



## The Concept of Digital Social Control: Results of Public Opinion

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### Abstract

Digital technologies currently have a significant impact on most areas of society, including the sphere of state and municipal government. The most popular and in demand today are the forms and mechanisms of social control over the activities of government bodies using digital technologies. The article examines the theoretical, legal, and empirical aspects of social control in the public administration system in the context of digitalization. Toward the active development of the digital society, the issues of digitalization are gaining more and more popularity in the modern world, including the improvement of the activities of public authorities using advanced digital technologies, artificial intelligence, information, and telecommunication systems. The article analyzes the regulatory, financial, personnel, organizational, and managerial aspects of effective social control in the public administration system based on sociological surveys and experts' interviews, and offers practical digital solutions to improve the effectiveness of social control. The digital software project of the "Open Government" is proposed, which is aimed at increasing the efficiency of interaction between public authorities and the population, representatives of the business environment, and the public. This work concludes and recommends improving social control over the activities of the authorities in the context of digitalization.

**Disciplinary: Sociology, Public Administration.**

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# 1 Introduction

Digitalization is “the process of introducing digital technologies for generating, processing, transferring, storing and visualizing data in various spheres of human activity” [3]. In a narrower sense, digitalization is “a modern stage in the development of informatization, characterized by the predominant use of digital technologies, which is due to the emergence and spread (including an increase in economic and physical accessibility) of new technical means and software solutions” [10, 6].

The digital transformation of public administration in Russia is designed to: “create a qualitatively new system for the provision of state and municipal services; to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of public law entities at all levels of government, the validity of their intervention in the economy and social sphere [2]; optimize budget expenditures for the implementation of state functions; have a positive impact on the socio-economic development of Russia as a whole and the competitiveness of the Russian economy in the short and long term” [4]. The legal and regulatory framework for digital public administration is based on both federal and regional legislative acts and by-laws in the field of information and informative development, providing access to information on the activities of state bodies and local self-government bodies, and the openness of public authorities. Targeted programs are of great importance [8–9].

Social control over the activities of government bodies is one of the most important tasks of digitalization of government bodies to ensure their transparency and openness.

Social control is understood as “the activities of subjects of public control, carried out in order to monitor the activities of state authorities, local governments, state and municipal organizations [16], other bodies and organizations exercising certain public powers in accordance with federal laws, as well as for the purpose of public verification, analysis and public assessment of the acts issued by them and the decisions taken” [1].

The normative and legal basis of the social control system in Russia is the Federal Law dated July 21, 2014, No. 212-FZ “On the Foundations of Public Control in the Russian Federation” [13]. Citizens of the Russian Federation have the right to participate in the implementation of public control both personally and as part of public associations and other non-governmental non-profit organizations [11].

The main indicators of the functioning of social control are the presence of a specific infrastructure, the presence of a culture of using this infrastructure by the citizens of the Russian Federation and the desire to participate in its development. A closer look at this situation can be seen as an expanded understanding of the novels of Open Government and E-Government. According to this approach, there are three forms of social control implementation [14]:

1. Participation of a citizen in classical forms of government (elections, referendums, polls, petitions, appeals and other forms).
2. Participation of a citizen working in institutions of functional representation (trade unions, NGOs, public organizations, public chambers and councils, etc) [7].

3. Participation of a citizen in electronic forms of interaction with the state (the so-called e-participation) (receiving government services in electronic form, electronic voting, crowdfunding, social projects, and other forms) [15].

Thus, social control is a system of society's influence on the activities of state authorities and local self-government, associated with the adoption and implementation of the most significant management decisions. The subjects of social control are usually: society, active citizens, public chambers, public councils, public organizations, trade unions and others.

At present, experts are openly discussing the idea of digitalization of social control, which consists of the use of digital technologies in the process of society's influence on the activities of state authorities and local self-government, associated with the adoption and implementation of the most significant management decisions. "There are new virtual or digital subjects of social control, whose identity needs identification. Objects and means of social control also change material objects and means give way to information and information technologies" [5].

At the same time, in modern practice, there are no institutional examples of the use of digital technologies in the process of social control over the activities of government bodies, which served as the subject of our scientific research.

