Citizen" referenda is the way the response options are formulated. Users say that in most cases response options do not cover all the potential viewpoints. Therefore, they acknowledge that they rather rank decisions taken by the city authorities than actively contribute to the decision-making process. As a result, the participants of the "Active Citizen" project feel that the city administration uses the platform to manipulate them.

Although the application does not fully meet users expectations, all the interviewees admitted that they continue using it. According to them, the launch of the "Active Citizen" service was a great step towards better governance. One of the interviewees notes that the level of public participation in the decision-making process has increased compared to the situation under Mayor Luzhkov: "The Municipality has become more open. Under Mayor Luzhkov, no one even asked people what they wanted" (Interviewee № 4, 20.04.2016).

Eventually, all the interviewed users assert that the "Active Citizen" platform would be a perfect tool for engaging citizens in the decision-making process if the producers fixed the existing problems. However, it is possible that it is the opportunity to get points and rewards that motivates users to keep participating in referenda. Although interviewee №3 does not name rewards as a primary reason to vote on the platform, he mentions that it is a nice bonus.

The analysis of the "Active Citizen" pages on social networking sites proves the hypothesis. In a comment section below each post, users tend to discuss bonuses rather than particular questions and decisions. For example, people left 62 comments below the announcement about the "One Million Trees" referendum on the "Active Citizen" page on the VK social networking site. However, almost half of the comments (29 out of 62) was motivated byrewards. Thus, it brings us to the conclusion that some users consider the "Active Citizen" service to be a mobile game rather than a public participation instrument.

Finally, there are people who use the application as a source of information. Two of my interviewees mentioned that they use the application to find out about the recent projects launched by the municipality. However, the users attribute a rather negative connotation to the platform when referring to it as a "source of information". They consider referenda to be warning signs of the forthcoming (rather negative) changes in the city. Interviewee № 3 explains:

> *When I see that they launch a new referendum, I already understand that we have a problem there… I already understand that big changes are coming…* (15.04.2016).

The analysis demonstrates that although the users primarily view the "Active Citizen" platform as a tool for public involvement, they also realize that the tool does not work properly. When they come to a conclusion that the service does not work as it is supposed to, they try to find other uses for the "Active Citizen" platform. They use it as a mobile game or as a source of information.

The Relevant Social Group of Critics

While users believe that the launch of the "Active Citizen" platform marks a step towards more democratic urban governance, urban activists, journalists, and academics are convinced that electronic referenda have nothing to do with democratic procedures. They constitute a relevant social group of critics. There are numerous reasons why the group of critics actively opposes the platform. First of all, they assert that instead of supporting public participation in municipal decision-making, the platform serves as an instrument of legitimation of the city administration's decisions. The deputy of the Moscow City Council Elena Shuvalova provides the following explanation: «... the project administration uses a combination of manipulative and openly illegal methods to create an illusion of public support» (Shuvalova 2015b).

The critics identify four main mechanisms that the producers of the "Active Citizen" have used to manipulate the public opinion. First of all, they note that the project administration asks people to vote for the decisions that violate both the national and international law. The referenda on the location for the statue of Vladimir the Great is an example of such kind of referenda. The city administration offered users of the "Active Citizen" platform three options where to erect the statue. The voters chose Borovitskaya Square near the Kremlin. However, the square was on the UNESCO World Heritage Site List and, hence, the decision to install the statue in this location could not have been a subject of a referendum before being approved by the UNESCO's World Heritage Committee (Shuvalova 2015a).

In addition, the critics note that the administration of the "Active Citizen" project launches referenda on questions that, according to the Urban Development Code, should be discussed at public hearings. These issues include, for instance, the decoration of residential block buildings that only the co-owners of the apartments in the building have the right to decide on. Next, the critics discuss numerous cases when the "Active Citizen" administration asked citizens to decide on issues such as maintenance of green areas. However, according to

critics, these questions require special expertise and, therefore, should be discussed by specialists in the field. Finally, the critics point out that the curators of the "Active Citizen" project held referenda on decisions that had been implemented before the referenda took place. Journalists Kirill Mazhai and Ivan Chesnokov (2015) describe the case when "Active Citizen" users were to choose a method of user ID authentication when logging onto the Wi-Fi network in the Moscow metro. The authorities launched the referendum in December 2014, but the verification method via SMS had been introduced several months before the poll was held (Mazhai and Chesnokov 2015).

However, referenda questions are not the only subject of the critics' concern. Some journalists and IT-specialists are not satisfied with the technical characteristics of the "Active Citizen" system. In November 2015, Alexander Plushchev, a journalist specializing in the Internet-related issues, wrote a blog entry where he criticizes the authentication method to verify the identity of the "Active Citizen" users. According to the journalist, the mobile phone authentication procedure allows people from all over Russia to register and vote on the platform on issues that are related to Moscow (Plushchev 2015a). Furthermore, the journalist notes that the mobile phone authentication method does not prevent the "Active Citizen" users from voting more than once on the same referendum, as they can use several phone numbers to create multiple accounts. Thus, he assumes that these security lapses leave the "Active Citizen" platform open to the possibility of frauds.

