Policies Aimed at the Digitalization of the Russian Government

Albina S. Lolaeva1,2, Evgenia V. Gots3, Evgeniy A. Malyshev4, Alena N. Prizhennikova5, Ekaterina A. Sviridova5 and Denis A. Shirev6

1Gorsky State Agrarian University, Vladikavkaz, Russian Federation
2North Caucasus Mining and Metallurgical Institute (State Technological University), Vladikavkaz, Russian Federation
3State University of Management, Moscow, Russian Federation
4North-West branch of the Federal State Budget-Funded Educational Institution of Higher Education “The Russian State University of Justice”, Moscow, Russian Federation
5Financial University under the Government of the Russian Federation, Moscow, Russian Federation
6Peoples’ Friendship University of Russia, Moscow, Russian Federation

Summary
The article considers the stages of e-government development in Russia from 2002 to the present day in the context of public administration reforms. During the first period (2002-2009), the Federal Target Program "Electronic Russia" was launched along with a major administrative reform. The second period (2010-2015) was determined by the Federal Target Program "Information Society" (2011-2020), in particular, its key project "Electronic Government (2011-2015)". The third period (from 2016 till the present day) marked the beginning of the development of the concept of "Government as a Platform". It has not been implemented but aroused great interest and provoked debates about the future of digital data and digital infrastructure for their collection, processing and storage. The authors of the article have concluded that a long-term failure to adapt to the new principle of distributed and delegated management in various political spheres without clear administrative boundaries will predetermine a new reform that is obvious and necessary.

Keywords:
information society, digital democracy, scientific and technological progress, information and communication technologies.

1. Introduction

The study is relevant due to the rapid development of information technologies widely used in socio-political processes and the need to improve democratic mechanisms in Russia with due regard to the opportunities provided by the information society.

In modern society, informatization is everywhere and influences all spheres of human life. Under these conditions, the effective functioning of government, interaction between state and citizens, the implementation of democracy are impossible without the use of information technology. During the transformation of power, electronic government becomes a top-level communication tool between the state and society. Thus, it is important to identify the content of e-government technology.

In the early 2000s, a digital lag was obvious to the new Russian leadership as the public sector had no progress in this area. While world leaders were gradually adopting a new digitalization program, Russia only started a full-fledged reform of its public sector. This made reformers initiate simultaneous but independent reforms. Within the framework of the Federal Target Program "Electronic Russia" (2002-2010) [1], the introduction of e-government was first proposed as an independent reform. At the initial stage, the concept covered an expanded program for promoting democracy and updating information and communication technology, including the public sector [2]. This approach seemed reasonable since both areas required significant development before being combined. The Federal Target Program "Electronic Russia" included various measures required to create an integrated infrastructure of state information technologies. In particular, these measures were as follows: to develop identification and authentication systems, as well as digital (paperless) workflow. In addition, the program promoted the integration of autonomous state information systems to ensure the provision of all services through multifunctional centers. In the early years, the only visible result of this reform was the increased presence of federal government agencies on the Internet through a network of interconnected departmental websites. Real e-government was created only at the end of the program. Throughout its implementation, the program had many shortcomings, including critical underfunding, lack of coordination, inefficient use of budget funds, relatively low priority and insufficient political attention to reforms. Since its launch, the Federal Target Program "Electronic Russia" (2002-2010) has been revised at least five times, narrowing its scope and decreasing ambitious plans due to a poorly coordinated agenda, ineffective reforms and misuse of funds.
2. Materials and Methods

The study aims at analyzing, generalizing and systematizing the stages of development of e-government in the Russian Federation. It also offers recommendations and proposals for the further development of e-government. The chosen topic is interdisciplinary since it covers a wide range of scientific and practical issues, in particular, information, constitutional and administrative law.

Nowadays digitalization transfers all social processes into cyber-physical space and forms a new scientific and technological paradigm based on digital systems. The interdisciplinary discussion of the most significant issues relating to the transformation and digitalization of public relations and their legal regulation should resolve uncertainty in certain areas of forming an information society in Russia and foreign countries.

