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## Contest as a method of exposure of the quality of municipal strategies

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### **Contest as a method of exposure of the quality of municipal strategies**

The article includes the answer to the question “What are municipal socio-economic strategies supposed to be?”.

In order to reach a consensus on the quality of municipal strategy it was proposed to use the Contest of the urban strategies, which was held in Russian cities with population over 100.000 people. The contest resulted in division of the participants in 3 groups: winners (Orsk, Samara, Cherepovets), finalists (Vologda, Irkutsk, Kaliningrad, Novoshakhtinsk) and semifinalists (Bryansk, Krasnoyarsk, Sochi, Tambov, Ulan-Ude).

The contest created three sources to define a good strategy: feedback from the jury; analysis of strategies of the winners; feedback from mayors of the finalist cities.

A strategy is supposed to be a special plan for regional community that provides one or more goals to achieve under conditions of uncertainty. There are lots of difficulties connected with comparing of municipal and cities strategies and with their rating and their evaluation, as well. Practically it's impossible.

There are no unified criteria of quality for municipal strategies and there are no unified criteria which were asserted by Russian government with normative act or were adopted by expert community. Nobody knows what a “good” municipal strategy means. Someone thinks that the main features of a “good” strategy are practicality, feasibility and embeddedness in planning and budget systems. Others think that a “good” strategy should have original ideas for development and big projects to make local community to be involved in strategic planning process.

The Municipal strategies' contest was chosen as a tool to search for consensus on the qualities of a “good” strategy for city. The main part of the contest was based on creative competition with expert jury voting. Experts were selected from the field of municipal strategic planning. The contest was held in two rounds with classroom presentations, open to the public.

Some words about contest procedure. 12 cities from different regions took part in the first round: Samara, Cherepovets, Orsk, Vologda, Irkutsk, Kaliningrad, Novoshahtinsk, Bryansk, Krasnoyarsk, Sochi, Tambov, Ulan-Ude. The round was held on September 11, 2014 at the Ministry of Regional Development in Moscow. The jury members judge independently by 2 parameters: quality of a strategic document (60% of result) and presentation (40% of result). Jury votes were based on weighted arithmetic means.

Top 7 cities were selected by the Jury to participate in the final round: Vologda and Cherepovets from Vologda Oblast, Irkutsk from Irkutsk Oblast, Kaliningrad which is the centre of Kaliningrad Oblast, Samara from Samara Oblast, Orsk which is the second city of Orenburg Oblast and Novoshakhtinsk – small city in Rostov Oblast.

By the decision of the Organizing Committee contest was held within a framework of XIII All-Russian Forum «Strategic Planning in the Regions and Cities of Russia». The Forum is held annually since 2002 and is considered to be the main platform for discussion of methods and tools of strategic planning, as well as constructive analysis on the most important and sensitive problems of strategic plans and complex project implementation in urban development of Russian Federation.

In the finals strategic documents were presented by Mayors of municipalities. The expert Jury was consisted of seven famous researchers and consultants. They should assess strategic documents and presentations. Each expert had only two votes to give for two best, in his mind, strategies.

The winners of the contest were Samara and Cherepovets. It should be noted that three cities had the same number of votes (3), but Orsk (the third one) lost one vote because presentation wasn't made by Mayor but it was a rule.

Supposing the contest strategies to be significantly different and divided into several types and the jury to see and take into account these differences during estimation, the analysis of the results will allow to restore the implicit system of selection criteria and identify the best strategies' features that separated them from the worst. It also helps to understand the preferences of the experts: which particular strategy each of them prefers most. Voting was even, and it means that all the city-finalists have a good strategy and their quality differentiation was insignificant. This fact makes it difficult to identify the factors of choice.

Participating cities were divided into 3 groups after all stages of the contest: Winners, Finalists and Semifinalists. The competition results were analyzed by taking into account the content of the strategies by special codifier. The codifier was developed in «Leontief Centre». It was used for the analysis of the municipal strategic documents and has been tested in 2013, when 100 strategic documents were studied.

The codifier was focused on description of real Russian municipal strategies. Most of them are socio-economic so two groups of aspects are included in the codifier: social and economic. Moreover, different groups of aspects in the codifier allow to emphasize the type of

infrastructure projects and to choose implementation mechanism for the strategy. The creation of codifier was influenced by the idea of the “right” approach to strategy’s elaboration when only some priorities are distinguished clearly and key flagship projects are emphasized.

Finally, we had a result of contest and result of our analysis of strategies so we could compare it. Different indicators and options were studied: ambitiousness, key projects, economic transformation etc.

### Ambition

To my mind, ambition is aiming at fundamental changes or advanced development. If the strategy contains quantitative data, the indicators of ambitiousness are dynamics of industrial production, average wages, etc. correlated with the forecast of economic development in Russia in the year strategy was adopted. In the absence of quantitative data, peer review, based on the number of social, economic and infrastructure projects, and the cost of these projects in relation to the budget of the municipality, is used. The winners’ strategies are more ambitious than strategies of finalists and semi-finalists.

