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# Problems of public participation in urban improvement programmes: cases of Petrozavodsk, Yekaterinburg and St Petersburg

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## Introduction

Public participation in local politics is one of the most important elements of local democracy, building a sense of responsibility among citizens for their city and increasing the legitimacy of local government. The purpose of this project was to study the forms of public engagement in the processes of comfortable urban environments creation in Russia. The involvement of citizens in these processes is widely publicised by officials, but in practice, the involvement of citizens is uneven and insufficient. It was important to find out what forms of public engagement are used in practice at the municipal level in Russia: how do citizens assess the possibilities available to participate in solving problems related to urban environment improvement, and what makes the engagement process difficult?

## Methodology

The study into citizen participation practices in the ‘Creation of Comfortable Urban Environment’ programme was conducted in three Russian cities: Yekaterinburg, Petrozavodsk and St Petersburg. This choice of cases enabled the inclusion of cities with different sizes and populations, and which use different mechanisms for public involvement: public hearings in St Petersburg, voting in Yekaterinburg, and initiating projects and voting in Petrozavodsk. The research methodology was based on the use of data that were both quantitative (representative survey in cities, N=902) and qualitative (semi-structured interviews with activists who were participating in and/or following the implementation of the project (N=18), documents and media publications analysis).

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## Abstract

As part of the LUPSRUSS<sup>3</sup> -2 project, our team compared the implementation of the state-run ‘Creation of Comfortable Urban Environment’ programme in three Russian cities. Based on the analysis of regulatory documents, media and social network publications, surveys and interviews, we identified the main problems associated with public engagement in the formation of a comfortable urban environment, and made recommendations.

## About ICLD

The Swedish International Centre for Local Democracy (ICLD) is part of the Swedish development cooperation. The mandate of the organization is to contribute to poverty alleviation by strengthening local governments.

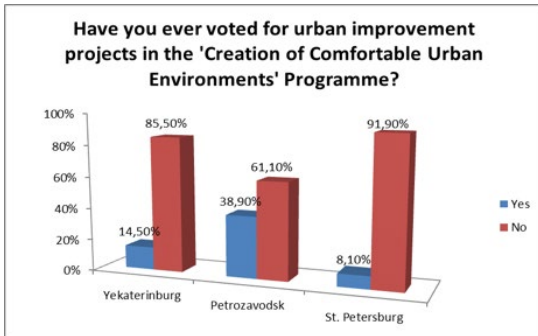


Figure 1 (Levada-Center/Malmö University, 2021).

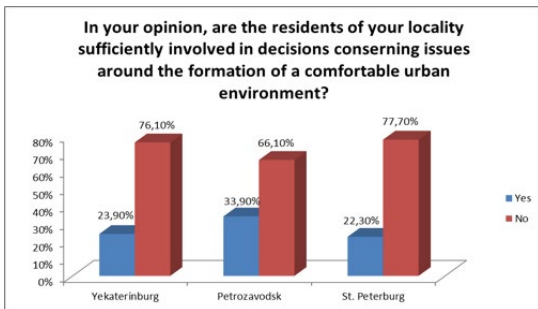


Figure 2 (Levada-Center/Malmö University, 2021).

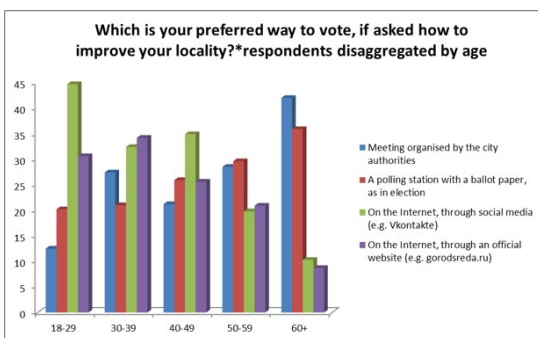


Figure 3 (Levada-Center/Malmö University, 2021).

## Research results

The study showed that the Russian state uses various methods to involve citizens in the process of urban improvement (known in Russian as blagoustrojstvo). Established in 2021, ‘The Standard for Citizens’ Involvement in Addressing Urban Environment Issues’<sup>4</sup> contains a description of different forms of public participation at all stages of the improvement project’s life-cycle, and also suggests specific mechanisms for interaction with different groups of people.