Ilya Rozhdestvensky, the journalist who carried out the investigation of the "Active Citizen" platform, expresses his concerns regarding the integrity of the referenda results. He notes that the administration of the project did not invite a third party to observe the electronic voting process and vote counting (Rozhdestvensky 2015). In this situation, the critic says, it is impossible to verify whether the administration of the "Active Citizen" project delivers accurate results. Furthermore, the critics point out that the results of the "Active Citizen" polls often do not coincide with the overall public mood, which makes it hard to believe that the referenda results are accurate. Interviewee №5 explains: "... the residents of Moscow protest against infill development of urban green areas, but the "Active Citizen" users vote for it. No one can believe that…" (19.04.2016).

Besides the critique of legal, operational and technical aspects of the "Active Citizen" referenda, the project opponents are also skeptical about the reward system. They assume that the practice of rewarding might have negative effects

on the referenda results as it makes people vote irresponsibly. The critics affirm that the "Active Citizen" users, whose main motivation to participate in the polls is rewards, tend to vote even on issues, which do not initially concern them, and, therefore, they do not make well-informed decisions.

Thus, the critics come to the conclusion that the city administration uses the "Active Citizen" service as an instrument of guided democracy. They note that the service allows the city administration to control every stage of the decision-making process and to gain approval for the already made decisions. By launching referenda on the "Active Citizen", the city administration tries to prevent any possible protests against unpopular or illegal decisions by making citizens believe that they have a voice in those decisions. As interviewee №5 notes:

> *If they [the municipal authorities] just said that we had decided not to take your opinion into account, people would rise up... And in this case, they create an illusion that people express their opinions. It is hard to deal with this kind of manipulation* (19.04.2016).

She also adds that while the authorities create more opportunities for public (pseudo-) participation in the digital space, they limit the possibilities for political expression in the offline space. She observes that the authorities often refuse to give permission for public meetings and prevent such forms of public action as one-person pickets[2] by arresting the protestors. In the given context, interviewee №5 concludes that the launch of the "Active Citizen" platform could be viewed as another attempt to exclude citizens from decision-making.

Closure of the "Active Citizen" Platform

Since interpretative flexibility of the "Active Citizen" platform is rather high, numerous conflicts arise around the artifact. To resolve these conflicts, the producers try to persuade the users and producers that the "Active Citizen" service works in accordance with the declared goals. Pinch and Bijker (2012) refer to the mechanism for achieving closure by arguments and negotiations as the "rhetorical closure mechanism". According to the authors, the rhetorical

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[2] According to Federal Law № 54-FZ 'On Assemblies, Meetings, Demonstrations, Marches and Picketing' of June 8, 2012 (as amended), protesters are not required to notify the authorities of pickets held by one participant. Therefore, protesters prefer picketing in shifts instead of applying for permission for public meetings.

closure occurs when one relevant social group manages to persuade other groups that the problems they have with respect to a particular artifact have been solved (without necessarily solving them) (Pinch and Bijker 2012:37).

The Moscow municipal authorities usually begin their argument against the criticism of the "Active Citizen" platform by comparing levels of public participation in urban governance before and after the launch of the service. The authorities emphasize that Moscow residents have long been excluded from decision-making. Hence, they conclude, the launch of the "Active Citizen" platform signifies a giant step towards wider engagement of citizens in the decision-making process.

The producers stress that the functional qualities of the platform that seem to be problematic for the critics are the best solutions for the users. In this way, the project representatives explain the absence of the obligatory verification for the "Active Citizen" users. Although the producers agree that the absence of mandatory verification allows people from other regions to vote on the "Active Citizen" polls, they notice that it is very unlikely that residents of other Russian cities would be willing to vote on the Moscow-related issues.

In a similar manner, the producers respond to the accusation of stimulating participation in the "Active Citizen" polls with rewards. My interviewee says that only 20% of the "Active Citizen" users convert their points into rewards. Thus, she concludes, the majority of voters are driven by altruistic motives.

There are several arguments that the project representatives put forward to address the "falsification of the results" issue. First of all, they note that the project administration has no reasons to falsify referenda results. Secondly, they emphasize that, on average, only 200-300, 000 people participate in each referendum. According to Artem Ermolaev, it does not make any sense to fabricate such small figures. Finally, he claims that the authentication method used by the project administration eliminates any possibility to cast multiple votes. He notes that the number of people who have multiple "Active Citizen" accounts is so insignificant that their votes cannot affect final referenda results (Ermolaev 2015b).

Although the producers usually deny any accusations, they have taken some actual steps to improve the reliability of the service. First of all, the project administration provided voters with the opportunity to verify if their votes were included in the tally and were recorded correctly. Secondly, the project administration started updating voting results for each referendum every 15 minutes, which made it possible to observe the voting progress in real time

(Ermolaev 2015b). Finally, in January 2016, the project administration hired the firm PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) to conduct an external audit and to test whether the system records user data and votes correctly and whether the system is protected from external cyber-attacks. Already in May 2016, the project administration reported that "after the retrospective analysis of the referenda results, the PwC experts did not register any deviations that would reveal that the referenda results were manipulated" (https://ag.mos.ru/).