## 2 Methods

The empirical analysis includes quantitative data from a sociological survey with a sample size of  $n = 450$ , and qualitative data from 25 experts in formalized interviews collected in March 2021, Yekaterinburg city, Sverdlovsk region, Russia.

Characteristics of the questionnaire survey: a questionnaire survey of the population as users of digital services with a sample size of  $n = 450$  was carried out with a quota sample, the parameters of which were based on the characteristics "gender", "age", "position", conducted in April-May 2021. Among the respondents, the share of men was 27% and women 73%. The survey involved mainly young people aged 22-30 years (37.1% of respondents) and 30-40 years old (25.9%), as well as middle-aged people 40-50 years old (26.7%), 50 -60 years (10.3%).

The experts were representatives of Russian and foreign government bodies, representatives of higher educational institutions, teachers and educators, and public figures.

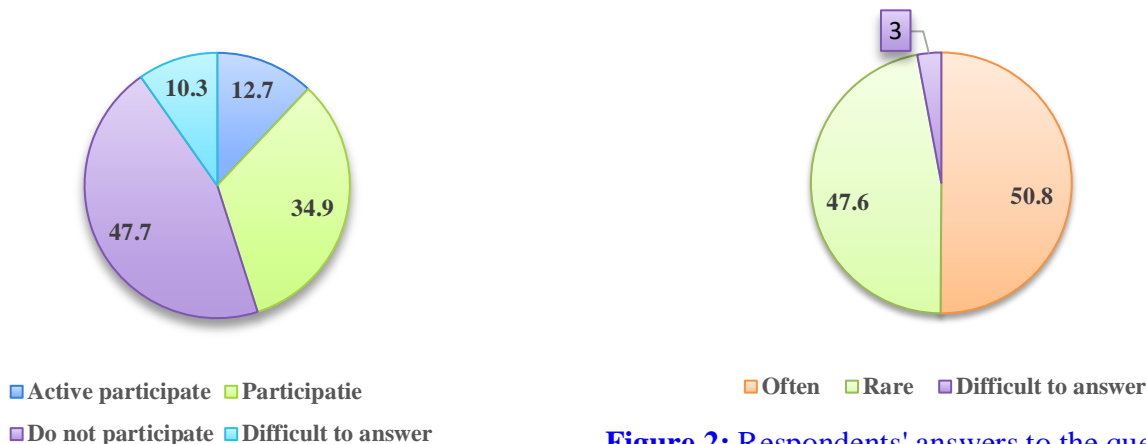
## 3 Study Detail and Result

### 3.1 Sociological Survey Results

The aim of the sociological survey is to study public opinion and experts' opinions regarding the transparency and efficiency of activities using IT technologies, as well as regarding the feasibility of the proposed solution.

According to the survey results, it was found (Figure 1) that most respondents do not take an active part in the public life of the city (47.6%), while participation is demonstrated in 34.9%, active participation 12.7%. Thus, the results of the survey showed that the population of the city is quite active, and monitors the implementation of socially significant social and political projects.

The use of digital technologies in the process of social control by the society of the city of Yekaterinburg also became the subject of discussion. The survey has shown that 50.8% often use the information systems of the Internet to receive government services (Figure 2). This conclusion indicates a high need for digitalization of the institution of social control.



**Figure 2:** Respondents' answers to the question "Do you often use the Internet information systems to receive government services? (for example, through the portal "Government Services")".

**Figure 1:** Respondents' answers to the question "Do you participate in the public life of the region; do you follow the implementation of government projects?"

During the survey, respondents were also asked to assess their level of satisfaction with the quality of the proposed digital platforms, and platforms for the implementation of social control (Fig. 3). According to the survey results, 63.5% are satisfied with the state of the digital environment, while 36.5% are not satisfied with the state of digital platforms and platforms for the implementation of social control.



**Figure 4:** Respondents' answers to the question "Would you like to receive all relevant information about the socio-political life of the region and the city (including the implementation of state programs) in one mobile application online?"

**Figure 3:** Respondents' answers to the question "Are you satisfied with the quality of these digital services?"

The respondents were asked to evaluate the idea of creating single information and legal resource, with the help of which it would be possible to exercise social control over the activities of public authorities (Figure 4). The respondents 82.5% would like to receive all relevant information about the socio-political life of the region and the city in one mobile application online.

