



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

## Government Information Quarterly

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/govinf](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/govinf)

# The electronic face of authoritarianism: E-government as a tool for gaining legitimacy in competitive and non-competitive regimes

Seraphine F. Maerz

Central European University (CEU), Doctoral School of Political Science, Public Policy, and International Relations, Nador u. 9, Budapest 1051, Hungary

## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Received 22 December 2015

Received in revised form 26 July 2016

Accepted 19 August 2016

Available online xxxx

## Keywords:

E-government

E-participation

Authoritarianism

Competitive regimes

Non-competitive regimes

Internal and external legitimization

## ABSTRACT

E-government in autocracies is used as a seemingly democratic pattern of legitimization which became increasingly popular during the last decade. The most current data of the UN e-government survey (2014) show that several autocracies massively expand their online facilities. Recent studies question the widespread assumptions that such initiatives improve transparency and foster democratization. They propose the hypothesis that authoritarian regimes set up e-government as a response to globalization pressures and to demonstrate modernity and legitimacy to the international community. However, this article argues that the hypothesis does not account for the variations of e-government across different types of authoritarian regimes and suggests a refinement. The qualitative assessment of four post-Soviet authoritarian regimes points to crucial differences of how e-government is used to legitimate authoritarianism. While the non-competitive regimes of Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan create their web presences primarily for an international audience, the article finds a surprising citizen-responsiveness on the websites of the competitive regimes of Kazakhstan and Russia. This article proposes a new concept of e-government in autocracies and illustrates that some type of competitive authoritarian regimes use their websites not only for gaining external legitimacy but also as an efficient tool for obtaining the support of their people by offering online services and simulating transparency and participation.

© 2016 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

## 1. The rise of e-government in autocracies

One theoretical merit of the currently reviving field of autocracy research is the re-integration of legitimization as a crucial factor of autocratic persistence (Gerschewski, 2013). A range of new contributions engage with the different patterns of legitimizing authoritarianism (Ahrens, Brusis, & Schulze Wessel, 2015; Beichelt, 2014; Grauvogel & von Soest, 2014; Hoffmann, 2014) and suggest novel cross-national typologies on autocratic legitimization (Kailitz, 2013).<sup>1</sup> This analysis adds to this nascent strand of literature and examines how e-government is used as a tool for gaining legitimacy in competitive and non-competitive authoritarian regimes.

Since the early times of the Internet, an ever increasing number of governments has seized the opportunity of improving the efficiency and transparency of their administrations by setting up

e-government platforms. Benefiting from the rapid diffusion of the new information and communication technologies (ICTs), they created an “electronic face of government”<sup>2</sup> which would help them to engage citizens, provide services and thereby enhance their legitimacy (Chadwick, 2001, 425). Such efforts of promoting citizen participation and interaction are generally perceived as fundamental elements of democratic politics and until recently, e-government has been prevalently associated with democracies. However, as shown by the UN E-Government Development Index for the last decade, the wave of e-government in democracies has been promptly followed by a second wave of online initiatives in autocracies. In fact, setting up official websites and investing in e-government and e-participation became very fashionable in authoritarian regimes and by now, some of their e-participation platforms even outrun those of Western liberal democracies (UNPACS, 2014).

Recent contributions on the political impact of ICTs address the massive growth of e-government in autocracies and challenge the widespread assumptions that such initiatives improve transparency and the prospects for democratization. In-depth case studies

<sup>1</sup> Autocracy is used here as an umbrella term for all non-democratic regimes, comprising both the distinctions between authoritarian and (post-)totalitarian made by Linz (2000) and other recent classifications (Geddes, Frantz, & Wright, 2014). A regime is a set of formal and informal institutions (Schedler, 2013, 23) and legitimization is understood as the process of legitimating whereas legitimacy refers to its result (Beichelt, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> The title of this article is partly inspired by Chadwick (2001).

show that e-government is not a one-way road to e-democracy (Kardan & Sadeghiani, 2011) and illustrate how authoritarian rulers use ICTs to consolidate and promote their regime (Goebel, 2013; Johnson & Kolko, 2010). Other research conduct large-N comparisons and reveal a correlation between the establishment of e-participation platforms in autocracies and a decrease of Internet freedom (Linde & Karlsson, 2013) or generally inquire about the different political determinants of e-government in democracies and autocracies (Stier, 2015). Åström, Karlsson, Linde, and Pirannejad (2012) particularly focus on the rise of e-participation in autocracies. By examining domestic and international factors, their findings indicate that economic globalization and technological development are the strongest driving forces for the extensive growth – regardless of the country's level of democratization. They argue that in contrast to the domestically driven e-participation initiatives in democracies, authoritarian regimes respond to global pressures and set up e-participation platforms to demonstrate modernity and legitimacy to the international environment.

