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**Future development of Russian political system:  
a view from Ural region**

The research is based on empirical data gained in 2006 in the city of Yekaterinburg (centre of Sverdlovsk region) which is the one of Russian industrial leaders with the population of 1,3 million people.

There were two stages of the research. The first one was interviewing “experts” – professionals engaged in political process (regional government officials, regional legislature deputies, political journalists, political scientists and party activists). The experts were asked to make assessments of four major domains of contemporary Russian political process: institutional design, political elites and leadership, political and geographical aspects and mass consciousness. Besides assessing current trends expert made their judgments on future perspectives up to 2015-2020.

The second stage of the research dealt with deeper examination of the mass consciousness by using qualitative method of focused group interview. The scope of problems was the same that the one at the first stage of the research.

Here we represent brief summary of the data and the most important inferences with emphasizing basic current trends and their most possible implication to describing Russia’s political future.

**1. Institutional design of the Russian political system.**

The influential potentials of federal and regional political institutions in Sverdlovsk region have the following meanings:

(in the table below the aggregate ranges are presented where 5 is a maximum possible meaning)

<b>Institution</b>	<b>2008</b>	<b>2015-2020</b>
The President of Russian Federation	4,65	4,4
Federal government	4,1	4,1
Plenipotentiary representative of the President of Russian Federation	3,65	3
Governor	4,85	4,65
Political parties	2,4	3,3
Chief federal inspector	1,95	2,1
Regional legislature	3,25	3,8
Local self - government	2,75	3,1
Mass media	2,95	3,5
Federal business elites	3,25	3,4
Regional business elites	3,5	3,75
Militaries	3	2,65

The governor is viewed as most powerful political actor. His influence is assessed stronger than a presidential one. This trend is supposed to maintain by 2020.

In future we can expect strengthening of regional legislature, local self-government, political parties and mass media. The institutions expected to diminish their influence are executive powers of different levels and militaries. So we can state that the experts involved in the research expect invigoration of democratic institutions and procedures in future Russia. But at the same time regional (as far as federal) chief executives will stay the key actors of political process.

## **2. Political elite.**

There are two major sources of elite recruitment in Sverdlovsk region nowadays: government institutions and business. In future we expect gradual growth of the role of political parties and non-governmental organizations, and decline of military and “secret services” professionals presence.

In the table below the list of personal characteristics is presented where the numbers mean per cent of the expert who consider certain qualities to be important

for successful career in regional politics. So, this can be examined as a guideline of professional standards for Sverdlovsk region politicians.

	Present time	In 2015
Professional competence	35	75
Family ties	75	40
Clan or ethnic ties	20	5
Corruption	15	5
Support of business elites	50	45
Communicative proficiency	20	20
Support of government institutions	40	40
Conformity	20	5
Commitment to national interests	10	30
Concern with achieving positive results of activity	5	25
Loyalty to in-group interests	5	5

Developing high professional standards for regional government officials will be the main result of political evolution by 2015. At the same time there are some elite recruitment characteristics that are to maintain their influence: family ties and support drawn from government and business institutions.

In spite of the fact that the experts are prone to consider elite schism the main possible cause of political destabilization the level of its consolidation in Sverdlovsk region is assessed as average. That means Sverdlovsk regional political system faces higher risk of losing stability and firmness than the federal political system.

The level of public support towards elites is assessed as high (speaking of federal elite) or average (with reference to regional elite).

By 2008 significant restructuring of regional administration is not foreseen, whereas by 2015-2020 the experts predict medium-scaled renovations.

### **3. Evolution of Russian federalism.**

Federalism is viewed in Sverdlovsk region as a major basis for maintaining national unity in contemporary Russia. In future a growth of economy and public well-being must accompany strengthening of federal power to overwhelm the risks

of disintegration of the country. Separatist movements in Sverdlovsk regions are unable to counteract the policies of the federal government and basically are too weak to be taken into consideration.

Most Sverdlovsk experts hope that in future Russian federal government will develop policies oriented to protect and support regions that play leadership role in Russian economy instead of distributing budgets in favor of economically weak regions.

Only 20% of interviewed experts are satisfied with an existing model of 'centre-regions' relationships, 35% characterize this model as over-centralized, and also many of them believe that the current model is not completed yet and has to change in future.

