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Master-Plan as Tool for Future: From Strategy to Real Change

How has the approach to territorial development management changed in Russia? Why has master-plan become a key tool for regions and cities, how is it different from the usual socio-economic development strategies, how is the regulatory framework for its implementation adopted and why this approach unlocks new opportunities – from higher quality of life to raising investments and international cooperation. Evgeniya Murinets, architect and urban development policy expert, member of the Expert Council on Comfortable Urban Environment Development under the Ministry of Construction of Russia, Lecturer on Master's Program of Presidential Academy, advisor to the Governors of Astrakhan and Ulyanovsk regions, tells BM.Moscow Foresight readers about all of these issues.

Evgeniya, let's talk about the subject that seems to involve all spheres of the economy of any city, region, country - about the comprehensive development of territories. Today in Russia we hear more and more often such concepts as "comprehensive development", "integrated approach to development", "development master-plan", "development strategy". What do experts mean by these concepts, are they identical?

Yes, all these concepts are about how to manage development of territories, which steps need to be taken by municipal, regional and federal administrators and under which sequence, in order to achieve set goals. The goals have been defined by the President, we are well aware of them, since the achievement of these goals is expressed literally in every task set for all

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government bodies. These goals form the basis of Russia's socio-economic and spatial development strategies, of Russian region strategies. High-level goals are added up with detailed non-conflicting goals for local communities, because despite the general similarity of the problems of the current quality of life in the country, there is nevertheless local specificity based on geographical, climatic, and national characteristics etc. Simply put, these notions primarily denote a way to achieve a decent standard of living in a specific area, and this way incorporates all aspects of life: from federal conditions and tasks to city-specific and even district-specific tasks and challenges: starting from quality of federal highways, major universities, cultural centers and ending with construction of a kindergarten or a polyclinic, and even local park improvements. The latter, by the way, is one of the most frequent requests from residents – improvement of both public and courtyard areas. At one time we, the federal government jointly with the professional community and development institutions, launched the federal territorial improvement program - DCUE (note - development of comfortable urban environment), and today every city in our country could demonstrate a space, improved under the program.

And when did this story begin?

By and large, we inherited excellent standards from the Soviet period, and these standards accounted for a required volume of social, engineering and transport infrastructure. The only, but very important difference between this approach and the current one is that back then estimates were based on labor needs of the existing and prospective factories in a specific region and housing requirements to create proper living conditions for worker families. In 2010 Russia's first master-plan was developed for the city of Perm – our "guild" considers it to be the very first comprehensive development plan. But if we dig a bit deeper, then it would look more like a concept of architectural and urban development rather than the strategy of socio-economic development (SED). The first modern SED strategies had emerged a little earlier, back in the 2000s, when the first industry law "Urban Planning Code" was devised, giving structure to urban planning principles. And just over the latest five-seven years we have been developing master-plans as symbiosis of "general" plans and SED strategies, understanding the deep interdependence of these documents.

What makes a master-plan document so special?

In its current format, a master-plan is an inter-industry document and this is a crucial point. This puts a master-plan above even a SED strategy, because once the plan is in place, a region has to adjust its strategy in line with the novelties, spelled out

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in the master-plan.

Looks like a victory of some “strata” over others …

Not quite so. A master plan is the main tool in managing territorial development, available to a governor, the prime minister and the president. A master plan prioritizes sectors in a specific city. This is why it is not a victory of some “strata” over others, but a tool for top tier executives, developed at the instruction of the President, who promptly developed such a comprehensive vision. And going back to the point in time, the year of 2016 would be a more accurate time, when our President and Prime Minister of Japan Shinzo Abe at the sidelines of the Eastern Economic Forum, working to improve relations and achieve the goal of signing a peace treaty between the countries, had agreed on cooperation in several areas, spatial development being one of these. At the same time, at the suggestion of Mr. Abe, the countries agreed to work together on the development of Vladivostok, being the closest to Tokyo major Russian administrative center and a key Russian port in the Far East. Our President forwarded these instructions to DOM.RF, which in its turn developed a master-plan in collaboration with Japan's largest design and engineering company. This master-plan was the first one to revise, apart from the architectural conception, the potential for the city's socio-economic development as a whole, to identify priority areas and development directions for the urban district, to calculate financial models for these priority areas and to propose ways to achieve them, or, as they say today, a “roadmap” with timelines, costs and responsible parties. It must be admitted that some of the solutions proposed by Japanese experts, for example, removal of port and warehouse facilities from the city center, raised many questions from the city administration, as they seemed too large-scale and revolutionary, though supported by the regional administration. Overall, this was a new approach for the country. At the same time, there was no legal framework in place to accommodate this approach, which had complicated its implementation, at least in this specific iteration, though the master-plan was presented at all levels in both countries.

