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Managing an “Unfinished Project”: Analyzing the Elites of Perm Krai Through the Lens of Expert Opinion

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Abstract. Perm Krai and the socio-political processes taking place in it are in many ways typical of Russia, and therefore of interest to a wide audience of researchers and political analysts. Based on the theoretical constructions of international elites studies and the Perm School of Political Science and elitology, we study the political and business elites of the region, their political behavior, aspects of identity, as well as the most politically sensitive topics in the life of the region. Relying primarily on the literature analysis and subsequent own semi-standardized in-depth interviews (N10) with representatives of regional elites — the following results were obtained. The identity of the elites and everymen in Perm region is somewhat vague, associated with the neutral notion of geographical region of the Kama region. Liberalism in the economic sphere and a relatively stable inter-elite consensus in the political sphere, based on technocracy, are characteristic of the region's policy for some decades. The region is characterized by a low socio-political dynamics compared to the benchmark regions of the Urals and Siberia, due to lack of regionally oriented elites and businesses and the predominance of various kinds of “Varangians” in the political class. The socio-political and cultural landscape of the region (the Perm Cultural Project) becomes a starting place and a source of supplies for the elites, receiving back very little. Thus, the region remains a promising project that cannot be realized in any way.

Keywords: Perm Krai, Kama region, Urals, elites, Perm Cultural Project, regional identity, regional political culture, the problem of Varangians, Gazprom, Lukoil, Uralkali, Trutnev, Reshetnikov, Makhonin, Kuzyaev

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Управление «незаконченным проектом»: элиты Пермского края в зеркале экспертного мнения

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Аннотация. Пермский край и социально-политические процессы, происходящие в нем, во многом типичны для России, а потому представляют интерес для широкой аудитории исследователей и политических аналитиков. Отталкиваясь от теоретических построений международного уровня в области исследований элит и пермской школы политологии и элитологии, мы изучаем политические и бизнес-элиты региона, их политическое поведение, аспекты идентичности, а также наиболее политически чувствительные темы в жизни края. С помощью анализа литературы и последующего качественного исследования — серии полустандартизированных глубинных интервью (N10), проведенных автором с представителями региональных элит, — были получены следующие результаты. Идентичность пермяков носит несколько размытый характер, ассоциируясь с нейтральным понятием географического региона Прикамья. Либерализм в экономической сфере и относительно устойчивый межэлитный консенсус в политической сфере с опорой на технократизм характерен для политики региона, отличающейся преемственностью. Для региона характерна невысокая, относительно регионов бенчмарков Урала и Сибири, социально-политическая динамика, связанная с фактическим отсутствием регионально-ориентированных элит и бизнесов и преобладание разного рода «варягов» в политическом классе региона. Социально-политическое и культурное пространство региона (пермский культурный проект) предстают как стартовая площадка и источник ресурсов для элит, но не получают обратных вложений. Регион при этом остается в статусе многообещающего проекта, который никак не может реализоваться.

Ключевые слова: Пермский край, Прикамье, Приуралье, элиты, пермский культурный проект, региональная идентичность, региональная политическая культура, проблема варягов, Газпром, Лукойл, Уралкалий, Трутнев, Решетников, Махонин, Кузьяев

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*We are a city of launched and unfinished projects.
We are a city of hired managers who come for a while
and who do not care what will happen to Perm later.*

Businessman Andrey Kuzyaev¹

Introduction

The Perm Krai is in many ways a typical Russian region, which however has some unique features with great potential for development. Developed human capital, a high degree of industrialization, the presence of civil society at the grassroots level, the ethnoreligious diversity with a huge experience of centuries-long coexistence of the Christian and Islamic population, the status of a donor region for the Russian economy, with a pronounced regional identity — all these factors determine the significant potential of the region. This potential, however, remains largely unrealized due to several constraints: the region has a large sparsely populated territory; the overwhelming majority of the population is largely individualistic and inert, with a low level of socio-political activity and civic self-organization; the region is remote from all borders, has a moderately harsh climate and, accordingly, high transaction costs, socio-economic heterogeneity and a variety of lifestyles — from the industrial and post-industrial capital of the region with a developed cultural environment, westernized social practices and lifestyle of large cities to the archaic hard-to-reach areas of the Komi-Permyak Okrug. Regarding the structure of the region's economy, there is a significant bias towards the extractive industry: the “resource curse” determined the “Dutch disease” of Perm Krai's economy. The region is characterized by a high degree of socio-economic inequality. These factors, both negative and positive, are generally characteristic of the entire country, which means that some of the findings of this study can be generalized and used as a basis for more general reflections.