Thus, the results of the sociological survey carried out confirm the readiness of society to introduce and create digital social control over the activities of public authorities.

### 3.2 Expert Interview Results

The experts were asked to answer several questions concerning the content, state, and assessment of the problems of digitalization of social control in the public administration system.

In the opinion of most experts, modern Russian society shows insufficiently active social control over the activities of the authorities; control is rather formal. Experts identify the main forms of social control as appeals, petitions, as well as online practices:

- The control is carried out formally. Citizens can exercise control through the "openness and transparency" of the system. Interaction of public authorities with citizens through social networks and forms of appeals does not always work, targeted support is not provided, or the response to an appeal comes with a delay. Also, not all citizens use social networks or e-mail, which slows down the digitalization process (expert 1).

- Supervises, but rather formally (expert 2).

- Society controls power using various forms of control. Most often this concerns issues of local importance - citizens are more interested in influencing the decisions of the authorities related to their daily life. For example, resonant issues related to the opening of new industries that negatively affect the environment, issues of choosing projects and methods of improvement, evoke a greater response than topics from the federal agenda. Such questions are usually raised by active citizens and form groups of their supporters around them. However, due to the underdevelopment of the institutions of social control, the only way to somehow influence the problem is to publish it, which is achieved, among other things, through the mechanism of creating petitions and writing collective letters to senior officials (President or Governor) (expert#3).

- As for various kinds of public organizations, their participation in social control is often formal (expert#4).

- Modern society exercises control over the authorities directly and indirectly. The choice of certain methods and methods of control directly depends on the urgency of the problem and the interest of society in solving it. Direct forms, as a rule, relate to the participation of citizens in the process of making and implementing government decisions. These forms include analysis of open information, participation in the discussion of draft regulatory legal acts, public hearings, participation in institutions of functional representation, etc. The indirect ones include participation in elections, inquiries to the authorities, and forms of protest activity. In this case, the border between direct and indirect control is the factor of specialization, since, in the first case, citizens need special knowledge and free time in the implementation of public control, in the second case, control is situational in nature and is not associated with the need to understand what they want (expert#5).

Does modern Russia need social control over the details of power? Could this increase the efficiency of government bodies? When answering this question, the experts unanimously agreed

that social control is needed to increase the transparency of the activities of the authorities, to organize effective interaction between society and the authorities:

- Social control is needed. This is an indicator of the effective work of the authorities. It is necessary to involve citizens in public discussion of regulatory legal acts or other documents adopted in the constituent entities of the Russian Federation. Organize public voting for certain socially significant decisions. To involve citizens in the study of reports on the activities of the authorities with the subsequent possibility of sending comments and suggestions (expert#7);

- Yes, it is needed to increase the level of transparency in the activities of government bodies, to combat corruption in them, to increase the efficiency of their activities (expert#12);

- Social control can increase the efficiency of government bodies if it is carried out not upon the execution of a decision, but at all stages of its adoption. For example, when planning the improvement of an object, the public must be involved not at the stage of work, when some of the trees have been cut down, but at the stage of project formation (expert#16);

- Social control is necessary for any state, as it is part of the feedback along the state-society line. The effectiveness of such communications allows the political system to work effectively, regardless of its internal goals, i.e., feedback loops can optimize the solution of social problems, but I can also just help in legitimizing the decisions made. At the same time, it is important to understand that the government's interest in public control is specific: there is a request for generating ideas, an agenda, and solutions, but not for limiting activities. On the part of citizens, the situation is the opposite - the population is not interested in generating the agenda but is interested in the power resource of state bodies. The very balance of social control, its relevance and intensity, is reactionary in nature and depends on the number and degree of urgency of problems in society. The state should not artificially increase the interest of citizens in this (expert#24).

Analyzing the digitalization of social control, the experts were invited to discuss the effectiveness of the use of modern digital solutions in monitoring the transparency and efficiency of government bodies, monitoring their activities.

