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PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING PROJECT IN SAINT PETERSBURG AS A COMMUNICATION PLATFORM

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Abstract

This article is devoted to the interaction of powers and citizens during the realization of the participatory budgeting project “Your budget” in the Central district of Saint Petersburg, Russia, in 2018. Similar projects in other countries help to strengthen civil society, improve the financial literacy of population, raise the level of generalized trust, and are considered as a part of participatory democracy. In St. Petersburg the project is implemented for the third year, and it still faces some challenges connected with the institutional organization of the process, communications between the stakeholders. While noting the difficulties, the study also shows the benefits participatory budgeting brings the city communities. The research is based on the participant observation. The special focus of the study is made on “city communication” and the needs of new approach to the “city dialogue”. The stages of the project are examined; recommendations on improvements of the project are made.

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Keywords: Communication between citizens and powers, participatory budgeting, participatory democracy, your budget.



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1. Introduction

From the first experiment in Brazil's Porto Alegre in the end of 1980-s, the participatory budgeting projects fled to other cities, states, and continents. In the Russian Federation these projects were settled in 2007. From 2007 to 2014, the participatory budgeting projects implemented more than 2,000 projects, and the number of beneficiaries of the program exceeded 1.2 million people, more than 3000 meetings in the regions took place, in which more than 130 thousand participants were involved (Vagin, Gavrilova, & Shapovalova, 2015a, p.96). The experiment in Saint Petersburg started only in 2016 with two of eighteen districts taking part in it. As the experiment was considered as a successful one it was spread to three more districts in 2017. And in 2018, all of the 18 city districts could rival for getting the extra finance for citizen's initiatives.

It is planned within such projects that citizens should be considered not only as the objects of the power's policy, but as equal subjects of communication with other stakeholders, and should be directly involved in the city policy. This can also bring to mutual understanding between the active representatives of the society and powers, promote democratic values, and give civil society new opportunities. Projects selected by the local population are usually more economical than similar projects realized without involving the population. In addition, such objects are more carefully maintained (Vagin, Gavrilova, & Shapovalova, 2015b, p.44). Some scholars see this kind of projects as a way to overcome poverty (Ahenkan, Bawole, & Domfeh, 2013). Others as a way to provide citizenry to formerly excluded groups in society rather than for the material gains it may bring (Souza, 2001; Bylieva, Lobatyuk, & Rubtsova, 2017). There is also an ideological task to change the discourse of complaints to constructive dialogue (Vtoroy seminar "Byudzhet kak predmet sotsial'nykh nauk", 2015, p.124). But since there is not much practice in this field, changes should be made in order to improve this project to make it work in the most effective way and transform it to a real form of participatory democracy.

2. Problem Statement

This study is relevant due to the fact that many cities in the world are trying to find the best forms of involving citizens in the governance. And each new experience gives us a new vision of the effective forms of people's participation in the city development, enhancing their financial literacy and improving the sector of public policy. One of the most important parts of the projects is organizing the direct communication between the administration and citizens. Different number of participants can be involved and the forms of interactions can vary. The parties have also different backgrounds, aims, motives, values, visions, and personal features. It is very significant to organize the appropriate communication within such projects.

3. Research Questions

The aim of this article is to analyze the participatory budgeting project "Your Budget" in Saint Petersburg, forms of communication between its active participants and executive powers and give recommendations for improving it. The Central district is in the focus of the study as it was possible for the author to observe the project on all of its stages, and the district was one of the two districts which

have participated in “Your budget” since its introduction in Saint Petersburg, which means that it could develop sustainable practices during its realization.

In order to achieve this aim, the author has set forth the following **tasks**:

- to analyze the project “Your Budget” in the Central district of Saint Petersburg in 2018;
- to examine the interactions between active participants and powers involved in the project;
- to get what communication problems were there;
- to provide guidelines for improving communication between participants of the project and administrative bodies.

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the article is to show how the participatory budgeting project “Your Budget” is organized in Saint Petersburg on the example of the Central district budget commission. The focus of the study will be made on the quality of “city communication” and the possibilities of its improvement.

5. Research Methods

The author analyzed the documents regulating the procedures of the project “Your budget” in Saint Petersburg, official groups of the project in the social network vk.com. The method of participant observation was also used, as the author could take part in all of the stages of the project as an active participant and summarized the experience. The study deals with the cases from the budget commission of the Central district.

6. Findings

“Your Budget” is positioned as a project to involve St. Petersburg citizens in the budget process through the use of initiative budgeting practices. This is an opportunity for city residents to put forward their initiatives in order to develop the urban environment, increase their financial (budgetary) literacy, and influence the effectiveness of spending budget funds. The main objectives of the project are: to obtain new ideas on the development of the urban environment, to increase openness and transparency of St. Petersburg budget, to increase budget literacy of the population and its level of trust in power, to increase the efficiency of budgetary costs, which together leads to an improvement in the quality of life in St. Petersburg and the achievement of public consent. The project is implemented in St. Petersburg as a part of the state program of St. Petersburg "Creating the conditions for securing public harmony in St. Petersburg" for 2015-2020, approved by the St. Petersburg Government Ordinance No. 452 of June 4, 2014 (Informatsionnaia spravka, 2018).