The scientific novelty of the research is determined by the lack of systemic scientific knowledge regarding e-government mechanisms in Russia, trends and patterns of its development in the digital era, which are supposed to be replenished in the course of the project.

The study should bring the following results:
- To clarify the nature, necessity and limits of e-government in Russia;
- To determine the stages of development of e-government in Russia;
- To identify the existing issues of e-government in Russia and develop possible solutions.

The methodological basis of the study consists of general (dialectical, analysis and synthesis, deduction and induction, formal-logical, structural-functional, etc.) and specific scientific (comparative-legal, historical-legal, formal-legal, sociological, statistical, empirical, etc.) methods.

The significance of the planned results is predetermined by their relevance and novelty, as well as their contribution to the theory and practice of democratic rule in Russia at the federal, regional and municipal levels. The full-fledged introduction of e-government and civic participation will contribute to the rapprochement of government and society, increase civic participation in the public sector, help make public and political decisions, open government bodies to citizens, and create additional incentives for the development of a partnership model between public authorities and citizens.

3. Results

Only by 2006, the reformers had finished developing the main elements within the IT infrastructure of the Russian government: state automated (information) systems "Election" (Vyborg, http://www.cikrf.ru/gas/), "Justice" (Pravosudie, https://sudrf.ru/), "Lawmaking" (Zakonotvorchestvo, http://parlament.duma.gov.ru/) and "Management" (Administratsia, http://gasu.gov.ru/). They also began forming components of e-government, in particular, the Unified Portal of Public and Municipal Services (www.gosuslugi.ru) launched in 2010. These systems automate some important political and administrative processes and, even though they are independent of each other and focus on specific tasks, lay the information basis of any e-government. Their successful launch and continued use demonstrate a significant step forward in the digitalization of public administration. However, the country's leadership and major experts recognized the general ineffectiveness of the Program. To increase the efficiency of the Program, the Ministry of Communication of the Russian Federation started to monitor the Program implementation in 2008. According to its report, many objectives were not achieved. In particular, interdepartmental electronic interaction was not implemented. In addition, not all IT solutions were systematized, therefore the created hardware and software were not fully used due to the lack of system compatibility.

In 2008, the Program was restarted and supplemented by the independent "Concept of E-Government Development until 2010" [3] that emphasizes the strategic priority of e-government. This was an important shift towards recognizing the leading role of IT solutions in the future modernization of the Russian public sector. During 2008, a legal review was conducted and new federal laws were prepared. On February 9, 2009, Federal Law of the Russian Federation No. 8-FZ "On Providing Access to Information on the Activities of State Bodies and Local Governments" [4] was issued together with Resolution of the Government of the Russian Federation No. 478 "On the Unified System of Information and Reference Support of Citizens and Organizations Concerning their Cooperation with State Bodies and Local Governments on the Internet" [5] to enable a unified technical infrastructure for the Russian e-Government. The evaluation of the program's poor performance coincided with the substantial revision of the public administration reform. By 2010, it had become obvious that the outlined reform agenda was exhausted. Like the Federal Target Program "Electronic Russia 2002-2010", the public administration reform also failed to implement and consolidate new principles of public administration, based on the NPM approach. New Public Management is a modern model for reforming public administration. Over 70 countries around the world are carrying out reforms based on these principles, including the most developed economies. However, the name and concept of New Public Management have no analogs in Russian. The initial strategy to build a triple-layer structure of functionally segregated government agencies and thus ensure the organizational diversification of the Russian public sector did not come to fruition. It was planned to
assign the policy creation and implementation function to ministries, the control and oversight function to state services, and the services provision function to state agencies, which would be politically and administratively independent from each other. Instead, the reform resulted in the creation of a vertically integrated system of government with the dominant top-down vector of bureaucratic accountability. Further modernization in this direction had come to a logical standstill and required the revision of the strategy.