In light of the current advances in the field of autocracy research, this “legitimation hypothesis” of Åström et al. (2012, 144) is highly compelling and their study provide important insights into e-government in autocracies. However, this article argues that it suffers from a crucial shortcoming: By not distinguishing between different types of authoritarian regimes and merely applying a measurement of degree, the proposed generalizations about the driving forces for setting up e-participation facilities in autocracies are flawed. In drawing a clear line between competitive and non-competitive authoritarian regimes and illustrating how the patterns of using e-government and e-participation as a tool for gaining legitimacy can differ in both regime types, this article offers a more nuanced perspective on the electronic face of authoritarianism and suggests a refinement of their legitimation hypothesis: The article finds that the examined non-competitive regimes do set up their e-government platforms first and foremost as a response to external legitimation pressures. Yet, the modern and technically sophisticated websites of some competitive authoritarian regimes mainly aim for internal legitimacy by simulating transparency and participation and offering a significant amount of “real” services to their citizens.

The article proceeds as follows: After conceptualizing e-government and e-participation in authoritarian settings (Section 2) and explaining the methodological approach (Section 3), the core part of the article (Section 4) outlines and discusses the results of the analysis. The concluding part (Section 5) summarizes the article and offers a brief agenda for future research.

## 2. Conceptualizing e-government in autocracies

The burgeoning literature on e-government and e-participation suggests a plethora of definitions for both terms. Linde and Karlsson define e-government as “all efforts of governments to use ICTs, particularly the Internet, in order to support government operations, engage citizens, and provide government services.” They specify e-participation as a kind of sub-concept of e-government which “refers to government initiated efforts to stimulate and increase citizen participation and interaction with government authorities (which is a fundamental value of democratic politics) with the support of ICTs” (Linde & Karlsson, 2013, 269). These and other definitions exhibit a bias in favor of democracy and do not reflect the above mentioned insights into the specific nature of e-government in autocracies. Therefore, this article suggests an adjusted definition of e-government and e-participation which particularly refers to authoritarian contexts and accounts for its purpose of legitimating authoritarian rule, as pointed out by Åström et al. (2012) and Johnson and Kolko (2010). While the definition relies on their observations as well as on some aspects of Linde and Karlsson (2013), it also borrows

from Stier (2015, 270–271) who puts an emphasis on the economic dimension of e-government. Thus, the concept of *e-government in autocracies* is understood here as all efforts of the regime to use ICTs, especially the Internet, in order to enhance its legitimacy. Hereby, the regime applies propagandistic language and symbolism but can also exhibit citizen-responsiveness by offering services, access to government-related information and possibilities for interaction which enhance the efficiency, accountability and modernity of the regime and stimulate economic growth. *E-participation in autocracies* is seen as a sub-category of e-government in autocracies which offers political inclusion. E-participation in autocracies is generally expected to be either underdeveloped or as relating to sham or mere routine interactions.

## 3. Methodology and operationalization

The post-Soviet region reveals one of the most significant growth rates of e-government and e-participation in autocracies during the last decade (Åström et al., 2012; UNPACS, 2014). The case selection for this analysis is partly guided by the rise of e-participation as indicated in the last column of Table 1. Thus, out of all post-Soviet competitive authoritarian regimes, Kazakhstan and Russia display the highest numbers of rank change while Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan are the only post-Soviet non-competitive authoritarian regimes.<sup>3</sup> The UN index of e-government and e-participation does not account for the conceptual differences of the terms in democratic and authoritarian settings as suggested in this article and the ranking in Table 1 should not be misunderstood in terms of democratization levels or trends.

In their study of e-government websites in Central Asia, Johnson and Kolko (2010, 21) also warn of misinterpreting e-participation initiatives in authoritarian regimes and their manipulation of e-government facilities at large as any sign of democratization.

In order to examine the e-government websites of the four cases, the article applies qualitative content analysis and formulates three analytical categories: (1) Audience, Style and Purpose, (2) Information and Transparency, and (3) Service, Interaction and Participation. Each category comprises a range of questions which guided the analysis of the cases and facilitated their comparison.<sup>4</sup> The analysis sought to select a similar set of official websites in all cases which typically included a country's government portal, its e-government platform(s), the president's websites and occasionally also the capital's official website. The first page of the websites was generally most relevant for answering the questions in category one. However, for the other two categories, most websites were analyzed up to three or more levels deeper. Overall, this proceeding broadly follows Johnson and Kolko's (2010) fruitful suggestions regarding methods and operationalization – yet, their categories and questions were mostly reformulated and adapted to the specific interest of this article in how authoritarian regimes use e-government as a tool for legitimizing their rule. Furthermore, in contrast to Johnson and Kolko's long-term observation (2004–2008), this article refers only to the captures of official websites in December 2015. Johnson and Kolko illustrate the major characteristics of e-government in autocracies by examining the development of national- and city-level e-government websites in Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Their findings on how some type of authoritarian regimes make use of ICTs to respond to international

<sup>3</sup> As opposed to the other three cases, Turkmenistan shows a negative development regarding rank changes. It is nevertheless considered as a case since the analysis inquires about how e-government is used for legitimating competitive and non-competitive authoritarian regimes rather than generally explaining the recent growth of e-government in autocracies.

<sup>4</sup> See Appendix A for the guiding questions used in each category.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/5110687>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/5110687>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)