But there is still no regulatory framework in place for master-plans today …

It is indeed so, but since then the master-plan concept has got many supporters both from state executives and from the professional community and residents. Moscow has done a great deal of administrative and institutional work for this. This work involved the Government of Moscow, particularly, the Moscow General Planning Research and Project Institute with 70

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years of experience in planning very large territories, the team of DOM.RF, a federal development institution, uniting under its roof leading Russian specialists in territorial development, VEB.RF and private industry developers from Moscow and Saint-Petersburg, our federal ministries such as the Ministry of Construction of Russia, the Ministry of Economic Development. Over the latest three-four years this pool was joined by the Presidential Administration, acting as an initiator, coordinator, controller and assistant in the development of such documents, particularly for Far Eastern cities. Ultimately, we see this term in presidential orders more frequently, which gives governors and mayors an opportunity to develop, though for now with extrabudgetary funds only, and follow master-plan novelties in their current activities and for making important strategic decisions to develop the territories under their authority. Moreover, the so-called master-plan bill is already prepared and pending approval in the near future.

And what will happen after its approval? Will all regions have to develop master-plans for all their cities?

First, when a document becomes legitimate (that is, its definition and specifics appear in the federal legislation), this creates an opportunity to allocate state budget funds for its implementation, something that is very difficult to do directly today. Second, according to the bill, the development of a master-plan is a right of the region, not an obligation. This is the most crucial aspect. This, I believe, is a compromise between the de facto traditional management system and an innovative, more complex approach that is not yet feasible for everyone. Third, according to the President's instructions from March 2024, the Russian government, together with the heads of the federal subjects, must identify 2,000 pilot settlements, for which long-term development programs should be developed, and to select two hundred “test” cities and metropolitan areas out of these two thousand, and prepare master-plans under the new law for these test cities. I should say that contrary to general expectations, now there is a queue of cities to get on the "200" list, and now there are about 280 cities in the queue. The advantage for the listed territories is that federal co-financing and extra-budgetary funds from development institutions will be allocated for the development of their master-plans. Also, numerous programs of the National Project "Infrastructure for Life" will be supported by activities, included in these master-plans and development programs.

There is a lot of work to be done... Is there an ultimate goal for it?

The question is purely philosophical, on the one hand, and very specific on the other. This is what we started our dialogue with:

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the country operates a system of national goals and tasks, supported by national projects that are intended to help achieve these goals. The upcoming timelines feature the year of 2030 with continuation prospects up to 2036. All goals and objectives are focused on the well-being of the population, on improving living conditions, on increasing the population and life expectancy, and on increasing the technological level of the economy etc.

So, a master-plan is more of a social project?

Indeed, bot social and investment project, since it determines socio-economic potential of a territory. And this would be a good basis for raising both domestic and foreign investments into development.

Essentially, this is a tip for investors on where and what to invest money in?

Yes, it is a great tip, since a master-plan would give them all the information on what is planned for construction/refurbishment, where it is planned and how much money would be allocated for this, the source of financing and what is most important, what would be the expected outcome of a specific activity for residents, for city, regional and federal economies and for investors as well.

And which master-plans today, in your opinion, are the closest to the "standard" you described?

Such projects exist in the Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky agglomeration, the city of Grozny, the Murmansk agglomeration, Yakutsk, _ Ulan-Ude etc. There are master-plans for smaller, but no less important cities of the country: Suzdal, Derbent, Mendeleevsk etc. Considerable experience has been gathered. The new draft law is based on this experience, particularly on these cities.

This is a really large-scale approach. Generally speaking, is this our domestic "invention" or has it been borrowed from the

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West? It seems unlikely that "master-plan" is of Russian origin.

Indeed, "master-plan" is a foreign word. But it has less significance abroad. This is more of an architectural and urban planning concept than the first Russian master plan for Perm we discussed earlier. In the early 2000s, numerous innovations were introduced into the Russian regulatory framework, and into the field of urban planning and architecture as a whole. Even the Urban Planning Code was based on the American urban planning model of governance. Back then there was also active exchange with Western experts in other urban planning areas, architecture, construction materials and technologies. We got financial and political opportunities for easy travel abroad and to learn, and also many expats came to Russia to work at Russian sites. It is they who had brought us the word "master-plan" in the context of architectural and urban planning concept. In Moscow, our pilot region in almost all industries, back then almost every architectural concept and draft featured master-plans. At the time we started to replace "general plan" with "master-plan" out of fashion, to make these layouts more visually attractive for customers. However, the master-plan under the current reading of the draft law features practices that are unique for the global market. And we are glad that we can offer our developments to the world in this rather significant sector of the economy.

And who can develop such a complex inter-industry document? What skills does a developer need? Is there a corresponding professional standard?

Yes, this is indeed one of the key issues on which the quality of the final result is dependent. As you defined it, a master-plan is an inter-industry document, so its developers should be consortia, including architects, sociologists, economists, historians, financiers, and other professionals as needed for a specific project. The leader of such a consortium can be a representative of any industry. Managerial experience and the ability to negotiate with all participants, authorities, residents come first here. Such experience can be found in architects, sociologists and lawyers alike. Here I would also emphasize the importance of customer competencies and his proactive support for development, rather than just formally responding to developer inquiries on the one hand, and reports from federal authorities on the other hand.

To conclude our dialogue, I would like to ask to what extent this development area could become another point of common ground in our cooperation with BRICS countries and other international partners.

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Yes, it is a great tool for such purposes. In the era of reforming global value chains, a master-plan can become an applied platform to offer options for foreign investment, export potential, based on a specific territory potential. For instance, numerous border cities exist that, nevertheless, fail to take full advantage of their potential. And a master-plan can literally show us the way to fruitful cooperation.

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