Despite all the measures taken by the producers to demonstrate the integrity of the electronic referenda results, the critics seem not to be persuaded. They say that it does not make any sense to improve the functionality of the "Active Citizen" platform as it will not function as a tool for citizen engagement in decision-making anyway. As one of my interviewees claims: "You can't use this system to solve particular urban development issues, because its producers and users are driven by the motives other than solving urban problems" (Interviewee №7, 15.04.2016).

The critics explain that the problem is not in the platform itself, but in the context, in which it was launched. Interviewee №6 explains that, in fact, the municipal authorities are not democratically elected but appointed by the federal authorities. Consequently, he says, the citizens cannot trust the Russian authorities as they are not viewed as legitimate, and, therefore, they cannot believe in good intensions of the "Active Citizen" producers. Thus, the critics argue that that the electronic referenda platform cannot work in the given context. As interviewee №7 notices: "It is impossible to introduce electronic democracy under this [Putin's] regime" (15.04.2016).

Conclusions

The paper aims at examining how the "Active Citizen" platform transforms the relationships among different actors involved in the process of urban development. Despite the enthusiasm expressed by policy makers, public administration scholars, urban theorists and planners regarding the democratizing potential of electronic participation tools, the case of "Active Citizen" demonstrates that there is a significant gap between theoretical assumptions and the way these instruments are implemented into practice.

The analysis demonstrates that the "Active Citizen" platform, in fact, helps to overcome some of the limitations of the conventional participatory

mechanisms. It allows citizens to be more actively engaged in the decision-making process because the service gives them an opportunity to participate in urban governance "on the go", as it takes only two to five minutes to vote. In addition, gaming techniques and the reward system introduced by the producers help to attract the citizens to the service. Although the interviewed users do not consider the possibility to exchange the collected points for some services or goods to be the main motivation to participate in the electronic polls; they mention that it is a nice bonus. The analysis suggests that the convenience of use and gaming techniques helped the city administration to attract the attention of Muscovites to the service.

At the same time, the analysis of the tool shows that the platform contains the same barriers for citizen participation as the conventional procedures. First of all, it is the city administration that chooses and frames referenda questions and possible answers to them. As the examination of the platform and interviews with its users show, most of the referenda rarely address significant issues of the urban development process in Moscow. The electronic polls are usually dedicated to such topics as beautification of streets, entertainment activities in the city, or names of streets.

In addition, answer options are also limited, and users have little opportunity to make their own suggestions. The "Active Citizen" voters have to choose one of the solutions offered by the city administration and have no possibility to revoke a particular decision if they disagree with it. Therefore, it could be concluded that the platform does not support a two-way communication between the city government and urban dwellers. The users are perceived as reactive actors rather than active participants of the decision-making process. Thus, the study reveals that the "Active Citizen" platform does not allow for a high degree of citizen engagement in urban governance.

Furthermore, the introduction of the electronic participatory mechanisms in Moscow was not supported by broader institutional transformations. There is still no law that regulates the working of the "Active Citizen" platform. In the absence of such law the Moscow authorities are not obliged to translate decisions taken by the "Active Citizen" users into real actions. Therefore, they can use the "Active Citizen" service as a tool for consulting with urban dwellers. The situation demonstrates that the Moscow authorities have simply appropriated a technology that was developed in the Western world without adjusting it to the local context. However, as STS scholars Hård and Misa argue, "when technologies are introduced into a new setting, they are often substantially

modified and even given new meanings" (2008:11). This can be seen in the "Active Citizen" case — none of the actors concerned with technology sees the platform solely as a tool for public participation.

Despite all that, it is impossible to say that the "Active Citizen" service is not working. The study demonstrates that "working" and "non-working" are not intrinsic qualities of the artifact, but they are socially constructed categories. The paper reveals that different relevant social groups use different criteria for assessing whether the platform is "working" or not. The producers of the "Active Citizen" platform view the service as an instrument for surveying public opinion and, hence, they evaluate the success of the platform based on the number of people participating in polls. Since the number of the "Active Citizen" users is constantly growing, the producers believe that the service is working well. The users and critics, in turn, evaluate the service based on the "working in accordance with the declared goals" criterion. Since both relevant social groups realize that the producers use the services for purposes different from engaging citizens in decision-making, they conclude that the electronic referenda service is a non-working technology.

The analysis also demonstrates that the design of the platform is changing as negotiations among relevant social groups evolve. In order to address some problems that the relevant social groups of users and critics had with respect to the platform, the producers have come up with a number of technical and non-technical solutions. However, as my analysis reveals, the critics consider these measures not to be sufficient to resolve the conflicts around the "Active Citizen" platform. They believe that the only way to "repair" the technology is to change the context in which it operates. Thus, the discussion suggests that instead of asking "to what extent does the "Active Citizen" platform support public participation in urban governance" it might be relevant to ask the following questions: under what conditions will the platform support public participation in urban governance? Under what conditions could the closure of the platform be achieved?

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