The ‘Creation of Comfortable Urban Environment’ is a multi-year federal programme for town improvements run by the Russian government, and it covers all regions and many municipalities across the country. The programme aims to involve citizens in decisions about improvements to their towns. This is achieved through various methods including through annual ‘ranking votes’, in which citizens choose between different proposed town improvement projects and prioritize these by voting on them. The official results for the ‘Creation of Comfortable Urban Environment’ programme look quite convincing. Analysis of the results shows that over the past five years, the authorities have managed to achieve intermediate goals both in terms of improvement,<sup>5</sup> and in terms of involving people. In 2017, the main form of public participation was the so-called labor participation (subbotnik, where local people come together to clean and tidy up their local surroundings), which involved 33,400 people in about half of the subjects of the federation (regions).<sup>6</sup> By 2021, 9.7 million had participated in the rating votes. The most popular improvement project was the Preobrazhensky Park in the Academic District of Yekaterinburg, which got more than 77,000 votes. Representatives of governing bodies report regularly<sup>7</sup> about active discussions with residents of improvement projects, demonstrating an openness and readiness to take into account the interests of the population.

At the same time, from the people’s perspective, the assessment of the

4 The Ministry of Construction of Russia approved ‘The Standard for Citizens’ Involvement in Addressing Urban Environment Issues’, see: <https://minstroyrf.gov.ru/press/minstroy-rossii-utverdil-standart-vo vlecheniya-grazhdan-v-reshenie-voprosov-razvitiya-gorodskoy-sred/>

5 The completed projects can be found on the official website: [gorodsreda.ru](http://gorodsreda.ru)

6 ‘Report on the implementation of the priority project ‘Creation of Comfortable Urban Environment’ in 2017’, see: <https://minstroyrf.gov.ru/upload/iblock/f66/ITOG-13.04.2018-Godovoy-otchet-po-gorsrede.pdf>

7 ‘The public control group was convinced: work in the park named after the XXII Party Congress is going according to plan’, Official portal of yekaterinburg.rf, 6 November 2020, <https://xn--80acgfbsl1azdqr.xn--p1ai/news/81892-gruppa-obshchestvennogo-kontrolya-ubedilas-raboty-v-parke-imeni-xxii-partsezda-idut-po-planu>; ‘Residents of Kukkovka and Drevlyanka discussed improvement projects’ IA Respublika, 4 May 2021, <http://rk.karelia.ru/social/zhiteli-kukkovki-i-drevlyanka-obsudili-proekty-blagoustrojstva/>; ‘A people’s park is being created in the village of Metallostroy’, Administration of St. Petersburg, 3 October 2020, <https://www.gov.spb.ru/press/governor/197531/>

8 Levada-Center/Malmö University, 2021. The national representative data sample. Respondents could rank different forms of participating. Figures show the distribution of responses for the option they liked most in gender, age, educational groups, and locality sizes.

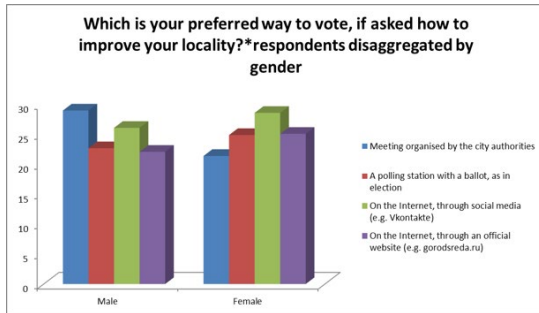


Figure 4 (Levada-Center/Malmö University, 2021).

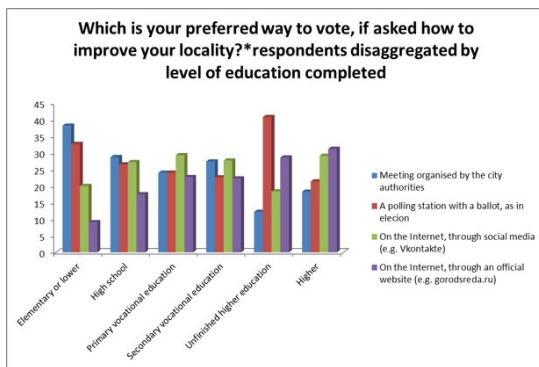


Figure 5 (Levada-Center/Malmö University, 2021).