After six years, the public administration reform had been demonstrating little improvement of the government efficiency and quality of public services. The reform failed to achieve most of the measurable targets. Furthermore, the Federal Target Program "Electronic Russia 2002-2010" was openly regarded as a failure. In these circumstances, it became evident that the approach to separately implement two modernization projects had proven its inefficiency. For the third phase of the public administration reform, it was decided to put the development of information and communication technologies into the core of the government modernization project. Thus, Russia joined many other countries transforming their system of public administration into e-government. This e-government reform was harmonized with the Federal Target Program "Information Society" [6] which set the digitization of all spheres of the Russian society as its key objective.

The focus of the reform was made on conversing public services, internal workflow and data government into a digital format. In the minds of reformers, e-government would further extend the so-called "single-window" access to public services through the Unified Portal of Public and Municipal Services. This portal was designated to provide information on available services and government regulations, digital application forms, and payment services. To ensure access to multiple services from different federal, regional and municipal government agencies, the portal should be integrated with the Unified Identification and Authentication System.

The vector of further modernization was determined by the adoption of Federal Law No. 210-FZ "On the Organization of Delivery of State and Municipal Services" [7]. This document de jure prohibited government agencies from requesting the previously collected and stored personal information of applicants. The clause stipulated mandatory interdepartmental collaboration at least within the framework of services delivery. Due to policies promoting digital workflow, the focus of back-end modernization shifted towards the System for Electronic Interagency Collaboration. Initially, it was perceived as an IT solution connecting the Unified Portal of Public and Municipal Services with similar regional portals and multifunctional centers, on the one hand, and services providers authorized by government agencies, on the other hand. The digital government infrastructure also prompted the development of the Unified Identification and Authentication System to ensure proper user access. Finally, the approach synchronized this system with the state information systems formed in the previous period.

Thus, the next step in public administration reform was to build e-government in Russia. Despite such a significant shift in the agenda, the overall approach seemed to be the same. As with the earlier reform, it was decided to focus on infrastructure development projects to promote political and operational changes. In addition, the approach replicated the earlier and already proven faulty expectations that infrastructural transformations would make regions catch up. The reformers assumed that regional government would take advantage of the developed infrastructure and utilize the option of hosting its regional e-government segments. Considering the previous experience, the decision was made to ensure a smooth transition to the predominantly online service delivery model. To ensure digitalization, it was necessary to enhance the functioning of the existing multifunctional centers promoting and facilitating the citizen's use of online portals. Since these centers were under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Economic Development of the Russian Federation, this decision did not eliminate the dual administrative control over the reform. Under the new system, powers were distributed in the following manner: the Ministry of Communication of the Russian Federation was predominantly tasked with the development of e-government infrastructure and the Ministry of Economic Development of the Russian Federation was responsible for policy and oversight over the reform, as well as "offline" access to the Internet. This decision not only influenced effective coordination but also had a negative impact on the political capital required for reforming.

In designing the reform, an emphasis was placed on developing standards, prescribing results and prioritizing infrastructure development over policy transformation. This defines the reformers' approach as genuinely technocratic. They refused to consider the opportunity of bureaucracy to influence reform implementation not only by slowing down its complex and/or unfavorable aspects but also by resisting to certain policies that undermine their control over political spheres. According to Pournelle's Iron Law of Bureaucracy [8], "there are two types of people in any organization. First, some are devoted to the goals of the organization. Secondly, there are those dedicated to the organization itself. Any evolutionary attempts to reduce the scope of public administration or level of control over certain areas through any means of improvement and optimization, including digitization, would face administrative actions to curtail and diminish their effectiveness". Combined with the lack of accurate indicators of reform effectiveness, the first reform was doomed to demonstrate underperformance. The indicators contained in the documents fell short of the selected targets. For example, their implementation
confirmed that the chosen methods would not transfer 70% of all state and municipal services to the electronic format [9].

The initial implementation of the reform in 2011-2013 revealed some shortcomings as it could not achieve the goals set. Despite positive dynamics, the ever-growing number of registered users, and the user-friendly Unified Portal of Public and Municipal Services, the overall impact of digitization did not meet expectations. Most popular and frequently used online services were purely informational (i.e. required further offline actions to proceed) and the majority of users opted for simplified registration without advanced verification and authentication. Subsequently, this granted them only limited access and functionality that excluded the processing of payments and other operations that required personal and financial data [10].

