

OPENNESS OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT AUTHORITIES

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Abstract

The transition to the 21st century is characterized by intensive technological development of the global information society, the basic resource of which is information. Russia implements the Concept of information society which is related to the information openness of local government and civil society. Openness and transparency of the local government is an inherent indicator of democracy. The main purpose of the research is to establish whether the local government bodies' official websites comply with the requirements of current legislation in the sphere of information openness and transparency.

On the basis of theoretical and practical methods used in the course of the research we worked out 8 matrixes with 68 parameters referring to the relevant rules of the legislation. We also made an analysis of 11 federal laws of Russia, 2 President's decrees, 7 ordinances and 5 directives of the Russian Government, 5 orders of the Russian federal ministries and considered the methods of monitoring and esteem of the federal executive bodies openness in Russia.

Key words: information openness, information transparency, local government authority.

JEL Code: H75, I2, I21

Introduction

Integral information environment becomes a city-forming feature in the era of information society formation and introduction of "e-government" into the state management. Information exchange between the state and local government and society is an important factor from the point of view of state functioning and development (Irving-Clarke, 2017; Jaeger, Lyons & Wolak, 2017; Nisar, 2015; Jēkabsone & Sloka, 2015; Merkus & Veenswijk, 2017).

Many sources define such countries as Sweden (1766), Finland (1951), the USA (1966), Danmark (1970), Norway (1970), Austria (1973), France (1978), the Netherlands (1978), New Zealand (1982), Australia (1982) and Canada (1982) to be the first to introduce „the right to know“ into the national legislation.

Issues concerning information openness are widely discussed in all spheres of life: from politics and state administration to social service of the population. Implementation of the information openness principle in all spheres of life provides access of citizens to information, ensures transparency of activities of public authorities and municipal organizations, possibility of responsible choice (Badulescu, Kolozsi, Badulescu & Lupau, 2016; Kankanhalli, Zuiderwijk & Kumar Tayi, 2017; Kromidha & Córdoba-Pachón, 2017, Rezer, 2013, 2017).

The matters connected to the information openness of state and local government, the citizens rights and interests protection and information security are also reflected in the works of Russian scientists (Afanasieva, 2010; Belozor, 2015; Knyazev, 2011). It is necessary to mention that the terms “transparency” and “openness” are not totally synonymous.

Information openness in the current context is such an organizational and legal regime which is based on the constitutional right to information access for citizens which are provided with sufficient and necessary volume of socially significant data about government activities and when society and the governmental structures coordinate for its provision. According to David Bannisar and the non-governmental organization «Privacy International», by 2006 about 70 countries in the world had already adopted relevant laws and 50 countries were developing them.

It is assumed that information transparency of governmental activities and real availability of information about decision-making and authorities current activities is not only a must for consistent and reliable link between citizens and government representatives, but also a means of the very government effective functioning.

An official website of the state and local governmental body which reflects the structure and content of data stipulated in the legal acts is the main tool to provide such interaction. It is evident that both citizens and governmental officials need to know how to define the level of information openness and transparency of governmental bodies on the state and local levels and degree of their official websites openness. Thus, the key problem of present research is focused on necessity to study the openness and transparency of state and local government official websites as an effective means of interaction with people.

Articles 24 and 29 of the Russian Constitution stipulate the right to information. The freedom of information in the modern world is viewed as the freedom of speech and thought. The right to search and gather information without prior permission cannot be limited by the state unless the means of these activities are illegal. The meaning of the Federal law of 6th October 2003 No. 131-FZ “On the general principles of local self-government organization

in Russia” is aimed to provide for citizens an opportunity to get full and reliable information about activities of local government and its officials.

1 Methods

Research methods as below were applied to analyze whether official websites of the local governments comply with the current legislation which stipulates their information openness and transparency:

- analytical method (monitoring of local governments official websites from the point of the criterion of presence, completeness of information and navigational availability);
- legal comparative method (comparing information content of local government official websites with the requirements of the current legislation);
- comparative method (comparing the local government official websites information openness within the group, identifying leaders and outsiders);
- statistical analysis method (analyses of the obtained research results of the governmental bodies’ official website);
- observation method (monitoring of updates of local governments’ official websites).

Information openness and transparency of the local governments in Sverdlovsk region had been monitored from November 2016 to January 2017. The cities were ranked based on the population of the locality.

The monitoring was aimed to reveal and estimate the level of the local government official websites information openness and transparency in Sverdlovsk region by means of quality and quantity characteristics. The objects of analyses were 16 local governments’ official websites in Sverdlovsk region. The research subject matter was the compliance of the information published at the local governments’ official websites in Sverdlovsk region with the requirements of the current legislation in the sphere of information openness and transparency.

16 local governments’ official websites from 16 cities were grouped based on the population: the first group includes population of more than 97 thousand people; the second group includes the population of 37 – 57 thousand people.

