

# How does the shift toward e-petitions as a primary mechanism for political influence in Russia alter the accountability structures of the centralized state and the long-term stability of its decision-making processes?

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## Executive Summary

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The shift toward e-petitions in Russia primarily alters accountability structures by centralizing them to the Kremlin, defining accountability as vertical compliance with central Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) rather than horizontal responsiveness to citizens [7, 9, 13]. This mechanism streamlines top-down control and contributes to the stability of the centralized state's decision-making processes by providing real-time metrics for monitoring regional performance and enforcing federal priorities [3, 9, 11]. However, this approach also fragments local accountability, creates destabilizing incentives for officials to prioritize closing digital tickets over solving root causes, and risks undermining long-term governance quality and stability by intensifying tensions with regional elites and filtering out unstructured feedback [3, 7, 9, 12]. The long-term stability impact remains moderately uncertain, as the system's ability to manage accumulating dissent and elite friction without genuine power redistribution is an ongoing challenge.

## Key Findings

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### Centralization of Accountability and Top-Down Control

The shift to e-petitions has fundamentally redefined accountability in Russia, moving it from local voters to the central Kremlin administration. Regional governors are now primarily assessed based on KPIs set by the Kremlin, ensuring strong top-down accountability and vertical compliance with federal directives [7, 9, 10, 12, 13]. This centralization strategy treats regions as "territorial divisions of one huge corporation" where leaders are interchangeable and obligated to maintain loyalty to Moscow [11]. A 2017 study found no strong correlation between governors' performance based on public and expert opinion or their ability to mobilize votes and their job security, indicating that digital metrics serve as tools of political control rather than authentic policy guidance [13].

This system is reinforced by platforms like Gosuslugi and the GovTech Unified Digital Platform, which became mandatory for regional information systems in January 2024 following a March 2023 presidential decree [4, 6, 8, 11]. The "Rule by KPI" system, implemented around 2016 under Sergei Kiriyenko, further evaluates gubernatorial candidates and incumbents to preserve regime stability [7, 10].

## **Streamlined Decision-Making and Fragmented Local Accountability**

Consolidating e-petition data into centralized digital dashboards streamlines top-down decision-making by providing the Kremlin with standardized, real-time metrics to monitor regional performance [3, 9]. Governmental portals have shown effectiveness in solving localized urban problems, reporting a 57% success rate and over 400,000 resolved issues [1]. However, this consolidation simultaneously fragments local accountability by bypassing traditional local filtering mechanisms that contextualize regional grievances [7]. The dismantling of direct mayoral elections and the abolition of local self-government remove institutional filters that prioritize local concerns, shifting local leaders' accountability away from voters and toward central government officials [7, 9, 12]. This creates a disconnect between solicited public opinion and actual policy decisions, as officials prioritize demonstrating compliance with central KPIs over addressing the root causes of regional grievances [3, 9].

## **Destabilizing Incentives and Distorted Resource Allocation**

The mechanical tracking of e-petition resolution rates, while stabilizing governance through top-down control, creates destabilizing incentive structures that distort long-term resource allocation. Officials prioritize closing digital tickets and demonstrating compliance, leading to "mechanical responsiveness" and "policy simulation" rather than genuine problem-solving [3, 9]. This approach risks intensifying tensions with regional elites and undercutting federal efforts to implement policy efficiently, potentially leading to worse governance quality and instability [9]. Without functioning electoral mechanisms, resources are allocated based on central directives rather than organic community needs, often funneling toward easily quantifiable urban problems to meet digital KPIs while deeper socio-economic issues are neglected [7, 9, 11].

## **E-Petitions as Simulated Responsiveness Mechanisms**

Russia's e-petition platforms primarily function as simulated responsiveness mechanisms

that centralize accountability to the Kremlin, rather than driving substantive policy shifts through direct citizen input. The state deploys these digital tools mainly for "public opinion monitoring, narrative control, and legitimacy management" [3]. Citizen participation remains limited by high distrust of authorities (50.0%) and ignorance of the platforms (56.3%), with citizen use of government-operated platforms assessed at 5.26 out of 10 in 2021 [2]. Independent e-petition portals achieve a lower solution ratio of 1% to 6% for general e-petitions, further confirming that the mechanisms are designed to reinforce top-down control and simulate responsiveness [1].