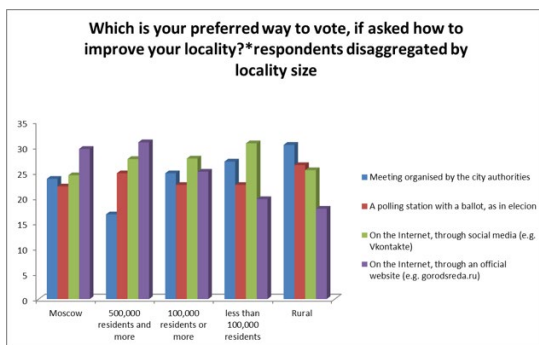


Figure 6 (Levada-Center/Malmö University, 2021).

programme appears to be completely different. Survey data which we used in our research show that, on average, only 20.5 percent of citizens in the three cities in our study remembered having taken part in voting for town improvements at some point.<sup>9</sup> Only 26.7 percent believe that the population is sufficiently involved in solving issues related to urban environment development (data for cities are presented in Figures 1 and 2).

The study shows that Internet voting is the most convenient way to vote, but it excludes those groups of the population who have problems accessing the Internet. The survey showed a strong variation by age in the methods of participation that people preferred. Among people aged over 60, 42 percent preferred public hearings to other forms of participation, compared with only 12 percent of people aged under 30. By contrast, 45 percent of under-30s thought that voting via social media was the most convenient method of participation, compared with only 10 percent of over-60s (Figure 3). No noticeable gender differences were found in this sense (Figure 4). The study allows us to state that more educated residents of large cities prefer Internet communication with government authorities regarding processes for improving their urban environment (Figures 5 and 6).

Based on the findings from Levada-Center/Malmö University, 2021 survey and the interviews we conducted with stakeholders, these are the main problems with public engagement which sometimes arise during interactions between society and government bodies:

- 1. Insufficient information.** Citizens do not know enough about existing improvement programmes, their features, or the forms and mechanisms of participation they include. The information is presented either in a very concise form or is formulated in a bureaucratic language that is difficult to understand.
- 2. Inconvenient time and place for public hearings.** As a rule, discussions of improvement projects are held on weekdays during working hours, when the majority of people are at work. Also, meetings are often held in the local administration premises, which may be far from the location of the planned future improvement. Therefore, residents interested in the discussion often do not have a convenient opportunity to express their opinion in person at public hearings. As was mentioned in an interview, ‘people were walking, asking questions in the centre of the city... there were residents from

<sup>9</sup> Levada-Center/Malmö University, 2021. ‘Vash gorod, vash vliyanie, vash golos’, national representative survey, Russian Federation, N=2,525. Fieldwork conducted through face-to-face interviews in a representative nationwide set of 97 urban and 40 rural locations, 17–28 June 2021. The national representative sample size was N=1,623, with an in-depth sample at the city level in the three major cities of the study (St Petersburg, Yekaterinburg and Petrozavodsk) of 300 respondents respectively. In total the weighted sample size was N=2,525.

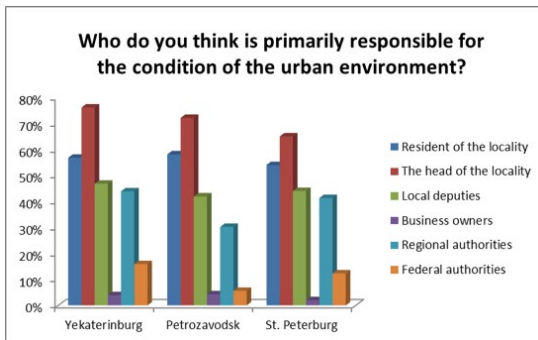


Figure 7 (Levada-Center/Malmö University, 2021).

different districts, they couldn't understand correctly which park [for improvement] the question was about' (activist, Yekaterinburg). Therefore, those projects that provide for forms of online discussion and/or voting seem to be more successful.