In 2016, 580 citizens suggested 766 ideas. In 2017, 1170 people made 1356 applications for developing Saint Petersburg within “Your Budget”.

In 2018, as the popularity of the project grew, there were already 5265 ideas from 3273 people (“Your budget” project, 2018). 39% of proposals dealt with housing and communal services, parking, transportation and bicycle infrastructure. 34% of residents wanted to improve the urban land, 13% to

build sports and playgrounds, 7% of projects were social and 3% – environmental. Most active citizens were aged from 25 to 35.

In St. Petersburg, not like in most of the other Russian regions, the project is organized not by municipalities, but by the city executive authorities – the Financial Committee and the district administrations. Not all of the representatives of these executive powers got used to the communication with citizens in person, which was challenging within some districts.

The project was realized within several stages, which were announced before it was launched in 2018. According to the schedule: recruiting had to take place in February, in March there had to be lotting for membership in the commissions, in March-May the budget commission sessions and lectures for the participants had to be organized, in May-June the expertise of the initiatives in the profile committees of the administration of Saint Petersburg were to be held, in June voting of members of budget commissions, selection of winning projects and development of "road maps" for their implementation in 2019 were to be made.

During the stage of recruiting any national adults, excluding state and municipal servants and deputies, could make as many applications as they could by publishing them on the official website of the project. The information about the project was spread by the official media and the activist groups in social media. This brought to that there were many similar applications made by people from one initiative group. However, these applications were also counted as different, and the winner districts with the highest number of applications were chosen. Six districts were chosen in three categories: three "sleeping", two central and one suburban; each of the six districts received 15 million fund for implementing 1-3 initiatives in 2019. It was a contested decision, as the applications were not moderated on a previous stage, more innovative initiatives could not be taken into consideration, because of the lack of campaigning in the district, the initiatives which do not suite the idea of the project, and absolutely inadequate initiatives were counted. As a recommendation for this part of the project the author can suggest premoderating the initiatives and grouping them also by addresses (to count several alike applications as one) and level of originality, etc. in order to choose the winner districts at least by the number of original initiatives which can be realized within the participatory budgeting.

Only the authors of applications who came to the first meeting could take part in the casting of lot. In every district 20 members of the commission and 20 members of the reserve were elected. In the Central district, e.g., there were 230 initiatives of 148 people, and only 42 were present during the drawing. Several people already suggested their initiatives in the previous two years, 7 people were representing one initiative group. Then only the initiatives of the elected members could be discussed during the sessions of the commissions. The commission members were obliged to visit the sessions and lectures. If they were missing more than two sessions, they were excluded from the list, and a new member was elected from the reserve. Around half of commission members were changed in every district. If the person left the commission, his initiative also was not discussed anymore unless other commission member supported it instead of his own. Studies show that “participatory processes also run the risk of capture by interest groups” (Islam, 2007, p. 15), but in this case, though the representation of different initiative groups wasn’t wide, the elected budget commission members were not the agents of business or powers and could be called part of civil society.

During the sessions budget commission members are discussing the initiatives, ways of their improvement, meet with the administration representatives to get a feedback. The lectures about the budget process, cultural heritage, responsibilities of the committees, public speaking were organized. Every session is moderated by two moderators. They play a very urgent role as they do not only moderate the discussions during the sessions but negotiate with the administration representatives on the possibilities of realizing the initiatives. Their extra tasks are to record the meetings and post information in the social network official group. The lectures were very prepared and useful for participants, as they received knowledge about the mechanisms of decision making, project realization, and budget process in Saint Petersburg. Some of the lectures were organized for all participating, and some for certain districts. Lecturers made presentations and the auditorium could give a feedback by asking questions in the end. Sessions of the budget commissions with administration representatives were not as successful as lectures and often led to confrontation between the parties. The administration of the Central district didn't consider commission members as equal party and tried to influence their decisions suggesting to change the initiative to the one they wanted to make themselves, but didn't have enough money. In most of the cases they showed unwillingness to take any original idea which was not realized before and deprecated the initiatives and statements of the "Your Budget" participants. Both sides often showed hostility, they did not try to find a common solution and proceeded to insist on their vision. It may be said that there were different communication barriers – physical, social, psychological, and semantic. It was common that both commission members and state servants had a number of prejudices about each other and often accused each other of non-professionalism and unwillingness to solve the problems. There was also a time limit for discussing each initiative, and sometimes commission members couldn't fully describe their suggestion. In most of the cases parties didn't consider themselves as people working on a common project, but as people with absolutely different understanding of the city needs. Moderators tried to smooth the waters, but usually the problems stayed unsolved after the meetings. Surprisingly, at the same time moderators were successful in the informal negotiations with executive powers out of the frames of the sessions. They found it easier to pursue the administration to find variants of putting an initiative into life rather than blocking it in such kind of informal meetings. This showed a need of extra education for moderators, participants and organizers of the project on preparing more effective discussions and improving the communication. All of the meetings were filmed, but not all of them were broadcasted publicly, as sometimes there was fierce debate which could not serve the initial idea of the project. Most of the commission members showed dissatisfaction with those meetings, but mentioned that it was useful, because they "understood the line of thinking of the bureaucrats". In studies on the participative budgeting scholars mention that in long term prospective these projects can bring to the improvement in behavior of politicians and public figures, as they face a more informed and politicized population, which leaves less room for clientelism and corruption (Blinova, 2016, p.42).