From the technical perspective, the reformers failed to engage with regions, which resulted in the emergence of two parallel and often unsynchronized e-government portals: for federal services, and regional or municipal services. Speaking of the Unified Portal of Public and Municipal Services, less than 15% of federal and less than 10% of regional/municipal services were fully available online. The regular monitoring of regional e-government development conducted by the Ministry of Economic Development of the Russian Federation revealed substantial discrepancies between the quality and quantity of services available on regional portals. The reform implied the monopoly of the state-owned corporation "Rostelecom" on providing hosting infrastructure for e-government. It was expected that regions would "rent" the provided infrastructure, yet the degree of compliance with these initiatives was low. Rich regions (Moscow, Saint Petersburg) had already invested in the development of their own portals, while poor regions found the "Rostelecom" hosting prices too high to use the infrastructure and realized that building local solutions would be cheaper. Due to technical difficulties that affected the implementation of the electronic workflow (for example, bandwidth limit on access to regional databases and registries) and interdepartmental collaboration, the initial stage of e-government reform in Russia was considered inefficient [11].

As a result, substantial changes were made to the design of the reform. After analyzing the existing services and user activities on the portal, the decision was made to convert the most popular services to a fully online format. The shift of focus from extensive (quantity of services) to intensive (quality of services) development was accompanied by the change from the institution-oriented to user-oriented approach. The services previously grouped by their providers were classified based on life situations they referred to, which improved the quality and user-friendliness of the portal.

The innovations visible to users were supplemented by a considerable transformation of back-end government functions. The entire architecture of e-government was reconsidered to put the System for Electronic Interagency Collaboration into its core. In terms of the design, the initial "hardware-based" approach, focused on the digitization and webification of the existing infrastructures and processes, was replaced with the "solution-based" principle that supported IT solutions promoting intra-governmental communication and data exchange. The reformers decided to build a system of the key IT gateways around the key components of e-government to unite and synchronize previously developed objects of the government's IT infrastructure.

The "bumpy" road to e-government in Russia was noticed and reflected in international e-government ratings. The E-Government Development Index, prepared by the United Nations on a biannual basis, marked significant progress between 2010 and 2012 when Russia moved from the 59th to the 27th position. Yet, between 2012 and 2016, Russia failed to improve its performance, falling to the 35th position with limited positive dynamics, allowing other countries to move forward. The situation started to improve in 2018 when the country was ranked 32nd with a substantial increase in its score. This decade-long dynamic correlates with the ups and downs in the Russian e-government development.

The period between 2011 and 2016 was marked by the moderate growth and spread of e-government services. According to the official statistics, the total number of registered users increased from 3 million in 2012 to 13 million in 2014 and 40 million in 2016. However, a more critical analysis reveals different data. When this information is compared with the official demographics between 2012 and 2014 from the Federal Service of State Statistics, the number of users registered on the Unified Portal of Public and Municipal Services turns out to be less than 12% of the total adult population and less than 18% of active Internet users from the same age group. At least one-third of all registered users chose simplified registration, therefore did not have full access to the portal. This reduces the number of the portal users with full and unrestricted access to only 8.3% of all Russian citizens and 12.5% of Internet users.

According to P. Khilov [12], the reported data on online activities was based on the number of submitted requests rather than processed requests. Thus, only 87% of requests for federal services were executed and indicators for regional and municipal services were 36% and 19%, respectively. The provision of services also differed in the top ten regions (about 167 requests per 1,000 people) and the bottom ten regions (only 13.8 requests per 1,000 people). The number of people using e-services remained relatively low during the same period. Only 3.2% of the Russian citizens chose this option in 2015, while the others still used
the walk-in option. In 2013, 63% of the respondents did not interact with public authorities online because they "preferred a personal visit and personal contact".