### The focus of strategies

The declared direction was determined by “image” section of the strategy: Mayor’s request, the City mission, the main goal of the City. General practical orientation was revealed in the studying of the goals, objectives, courses of action and projects. The winners’ strategies distinguished greater diversity: both economic and social components are developed, so are other spheres. 6 of the 12 studied strategies had a complete unity interaction between declared and practical directivities. 2 of the 12 strategies had a partial interaction while the quantity of directivities was equal. The quantity of declared directivities exceeded the quantity of practical directivities in 2 of the 12 strategies (e.g. Cherepovets).

### Flagship projects

The presence of the “flagship projects” in the codifier was a necessity. “Flagship project” is the project that influences city development mostly. It is also considered that “flagship project” should be clearly described in strategy and researched enough. “Flagship projects” are described in the economy, infrastructure and social services separately. Finalists use flagship projects in strategies rarely. At the same time, semifinalists use them even rarer.

### Economic transformation

The codifier can determine the type of economic policy: selective economy that is aimed at a specific industry or business or general economy that is focused on the general level playing field and good economic climate. In the most cases strategies are based on mixed economy. They pay attention both to general economic conditions and to private industry and business. If we analyze the degree of planned changes, winners pay more attention to the diversification. Institutional support and advisory support are used as the most common support tools.

#### Infrastructure

The degree of attention to infrastructure projects is defined by its quantity. It may be noted that the degree of attention to infrastructure projects from the winners is high, but, anyway, it's lower than in the finalists-cities. The majority of projects relates to the transport system development.

#### Social policy

The greatest interests in the strategies are education and culture. Semifinalists' interest in social problems is lower than other groups'. The winners use flagship projects in the social sector more actively than the finalists and the semi-finalists.

#### Implementation mechanism

Implementation mechanism is important for strategies' realization. The attention degree to the management of the strategy's implementation does not differ for all groups. Increasing the efficiency of local authorities through the usage of an integrated system of implementation indicators of the strategy is the most expected changes in the management system due to analysis of specifics.

What separates the winners from the finalists and semi-finalists?

1. Greater ambitiousness;
2. Complexity (great interaction between declared and practical directivities);
3. Frequent usage of flagship projects;
4. Concentration on economic diversification;
5. Usage of institutional and advisory support for the economy;
6. Higher attention to the development of education and culture;

7. Higher attention to the issues of implementation with the citizens participation in governance and efficiency of local authorities.

Analysis of direct statements of jury members about the qualities of a good strategy gives the following list of features. Most often and repeatedly mentioned features were a system of monitoring and implementation mechanism, ambitiousness of strategy and existence of flagship projects. There were also other criteria mentioned rarely, such as involvement of the head of the city and the entire community; the concentration on the person and on specific projects; existence of key issues, key benefits and the generation of new targets and ideas; the usage of new opportunities; strategy's originality and consistency of the document; a deep analysis of the internal and external factors. Conformity assessment was full almost in all cases.

Before announcing the results, Mayors were asked: "What is the most important quality of a good strategy?". They had to answer in one word.

Leading cities mayors stated that a good strategy is the one which is:

- **cooperative** – a strategy was elaborated collectively leading to consolidation of local community and key authorities;
- **independent** – a strategy was elaborated by the local community with no governmental influence, irrespective;
- **deliberative** – a strategy was elaborated by the local community considering its own interests;
- **ambitious** – a strategy was elaborated to reveal the potential of local resources and inspired by enthusiasm of locals;
- **realistic** – a strategy was based on adequate situation analysis and establishing achievable goals and purposes;
- **realizable** – a strategy was provided with an elaborated implementation mechanism; when goals and purposes are being ambitious but provided with clear instruments of resource mobilization, performance control and results overview;
- **stable** – a strategy that does not change dramatically despite radical changes or possible power shifts.

As you can see, jury members highlighted both ambitious and realistic features. The combination of these qualities in one strategy, perhaps, is the secret of success and victory in the contest. It is also necessary for the successful usage of strategies as a tool for socio-economic development of cities.

Conclusion

So there are 2 important results of the research. Firstly, creation of contests, which allow to use and to interpret the expert opinions and assessments, is possible. Expert assessments are used to identify the ideas of scientists, consultants and practitioners that underpin the success of the strategic planning in the city. The contest gave 3 sources to determine such qualities: direct statements of jury members; analysis of the properties of the winners' strategies; direct statements of Mayors of finalists cities.

Secondly, the expert opinion about the qualities of good urban policies was defined: *“Good” municipal strategy should be ambitious; provided with elaborate implementation mechanism and monitoring system; concentrating on the flagship projects; developed under the leadership of the Mayor in common with stakeholders; understood and accepted by the local community.*