Unqualified Transparency

Submitted on 16 Jul 2011 by Ivan Begtin

This is my first guest post for Epsiplatform.eu. I will write about current Russian situation with open government and open data.

And I will start from new term. It's "unqualified transparency".

This is the name of Russian specific way of being transparent of government agencies.

I can explain it as unprepared actions without methodology, without solving serious opendata/open government related problems, without using world experience or being "very selective" using it.

I will explain it using a few examples.

We have very strict laws about government procurement transparency and Russian laws demands that all government contracts with price more than 100 000 ruble (3300 USD) should be published online. But this transparency wasn't really intended for actual use. It's was just a way for federal government to force all other government agencies and local public sector to put it under control of Federal Antimonopoly Service. So it was part of "the power vertical" and transparency here was "unqualified" since it was only "public reason" and to real reason of transparency laws. So we don't have and we never had transparency lobby here in Russia and data that was published actually is not so good. We validated it a few weeks ago and we found that it's not something that could be trusted without validation since lots of data about these contracts actually was incorrect.

Similar situation about many other Russian laws. About government property, e-services and so on. Some laws demand that information should be published online but never defines data formats or data quality control.

And even more. All European and US transparency activities have strong background of Open government directive for US and Re-use of Information Act for EU.

But we don't have anything like that. We don't have any long term government policy about open government and transparency. Instead russian officials talks about "information society" and "e-services" and they even try to pub open data as e-services. Our officials very and very rarely use word "transparency".

And as another example. Official Russian statistics available as e-services. That's ridiculous but it's true. I can't download whole Russian statistics dataset like EU statistics data or US statistics data. I have to request each little table using "e-service" requests one by one.

At the the same time it's not so bad. We have some civil activities like our OpenGovData.ru and Datagov.ru that are non-government and non-profit projects. We active projects like Streetjournal.ru (it's Russian alternative to FixMyStreet) or Russian-Fires.ru that coordinates volunteers to help people during forest fires and so on. And we try change attitude of Russian officials to help them understand real value of open data and crowdsourcing.

Sure it was only very short introduction and next time I write about Russian Moscow "Information city" program and how it differs from Smart City and Open Cities.