In addition to the digitization of services, the e-government reform significantly improved the regulatory capacity of public administration and positively affected the business climate. It was expected that converting to the digital format would reduce the administrative and regulatory burden on business, thus enhancing the business climate and fostering economic growth. However, the existing evidence demonstrates that the business community remained disengaged with the Russian government despite all improvements in the IT infrastructure. The 2015 annual report compiled by the Commissioner for Entrepreneurs' Rights at the President of the Russian Federation [13] stated that the government failed to make any significant changes to the existing regulatory burden. Despite positive feedback on the Unified Portal of Public and Municipal Services, almost 52% of the respondents claimed that administrative burden increased in 2015, accounting for 10% and even 20% of the total revenue. The business community indicated that the reform failed to harmonize the regulatory activities of government agencies as some of them still enforced regulations, whose implementation would inevitably result in fines and other penalties.

4. Discussion

It required a substantial review of the initial reform project in order for e-government to catch up and become the leading form of public administration in Russia [14]. The reform resulted in the advanced and modern IT infrastructure of digital government with the most notable changes in the sphere of public services delivery and particularly in the constant modernization of the Unified Portal of Public and Municipal Services. In this regard, such a late start (in comparison with the leading countries) leveled negative consequences of the technocratic approach. This approach contributed to the rapid modernization of the IT infrastructure since it did not consider how the new infrastructure would be utilized by the bureaucratic apparatus [15].

The Federal Target Program "Electronic Government" was concluded in 2016. Citizens gradually accepted the new form of interaction with regulators and bureaucrats, in particular, young and middle-aged people found it convenient, and ever-growing Internet coverage (mostly mobile) made wider adoption possible. As public e-services became normal all over Russia, the latest model of public sector digitalization "Government as a Platform" was presented in April 2018. The Center for Strategic Research (a think-tank guided by Alexei Kudrin, the former Finance Minister and the current head of the Accounts Chamber of the Russian Federation, belonging to the political group of "reformers") had been developing the concept since 2016. While it is not an official governmental program or strategy, it is worth noting that the leading political party "United Russia" has included GaaP into the program for the united Election Day in a few regions on November 9, 2018. The "Government as a platform" model goes a step further in comparison to e-government, suggesting innovation in service delivery by allowing third parties to re-think public services without the direct intervention of public authorities. The model is to provide application programming interfaces (APIs) to citizens and businesses who can innovate on the formats of service production and delivery. Hence, GaaP transfers services into new digital formats that will allow governments to collect large amounts of data on citizens' everyday activities, interactions and transactions (these data can be processed, analyzed and used as insights to form new services) while encouraging citizens to become responsible participants in the coproduction and provision of those digital services. These ideas are contained in the report "Government as a Platform" compiled by the Center for Strategic Research. The concept links to the Digital Economy of the Russian Federation program 2018-2024 [16] that focuses on the wider adoption of digital technologies in economic and social spheres [17-19].

The justification of digital public administration is built around several explicit and implicit problem statements. Firstly, it mentions the lack of trust in state institutions. The lack of accountability and citizen control over public administration is regarded as a cause of inefficient bureaucracy. Corruption, mistakes and heavy administrative burden are expected to be alleviated by GaaP. Secondly, the lack of trustworthy data and ineffective, slow processes of data acquisition make the state slow to respond to various challenges. Public authorities are presented as intermediaries between citizens and their data that influence the efficiency and speed of public service delivery. The lack of horizontal, interdepartmental integration is viewed as one more challenge. The resistance of the current system of public administration leads to "digital feudalism", meaning that each government body develops its own digital systems and processes that are not compatible. The concept also criticizes multifunctional centers and the Unified Portal of Public and Municipal Services, which were introduced as a part of the Electronic Government program, claiming that they were a tactical win that turned into a strategic loss since they preserve the existing inefficient system and block further development and new ways of public administration. The concept states that poor public service delivery is the reason for the lack of innovation in the Russian economy, while the lack of reliable data and data analytics tools leads to suboptimal decision-making. The basic assumption is that the global competitiveness of the state is a direct consequence of the way public administration is run,
therefore the introduction of GaaP is a way of ensuring Russia's competitiveness in the global arena.