Before passing to the voting procedures each initiative had to undergo expert appraisal of all bodies of executive powers which could be chief administrators of the budget sources or be somehow connected with the realization of the idea. This was one of the most controversial parts of the project.

Officially, according to the Provision on examination of initiatives of budget commission members the powers could write a negative opinion only if the initiatives could not be realized within the

legal frames, the initiative didn't correspond with the authority of the city or local administration, the cost of initiative proposal was higher than the budget which should not exceed 15 million rubles. But though it was proclaimed that the ideas should be innovative, and every committee had people responsible for "Your budget" who agreed to support it, the committees gave many negative expert reports blocking initiatives or refused to give their opinion as it was not their responsibility. There were even cases when two committees replied stating that this wasn't within their mandate and the other committee should respond, and that other committee wrote just the opposite. In one of the cases in the Central district the Urban Beautification Committee instead of providing an expert report on the project of beautification of three garden squares suggested to make gardening in a different yard. Two of the budget commission members wanted creation and improvement of sport grounds on exact territories, but finally the administration of the Central district made them agree on different projects changing their ideas and territories. Only after that they could pass this stage and even receive the finance.

Sometimes there were legal barriers for projects realization – for example, it is almost impossible to introduce something new on the territory of objects of cultural heritage like Taurida garden. Sometimes committees agreed to put the initiative into life within their regular budgets – for example, to make the navigation signs in foreign languages on the main central avenue – Nevsky prospect. The district representatives preferred ideas on beautification, as social and creative initiatives were more unique and for that reason expected more efforts for their realization. One initiative (the initiative of the author of the article) was devoted to creating a social center for immigrants who could stay there while living in the street near the Unified Migration Center. The Committee on Interethnic Relations and the Implementation of Migration Policy in St. Petersburg as a whole wrote a positive examination, but their estimates were designed for a very large project with a wide bureaucratic structure with many employees and demanded a building of 1000 square meters. It was obvious that they had their own vision of the project that did not completely coincide with the initial one which could be done attracting fewer resources. Committee of property relations did not initially offer any building to implement the project and started the communication on exact addresses only after direct negotiations with the project author. A common problem was that there were very limited possibilities to reconsider the responses of the executive powers, as the voting procedures had to be organized in a week after they were received. For a more effective implementation of the project it is needed to shift the deadline for submission of projects for examination to an earlier one, in order to organize direct communication of the budget commission members with the authors of the opinions, hold joint meetings with the committees, get additional explanations and proposals on options for implementing the initiatives (this requires 2-4 weeks), make possibilities to give a notice of appeal for the negative expert evaluations, finalize the project and get a new expert evaluation from the powers. It is desirable that representatives of the committees also discuss initiatives with representatives of other proposed chief administrators of the budget sources on initiatives, in particular to clarify whose powers they are in, and what consistent recommendations to state in the conclusion. Also, criteria for the success of the examination should be expressed at the beginning of the sessions of the Budget commission for making it clear for the participants what should be done to receive a positive expert opinion in order to resolve these issues in advance. It would be worthwhile to include an external expert to conduct an examination of the validity of the estimates calculated by the powers.

Every budget commission member willing to put his initiative to a vote had to present it for the commission. This part of the project was very fruitful due to the work of moderators and active participation of commission members. There were additional lectures on presentation skills, and the examples of good presentations were given.

Still few projects were implemented, and the results are not sufficiently visualized. Even on the website of the Financial Committee there are only 31 materials devoted to “Your Budget” (Financial Committee of Saint Petersburg, 2018). As a general recommendation it should be outlined that intensified information campaign organized by professional communicators is needed during all of the stages: it is necessary to announce all the events not only in the "Your Budget" group, but also on other sources, so that other interested peoples can visit them too; moderators should write more about each meeting of the budget committee session and lectures, highlighting the main points that may be of interest not only for the participants of the project. This, among other things, will help to increase the level of trust and interest of citizens in “Your budget”.