According to most respondents, digitalization will significantly increase the effectiveness of social control, its expediency and necessity are noted. At the same time, digitalization should not become “innovation for the sake of innovation”, it should be initiated “from below”, and not launched as a normative decision. Experts also highlight the high importance and practical applicability of technologies for online broadcasting and video surveillance of the activities of government bodies.

- I have a positive attitude to digitalization. This makes it easier to track the activities of public authorities and receive feedback without delay (Expert#15);

- It is necessary to use modern digital solutions in monitoring the transparency and efficiency of the activities of government bodies, monitoring their activities. Digitalization will

help, for example, to assess how effectively the work was done; for the prevention of offenses and crimes by officials of public authorities (expert#12);

- Digital solutions can be used, but this should not lead to redundant reporting for civil servants and redundancy of published information (expert#7);

- As for the control over the timing and technologies of construction of various objects, it can be carried out by installing video cameras and broadcasting the recording directly to the Internet. This will allow interested citizens to observe the progress of construction without resorting to special information from government authorities (expert#9).

At the same time, experts are cautious about the idea of a large-scale digitalization of social control due to financial, managerial, and value-cultural factors:

- The idea of digitalizing the social control system is extremely controversial. On the one hand, this makes it easier for citizens to access information and provides new ways to implement their civic engagement. On the other hand, any digital solutions create parallel management structures, and their content has a high cost for the management system. In this regard, the creation of digital solutions for the fact of their creation does not seem relevant. Moreover, as mentioned above, the state should not create artificial involvement of citizens in this process - participation in public control should be a rational choice. Accordingly, digitalization in the field of open data seems to be a reasonable measure. The digitalization of the methods and methods of social control seems questionable, especially in the absence of relevant methods for determining the effectiveness (expert#18).

Speaking about the problems of digitalization of social control, experts identified such pain points as the low digital culture of both citizens themselves and civil servants, lack of productive digital infrastructure, low awareness of citizens, low involvement of citizens themselves:

- *There are two main problems with the introduction of electronic technologies. First, is the low digital culture. Citizens are not accustomed to using the Internet to perform socially, economically, and politically significant actions. Moreover, the use of digital technologies is often discredited for the sake of political motivation. Second, there is a usability issue. Citizens do not understand the logic of the digital infrastructure and its potentialities, and the responsible authorities do not have relevant information about the needs of citizens in this regard (Expert#11);*

- low awareness of citizens. It is necessary to inform citizens about the opportunities that they can use through the media and the Internet (Expert#8);

- the low digital culture of the population and authorities (expert#13);

- the problems of social control are more connected with the content side of this process, and not with the technical one. With sufficient citizen engagement, many ideas are generated about what to do and how to exercise control. In this case, technical issues (introduction of technologies) will be settled rather quickly (expert#25).

In conclusion, the experts voiced proposals to increase the involvement of citizens in the processes of social control. Among the most popular solutions were the formation of the political

culture of the population, the active use of social networks as the main platform for social control, the formation of an accessible digital infrastructure:

- You need to start with a public discussion of socially significant problems. To draw attention to social networks, authorities, publish articles there more often, invite representatives of state authorities to television and radio. Allow bloggers to participate in drawing attention to certain problems (expert#4);

- When forming a political culture of participation, citizens themselves will initiate inclusion in the process of social control over the activities of the authorities. It makes no sense to do this artificially since it contradicts the psychological attitudes of citizens (expert#14);

- Digitalization will have a positive impact on engagement, but only with the growth of the digital culture. We can say that social control is based on two main indicators. First, is the availability of an accessible digital infrastructure. Secondly, there is a need of the population for its use. Analyzing Russian society, we can conclude that infrastructure has been created in abundance, but it remains unclaimed. It is the demand that should be the object of state policy in this area and not the creation of new sites (expert#17).

## 4 Discussion

As a result of the study, the following problems of digitalization of social control in the public administration system can be identified:

1. Regulatory issues. Currently, there is an objective need to improve the regulatory legal framework for regulating the monitoring of transparency and efficiency of public authorities using IT technologies to increase the efficiency of interaction between the population, business, institutions, and government authorities, including in the implementation of government programs. In this regard, we propose the creation of a regulatory framework for the development of a virtual application for all participants in information interaction (population, business, government bodies, institutions), which allows you to receive up-to-date, operational information about the work of government authorities. The implementation of the proposed solution is possible by adapting a multifunctional application to a mobile platform.