### 3. Hidden decision-making process for a 'blagoustrojstvo' project.

As the study showed, the main mechanism of public involvement is preferential voting for the public spaces projects. But local officials make the final decision on these projects. Sometimes the results of the rating vote and the final decision do not coincide, which leads to citizen dissatisfaction. For example, the project that was rated first in the vote in 2021 in St Petersburg is planned to be included in the programme only in 2024 – not in 2022 as it should be according to the rules.<sup>10</sup>

### 4. Citizens' inability to control the project implementation.

Interaction between the local administration and residents occurs only at the beginning of the project life-cycle: that is, in the process of choosing a territory and a possible improvement design. Once the construction phase commences, communication typically stops, and the result of the improvement does not always fully meet the wishes of the residents. The most well-known example of this is a case in St Petersburg, where the district administration changed the improvement project that had been arranged with citizens.<sup>11</sup>

### 5. Conflicting opinions about who is chiefly responsible for the condition of the urban environment between residents and government bodies (Figure 7).

According to the survey, citizens perceive that the main responsibility for the condition of the urban environment rests with the authorities. For this reason, many people consider public participation to be unnecessary and insignificant. But at the same time more than 50 percent of citizens suggested that they also are responsible for the urban environment.

<sup>10</sup> See the public discussion on the social network VKontakte: [https://vk.com/kb\\_spb?w=wall-157028191\\_14036](https://vk.com/kb_spb?w=wall-157028191_14036) (accessed 9 October 2021).

<sup>11</sup> See: 'Played in co-participation and that's enough'. A public space will be created along the Stone Coast in the Krasnoselsky District, not for residents, but for a bar. 'MR7.ru': <https://mr-7.ru/articles/233150/> (accessed 20 November 2021).



## Questions for local governments

1. How is the citizen engagement process organized in your municipality?
2. What are the main problems of interaction with the citizens?
3. How can more citizens be involved in solving local issues?

## Recommendations

To increase the level of public participation in the implementation of improvement programmes, it is necessary to do the following:

- 1. Improve the quality of information.** Information about improvement programmes should be accessible, understandable and concise. The most preferred format is infographics, clearly illustrating the possibilities for public participation. We recommend using different channels to disseminate information to expand the audience. The study found that the most popular sources of information are social media, local print and online media, and television.
- 2. Organize public hearings about the locations to be improved in the future.** Information about public hearings should be distributed in advance to residents and other interest groups in districts of a particular city or locality. Questions and materials for discussion should be published in the public domain with the ability to comment and get feedback. The process of discussion should be carried out in several stages and in different formats (the pandemic has driven a preference for online formats), allowing the project to be corrected in accordance with the interests of all citizens (social categories). This participatory approach enables the interests of the majority of citizens to be taken into account and will reduce the conflict component of communication.
- 3. Include a transparent decision-making mechanism.** It is advisable to choose a method for making decisions with citizens. The study shows that Internet voting is the most convenient way to vote, but it excludes those groups of the population who have problems accessing the Internet. The survey showed a strong variation by age in the methods of participation that people preferred. Therefore, it is recommended that face-to-face and online voting be combined to maximize coverage of the opinions of residents who belong to different social groups.
- 4. Provide mechanisms for public participation and control at all stages of the project life-cycle.** It is necessary to hold regular meetings with residents to discuss the progress of the project; and to include the most active citizens in working groups to control and correct the implementation process.
- 5. Implement so called ‘tactical urbanism’<sup>12</sup> practices,** which would enable residents quickly to improve their locality on their own. ‘Subbotniks’ – when the local population comes together to clean and tidy up their local surroundings after the winter (usually on the first Saturday of spring, hence the name), planting flowers or trees, installing benches, or organizing bicycle parking – do not incur large financial costs, take little time and foster a sense of responsibility for the city among its citizens.

<sup>12</sup> Tactical urbanism can be defined as “a city and citizen-led approach to neighbourhood building using short-term, low-cost, and scalable interventions intended to create long-term change” (<https://parcitypatory.org/2020/07/31/tactical-urbanism/>)

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## Further reading

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