Unfortunately, the project is seen by the powers as the project from the top-down. This can be also illustrated by the events happened before the day of the presidential elections on the 18th of March 2018 when the administrations by the decision of the government gave a survey to the voters and asked to give suggestions on improvements in their districts using the label of “Your Budget”. But the terms for applying to the project had passed by the end of February, and this survey had the only idea of attracting people to come to the polling station. Moreover, within the survey the project was introduced as the one appeared after the President’s Message on the 1st of December 2016, (Opredelyayem priority v mestе, 2018), and in fact it was introduced in St. Petersburg in the beginning of 2016.

For involvement of more citizens in the project it is useful to find possibilities to draw their attention by participating in formal or informal voting procedures, consultations during the sessions. As many projects flew out, and only budget commission members could move forward the initiatives, many people lost interest in “Your Budget” and considered it as something not connected with them.

We can agree with the suggestion to use the concept of the New Public Management in order to change this subject – object relation (Bublik, Lukina, Fazlutdinov, & Chuvilin, 2016).

Wampler stated that “when participatory programs are especially weak, there is the potential to increase cynicism about democracy and participation, rather than to help deepen democracy” (Wampler, 2010, p.4). So does this participatory budgeting project make the democracy stronger or is it another window dressing and participatory mechanisms are organically built into an authoritarian political regime like the Chinese (Shilov, 2018)? On the one hand, we see the participation of residents in Saint Petersburg within the “Your budget” is cultivated from the top down, and not many people are involved and even aware of the project. This can be explained by the institutional design problems of the project, lack of information campaign, and also by specific political culture, rooted back to the Soviet times when people could participate in the political life in very limited frames suggested by the government, and which can be called “great-power activism” rather than civil society. “Post-Soviet period transformation mostly affected the spiritual, moral and psychological spheres, and the new values are still being formed” (Pozdeeva, Trostinskaya, Evseeva, & Ivanova, 2017, p. 1095), and still the culture of political participation is undeveloped. But, on the other hand, active citizens use this and find other ways to

influence the decision making in the city. And of course we can agree that “with the help of new information technologies, citizens have become more politically involved, and use to interact with state institutions and local authorities through modern information mechanisms” (Evseeva, Bashkarev, Pozdeeva & Tarakanova, 2017, p.354). This includes active usage of such platforms as “Krasivyi Peterburg” (“Beautiful Petersburg”, <http://www.xn--80accfiasjf8cghbfut2k.xn--p1ai/>) and “Nash Sankt-Peterburg” (“Our Saint Petersburg”, <https://gorod.gov.spb.ru/>). There is also a great interest in participation in the “city dialogues” organized after the discussions on Foresight Fleet in 2018 by the Russian Guild of Managers and Developers, Center of Applied Urbanism and supported by the Government of St. Petersburg, discussions on general planning and other important issues. In Saint Petersburg the funds for “Your budget” are relatively small, and the budget commission in no case can pretend to rival with the legislative power, which can be the case for participatory budgeting with deeper traditions (Fortes, 2014, p.119). Nebot finds some common reasons for failures in participatory budgeting programmes: absence of political will, lack of participation culture and inadequate institutional design (Nebot, 2018, p.288). In St. Petersburg we see a general will to deal with the project, but in quite limited frames, the participation culture is still not very developed within ordinary citizens not having the experience of defending their rights. The institutional design of “Your budget” still needs many improvements. At the same time, we need to take into account the risks long-lasting Brazilian project faced, including “creating a parallel bureaucratic system in which “professional” participants hold sway and become alienated from the daily reality in the neighbourhoods” (Cleuren, 2008, p.38). Today the main advantage of this project is that active people get the information on the budget process, division of powers, decision making in the city and can use this knowledge and experience in their everyday life which can bring to strengthening the role and professionalization of civil society.

7. Conclusion

To sum up, we may say that in order to make the “city communication” more effective, we need to train special moderators who can help to improve the interactions between the active citizens and power representatives. Moreover, there should be special lectures and seminars for project participants and state servants involved in the participatory budgeting. This will help to make this project more fruitful and will raise the level of public policy, promote responsibility of both sides, and bring to cooperation instead of confrontation and generalized trust. At the same time powers should be prepared for critical evaluation of their work, which corresponds with their will to be criticized on their own platform, not on the streets. It is hard to say whether this project can bring to the developed participatory democracy, but at least it teaches people to make common solutions and take responsibility.

Evidently there is a need of professional communicators for the executive power committees and district administrations to promote the project and explanation of its benefits to the people. There is also a necessity of receiving special education for practical communicators and moderators, which also influences the demand of new future professions such as coaches for interaction and city moderators.

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