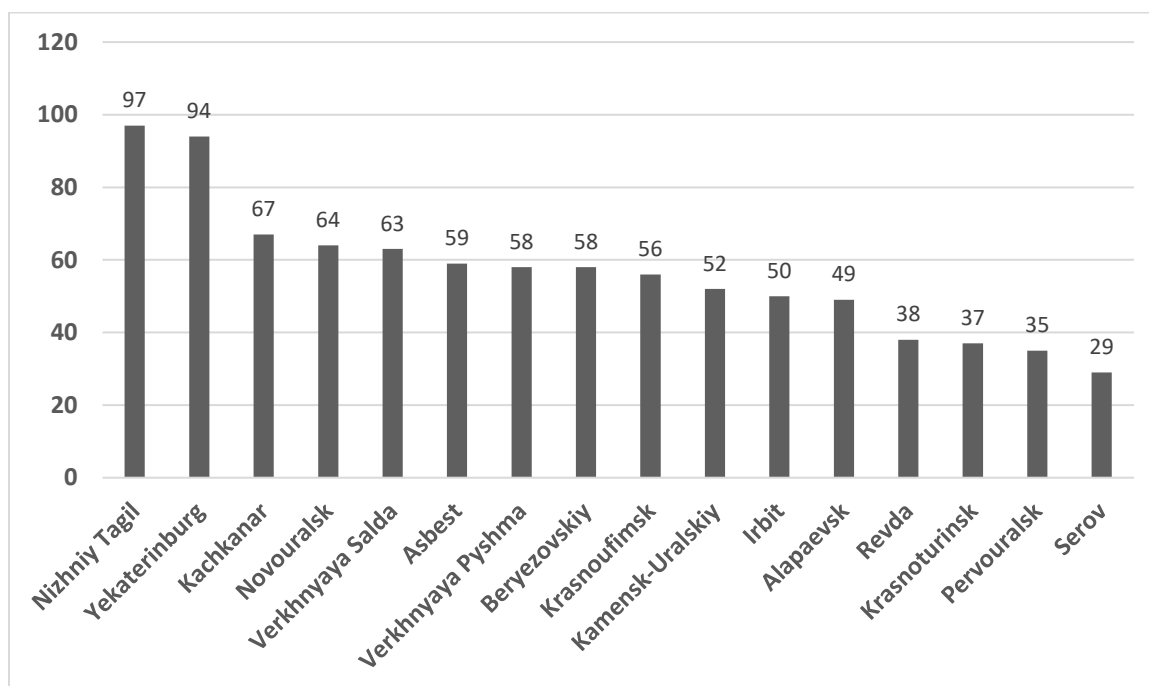
Analytical method includes 8 blocks of information, 68 parameters and 3 criteria related to the websites. The first criterion is the criterion of availability: the actual availability of information or service at the local governments’ official website; the second criterion is the

criterion of navigation comfort: ease of information search at the website, structure of the website, number of clicks from the home page to particular sections of the website. The third criterion is criterion of completeness: the integral volume of data published at the local governments' official websites. Comparative and legal methods helped to establish whether the information content of official websites complies with legislation requirements.

2 Results

Monitoring results of researched local government's official websites in Sverdlovsk region and their general overview are given below. The following statistics concerns the whole analysis by 68 parameters in 8 information blocks of all 16 websites researched in Sverdlovsk region. Fig. 1 demonstrates the final diagram which reflects the level of Sverdlovsk region municipal units' information openness in general at all directions of present research.

Fig. 1: Rating of local governments' official websites in Sverdlovsk region based on information openness criterion



Source: the diagram was developed by the author

The results evidence a middle level of information openness of official websites of local governments in Sverdlovsk region.

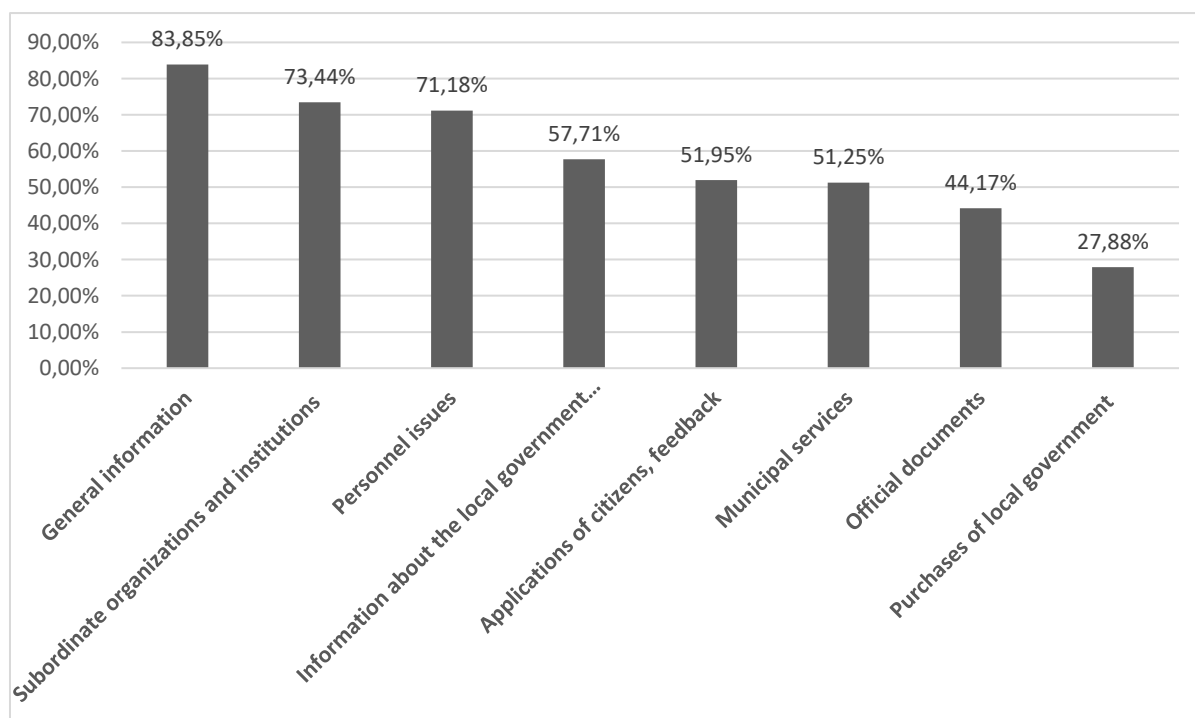
Fig. 2 demonstrates another category of statistical analysis of local governments' information openness and transparency calculated for each of 8 information blocks