In general the most desired for Sverdlovsk region trend of federalism evolution in contemporary Russia is invigorating regional autonomy in determining social and economical policy.

#### **4. Political and psychological analysis of the mass consciousness.**

The structure of political values is formed by dichotomy "democracy – authoritarianism".

Most respondent perceive the current state of the Russian political system as transitory. Stable fundament for democratic consolidation is still absent.

Social and political stability is menaced by nationalist movements and popular attitudes. Youth organizations are treated as the most possible ground for developing non-conformist and anti-system drives.

At the same time authorities of contemporary Russia are perceived as descendants of Soviet political tradition that is connected with maintaining numerous anti-democratic political practices especially at the regional level.

The perception of federal authorities is ambivalent: negative attitudes towards political power as such and regime match with highly positive attitude towards the personality of President Putin.

The image of President Putin in the mass consciousness is positive and attracts public support. None of the other Russian politicians, including all those who work with him closely, can be compared with him as an effective electoral campaigner.

The future of the country is regarded with strong pessimism based on political unpredictability, whereas future prospects of the Sverdlovsk region are much more optimistic due to a strong believe in inevitable economic prosperity. The highest degree of optimism relates to personal future.

Contemporary Russian political power is perceived as inferior in comparison to an abstract ideal existing in people's minds. Approaching to the ideal might be achieved only in case authorities establish closer ties with public and let it defend civil right. Another important demand is bringing morality into politics as whole and in relationships between the state and civil society.

Territorial aspects of Russian political future are connected with an international economic context. The role of Russian political elites in this process is not meaningful.

## **5. Expert assessment of Sverdlovsk regional political future.**

Here we summarize experts' perspectives on regional political future into three trends – optimistic, pessimistic and stagnation-based. Each of these trends assumes some basic features of political system and process.

### ***Optimistic – “transition to consolidated democracy”:***

- political parties and civil society playing much more important role in political process;
- expansion of legislatures influence by establishing the regime of "responsible government";
- the growth on public confidence and support towards democratic elections;
- Political elite formed by party and non-governmental structures;

- the most important characteristics of political elites are professional competence, commitment to national interests and concern with achieving positive results of activity;
- stable economic growth as a guarantee of political and social stability;
- “centre-regions” relationships are reformed in order to expand economical policy opportunities of highly-developed regions (such as Sverdlovsk); at the same time regional political elites draw themselves out of federal political process;
- Nation developing tolerance attitudes, reinforcing democratic legitimacy of the ruling elite based on the growth of public support.

***Pessimistic – “destabilization of political system”:***

- schism (deconsolidation) of the ruling elite;
- growth of inter-ethnic anxiety based on sharp increase of legal and illegal migration from China, Middle Asia, Caucasus and other regions;
- social differentiation becoming more drastic;
- higher risk of terrorist attack;
- interference of the foreign countries in order to damage national interest of Russia;
- radicalization of political behavior among youth subcultures;
- higher risk of social conflicts between original population and immigrant, between "the rich" and "the poor";
- disintegration of national identity caused inter-generations anxiety.

***Stagnation – “invigoration of ‘controlled’ democracy”:***

- the President dominating in federal political process, governors – in regional;
- business elites playing an active role in shaping policies and “stuff” of regional legislatures;
- legislatures of all levels becoming more dependent on the policies of executive branch;

- transition to proportional electoral system on regional level;
- local self-government included in “power vertical”;
- consolidation of federal and regional political elites that are recruited from such sources as family, clan or ethnic ties and support of government institutions and business elites;
- state determining activity of political parties and civil society;
- developing “catch-all” political parties with vague ideology and social basis oriented to populist rhetoric that is political parties as machinery for attaining electoral votes;
- ideologically indifferent mass consciousness with underdeveloped political believes;
- low civil activity.

Most of experts’ assessments fall into so called “stagnation-based” trend. But we’ve also asked them to make a difference between desired and highly possible visions of the future. So whereas they basically tend to predict maintenance of the most powerful current trends (which are associated with stability – “controlled democracy” model), they hope and believe that democratic transition is to be completed in future.