## **Elite Friction and Homogenized Governance**

Replacing informal elite loyalty networks with quantifiable e-petition metrics directly triggers friction between regional governors and Moscow. Governors are increasingly assessed based on Kremlin-set KPIs, leading to strong top-down accountability [9, 13]. This centralization strategy creates resistance from regional elites whose autonomy is threatened [9]. To maintain control, the Kremlin frequently rotates regional leaders to prevent the formation of independent power bases [11, 12]. This friction cascades into homogenized governance strategies, with regional governance becoming even more centralized and subordinated to Kremlin control in 2023-2024 [12]. The Kremlin now selects governors more carefully and proactively, aiming to establish a new federal government while balancing the interests of key lobbyist groups [11]. However, these intensified tensions risk undercutting federal efforts to improve policy implementation efficiency, potentially leading to worse governance quality and undermining long-term stability [9].

## **Information Bottlenecks and Vulnerability to Systemic Shocks**

The reliance on state-mandated e-petition platforms creates a data dependency that filters out unstructured feedback, establishing an information bottleneck that makes centralized decision-making vulnerable to systemic shocks. The state prioritizes quantifiable digital data over organic civic engagement, filtering out emotional and moral elements that often drive successful grassroots petitions [3, 5]. This creates a dependency on structured metrics, where digital feedback serves as "policy simulation" rather than authentic responsiveness to root causes [3]. The excessive political centralization and dominance of vertical over horizontal decision-making, coupled with strict political oversight of civil society organizations, masks underlying public sentiment until it accumulates [12]. This fragility was demonstrated during the 2018 battle with the

Telegram messenger service, where the state's blocking of 18 million IP addresses disrupted other services and revealed limits to centralized digital capabilities [4, 8]. This "networked authoritarianism" model, while simulating responsiveness, leaves the centralized state susceptible to elite friction and sudden systemic disruptions [3, 4, 6, 9, 12].

## Implications

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The shift toward e-petitions in Russia implies a state that prioritizes centralized control and managed stability over genuine democratic accountability and adaptive governance. For the Kremlin, these platforms serve as crucial tools for monitoring public sentiment, managing dissent, and enforcing federal priorities across a vast and diverse federation. This allows for rapid, top-down administrative corrections and a degree of policy coherence. However, this comes at the cost of local responsiveness and the potential for long-term governance quality degradation. Regional leaders, incentivized to meet central KPIs, may neglect deeper, systemic issues in favor of easily quantifiable problem resolution, leading to a superficial appearance of effectiveness. The suppression of unstructured feedback and the creation of information bottlenecks also mean that the centralized state may be less aware of accumulating grievances, making it vulnerable to sudden, unforeseen systemic shocks. The ongoing friction with regional elites, whose autonomy is curtailed, further suggests that while the system aims for stability, it may inadvertently sow seeds of future instability by substituting genuine problem-solving with algorithmic distortion and political loyalty.

## Limitations and Caveats

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Direct, high-credibility evidence on the long-term stability impact of Russian e-petitions is limited, making definitive conclusions about future stability challenging. The available research focuses more on the mechanisms of control and shifts in accountability rather than comprehensive, longitudinal studies of systemic resilience or fragility. Specific platform names, detailed market shares, and precise user adoption rates for 2025 were not available in the provided research, nor were granular data on resolution times or priority-based comparisons across federal districts. While the research indicates a strong lean towards e-petitions as tools for centralized control and simulated responsiveness, the full extent of their impact on the *long-term* adaptive capacity of the Russian state, particularly in the face of unforeseen challenges, remains an area requiring further

empirical investigation.

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