2. Financial security. The regions, for the most part, do not have sufficient financial resources to carry out a comprehensive digitalization of the public sector and institutions, and therefore, a competent combination of state budget funding for the development of the application and the attraction of private investment is necessary.

3. The problem of information interaction of the population, business, and institutions with government authorities in terms of obtaining relevant, operational information on the implementation of government programs. The authorities are the structure that is endowed with a large array of information in demand among the population. But the problem is that searching for official sources sometimes takes a lot of time. All this becomes an obstacle to the involvement of civil society in the processes of social control, government decision-making, in the organization of



monitoring their activities. The latter, in turn, potentially leads to a decrease in the effectiveness of the activities of public authorities, and some stagnation in their development.

4. Socio-educational, psychological and personnel problems, which include: the institutional crisis of the socio-economic spheres of life in general, low technological literacy of the population and low legal (legal) literacy of the population, the problem of implementing the project of digitalization of social control due to the incompetence and unpreparedness of the personnel authorities in the implementation of IT projects of this scale.

For the practical implementation of the idea of social control in the public administration system in the context of digitalization, the project of the mobile application "Open Government" is proposed. This project is aimed at increasing the efficiency of government bodies in the field of education in conjunction with representatives of the business environment, institutions, and the population. The presented project of the application is potentially multifunctional, capable of solving numerous problems that exist at this stage of the development of the Russian Federation in the organization of public administration.

The main task of the application is to provide its users with relevant, complete and reliable information and data as soon as possible. All relevant information about the adopted bills and current regulatory frameworks in the field of education will be downloaded and updated in this application. To increase the openness of the dialogue between the authorities, educational institutions and the population, the proposed mobile application provides for feedback, which will be implemented through a point-rating system for assessing urgent problems and questions from users themselves. In addition, they will be able to assess the effectiveness of the implementation of existing programs and projects at the federal and regional levels.

Once a week, based on a mobile application, it is planned to hold online conferences of citizens with civil servants, in order to clarify the latest topical topics on the development and implementation of a unified state policy.

The mobile application project is also aimed at solving such an urgent problem as redirecting citizens' appeals to government bodies, which in turn is largely due to low legal literacy and public awareness. Users can get the legal information they are interested in, and get clarifications in an online format.

An additional innovation implemented through the application is the creation of profile chats that unite people on various "common grounds". In these chats, citizens interested in the problems of higher education will be able to communicate with each other and form relevant specialized questions, to which they will receive answers from the governing bodies themselves. At the end of each working month, there is a choice of a representative from these chats, who will participate in a large-scale conference with government officials.

An incentive system for active users is also planned in the mobile application project. For the manifestation of activity, a certain number of points will be awarded, which can be exchanged for various services (for example, travel by public transport, partly for payment of housing and

communal services, partial repayment of car fines, etc.). At the end of the year, the most active citizen will be awarded the highest-ranking official in the region.

To assist citizens with low technical literacy, the mobile application provides training videos and an assistant bot that will answer several standard questions.

Effects expected from the project:

- Social - an increase in the level of openness of the dialogue between the authorities and the population, the formation of a simplified procedure for assessing the effectiveness of civil servants and projects, an increase in efficiency in working with the population, as well as an increase in convenience and accessibility, the ability to directly conduct various kinds of social research.

- Organizational - the development of civic consciousness and the creation of a favorable socio-political climate, as well as improving the system for assessing the activities of public authorities.

## 5 Conclusion

Summing up the research conducted, we can say that the existing format of public control is gradually losing its relevance since it cannot serve as a source of legitimacy. The very model of interaction along the line of citizen-state - business is changing. Public administration becomes a system that is transformed by feedback from its users - citizens and depends on this feedback as a criterion for reproduction. To effectively involve citizens and rationalize their participation in the process of governing the state, digital social control skills are needed - digital civic competencies that allow a person to participate in political life in the online space and orient him towards this.

## 6 Availability of Data and Material

All data are included in this article.

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