represented at all 16 local government's official websites. As we can see there is no any block which has information openness and transparency rate equal to 100%.

General information represented at official websites has the highest rating. The openness here is up to 83,85%. This block represented at the websites includes a name and structure of a local municipal body in 100% cases. The lowest degree of information openness (60,94%) have information blocks at the authorities website with the data about mass media.

The data about subordinate organizations and institutions ranks second in the rating of information openness: this information is published in 73,44% of cases (the most transparent here is the list of local subordinate organizations which is published in 82,81% of cases; the least transparent information here is the data about the control results, which is open in 62,5% of cases).

Fig. 2: Information openness of the local governments' official websites represented by information blocks



Source: the diagram was developed by the author

The issues of personnel rank third in information openness rating, these issues are represented in 71,18% of cases (in 93,75% of cases this block refers to the „Federal database of public service“ but unfortunately only in 50% of cases phone numbers are provided at the website).

Feedback block takes the fourth place in the rating: the openness is in 51,95% cases (the information about the reception hours is the best represented - 93,75%, while the information about interactive portal and accounts is represented poorly - in 12,5% cases).

The information about the local governments' activities is on the fifth place where the openness is 57,71% (information about measures implemented in case of emergency is provided in 100% of cases, but the texts of the municipal government's heads' speeches are published only in 18,75% of cases).

In the sphere of municipal services the information openness is 51,25 % which is the sixth place (this block contains enough information about services and procedures of its providing - 81,25%, but only in 6,25% of cases information about mobile services is shown which should be improved).

Official documents take the seventh place in the rating, openness level is 44,17% (legal acts are best represented in this block - 98,44%, least of all judicial decisions on cases of local acts invalidation are represented - 21,88%).

Block purchases of local governments is an outsider in information openness rating since it is represented only in 27,88% of cases (the most available information in this block is information about goods supply - 53,57%, but the contact information for complaints in this sphere is open only in 12,5% of cases).

Conclusion

Monitoring results show that obligatory official websites content completed only at 57,68% of information required by law. Thus, 42,32% of required information about local governments' activities is not published at official websites for citizens living in these territories. This can cause negative reaction due to unawareness and as unreasonable complaints to the local government which can result to decrease of efficiency of its work.

In the course of our work with official websites we elaborated typical remarks to the content and structure of those websites.

Firstly, there is a copyright sign ©, the period of publications and information about the copyright holder should be in the bottom of the local government official website. The last date of the publication period means the date of the last publication at official website. However, the dates are not always renewed, sometimes there is no year of publication which does not comply with the transparency principle.

Secondly, there are malfunctions that complicate work with the website. For example, there is no option for font rise or the website uses wrong font that hardens reading.

Legal substantiation of 68 parameters in 8 analyzed information blocks in local governments' official websites on the basis of current legislation in the sphere of information openness is introduced in matrix with references to legal norms. Observation of modern legislation in Russian in the sphere of information openness and transparency of local governments shows that there is a wide range of tools to provide access to information. Among them there are main (obligatory) and optional mechanisms.

Research of information openness of local government's official websites led us to the following conclusions:

- Nizhniy Tagil city is a leader of local government information openness in Sverdlovsk region with 97,50% information openness rate, Yekaterinburg city ranks second with 93,96% information openness rate, Serov city is an outsider of this rating having only 28,89% information openness rate;

- analyses of the local governments' official websites content show that websites comply with requirements of current legislation only in 57,68% of cases. This rate shows middle level of information openness as well as transparency;

- data obtained in course of research was transmitted to heads of local government bodies in Sverdlovsk region, manual and recommendations on elimination of revealed problems were developed.

Local governments' development directly relates to the level of openness and transparency which is an inherent feature of democracy and connection to the population.

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