The analysis of implicit problems through the analysis of expected benefits is even more revealing. The two key features of GaaP are being human-oriented, yet human-independent. This suggests that the current system is not oriented towards a citizen but rather towards state and its offices, while all the decisions depend on certain public servants. The idea of automated, algorithmic, and big data-driven decision-making as fair, neutral, and citizen-oriented can be traced throughout the document. "Intellectual agents" (AI-driven decision-making algorithms) are expected to be at the core of public service [20]. Bureaucratic process and personal responsibility in decision making (both seen as problems of the current system) would be substituted by an algorithmic process that eliminates personal contact. As a result, most public servants will be IT professionals and machine-learning specialists [21]. Consequently, the issues outlined in the concept are not being addressed through discussion or other forms of democratic participation, while automation and artificial intelligence are gradually replacing digital democracy. The word "democracy" (or its derivatives) is not mentioned in the document. At the same time, an emphasis is placed on technology rather than the democratic process: the technocratic narrative of information technology as a source of increased efficiency for the state has been a prevailing ideology of the ruling elite since 2012 when the technopolitical modernization agenda was curtailed.

5. Conclusion

In the course of the study, we have considered the stages of e-government development in Russia from 2002 to the present day in the context of public administration reforms. During the first period (2002-2009), the Federal Target Program "Electronic Russia" was launched along with a major administrative reform. Although these two reforms overlapped, they failed to implement the principles of New Public Management to the necessary extent. The second period (2010-2015) was determined by the Federal Target Program "Information Society" (2011-2020), in particular, its key project "Electronic Government (2011-2015)". This project abandoned the idea of e-government as a complement or partial replacement of "real" government and focused on the development of infrastructure for providing e-government services. The third period (from 2016 till the present day) marked the beginning of the development of the concept of "Government as a Platform". It has not been implemented but aroused great interest and provoked debates about the future of digital data and digital infrastructure for their collection, processing and storage. These projects pursued several goals. The first goal was to improve efficiency and reduce public administration costs, i.e. two main ideas of the New Public Management. The above-mentioned projects are not nominal since their achievements, in particular in the field of e-services, have had a positive impact on the interaction between society and state. In a nutshell, it has become faster and easier to communicate with government agencies for common citizens who are not in a conflict with their state. The e-government project also addressed political and economic aspects. One of its goals was to ensure the country's competitiveness at the international level (make it a more attractive place to live and do business). However, these plans did not match reality and businesses noticed an increased administrative burden. Despite "good intentions", there was a large discrepancy between plans and their implementation.

A review of the two-decade-long digitalization of the public sector in Russia within three consecutive federal programs/concepts reveals the true nature of such reforms, which might partially explain the existing discrepancy. Firstly, there is much technocratism in planning and preparing reform projects. Unlike most democracies, e-government reforms consider the interests of the state rather than society. This approach can be regarded as beneficial only for large-scale infrastructure projects when it is important to strengthen control over multifaceted tasks to ensure the balanced development of all components of the digital government infrastructure. Nevertheless, the same strategy in the next stages of the reform will result in numerous shortcomings and will require major adjustments to the entire project.

Secondly, the introduction of e-government in Russia is characterized by the centralization and directive management of reforms. The top-down approach was even incorporated into the reform project. Ideas were expressed by the federal center and were subsequently adopted by regions. Sub-national agencies and bodies had a limited ability to influence the course of e-government reforms. The initial approach was inflexible and did not provide any collaborative strategies. The regions were given the following options: either to use the given solutions or develop their own. This led to the creation of two e-government platforms: federal and regional. Moreover, the municipal level of self-government bodies was neglected in the original plans.

The adoption of the "Government as a Platform" model exposed even more flaws of the technocratic approach since an emphasis is placed on functional and political changes rather than infrastructure transformation. The latter process inevitably becomes fragmented and uncontrollable by a single center. This undermines the entire ideology of top-down governance in Russia, which critically changed public administration reforms in 2003-2013 and influenced the gradual introduction of e-government. A long-term failure to adapt to the new principle of distributed and delegated management in various political spheres without clear
administrative boundaries will predetermine a new reform that is obvious and necessary.

References