Research hypothesis: the regional elites have practically no planning horizon, and, with rare exceptions, do not associate their future with the region. On the contrary, they seek to build loyal and constructive relationships with the federal centre, due to which the dynamics of socio-economic development in the region remain weakly positive, at the same time slower compared to regions with similar indicators.

In this article we will consider the typology of elites regarding the case of Perm; study the reasons behind the current situation based on the analysis of the literature on the socio-political development of the region; and then, based on the analysis of a series of expert interviews, find out the reasons for the reduced socio-political dynamics compared to the benchmark regions, as well as several characteristics of modern regional elites: the degree of paternalism, focus on the region, dependence on the federal centre. We will also consider the region's most urgent issues and factors that might trigger potential protest, as well as identify the issues that the elites themselves are concerned about.

¹ Publication 1336/ Tatishchev's Pick — Perm in the past, present and future (@perm2023) (In Russ.) Retrieved August 15, 2022, from www.tgstat.ru

The theoretical and methodological basis of the study

In their classic volume H. Lasswell, D. Lerner, and C. Rothwell (1952) treated elites in terms of “leadership” of a society as a criterion of the values by which that society lives. The theorists were focused on the manner in which the “leadership” is chosen; the breadth of the social base from which it is recruited, as well as the way in which it exercises the decision-making power. Later the interest towards the elites studies revived, however, as M. Woods (1998) stated, the term ‘elite’ has remained largely untheorised and unproblematized. He identified three elements of elite definition, focusing on access to resources, networking, and discursive construction.

J. Wedel challenges the dominant theory of elite power, grounded in Weberian bureaucracy, which analyzed elites in terms of stable positions, and differs power elites from influence elites, “the modus operandi they employ to wield influence enable them to evade public accountability” [Wedel 2017].

Regional elites were studied in the European context. M. Tatham and M. Bauer (2021) survey the distribution of competences across the regional-national-EU triptych and highlight that preferences of regional elites ‘remain somewhat of a black box’.

Out of the EU context the term “regional elites” is often used in Russian literature: D. Badovskii and A. Shutov (1997) gave a historical perspective of the role of regional elites which used to strengthened in crisis periods. E. Avdokushin, A. Ponedelkov, and S. Vorontsov, (2015) note a discrepancy between the traditional meaning of elitism and the possession of real political power while A. Chirikova (2010) analyzes the political strategies of regional elites in the context of the power vertical.

In Russia regional policy cases are often studied in the context of regional elites. In an even political climate, with loyal and barely active masses, the elites as a driver of socio-economic and political dynamics are of the greatest research interest. As stated by O.V. Gaman-Golutvina: «Several empirical projects confirm that, despite the variety of social splits and divisions in modern Russian society (the rich and the poor; the Centre and the regions; ideological or ethno-confessional diversification), the dichotomy between the elite and the non-elite mass groups will remain the most significant demarcation line. It was the dominance of the elites that became the most important factor that determined the interest in [studying] elitist issues” [Gaman-Golutvina 2016].

One of the three blocks of Russian elitological literature is the study of the essential and functional features of various segments of the elites (federal, regional, administrative, parliamentary) by using sociological (theoretical and empirical), political-psychological and political-comparative methods. [Gaman-Golutvina 2016]. Following this logic, we focus on qualitative methods of social research, namely the method of expert interviews.

In this paper, we will use the “broad” interpretation of the elite, which describes it as the highest stratum that exists in any system of social stratification that determines the functioning and development of the society as a whole or its individual subsystems and acts as a key subject in developing the norms and values of the society. At the same time, we will follow A.V. Duka in considering the elite in terms of three non-mutually exclusive types of objects: 1) as functional groups, 2) as a certain social stratum, 3) as institutions [Duka 2012].

Following N. Lapina and A. Chirikova [2000], we outline the subject of our research as follows: the regional political elite includes the head of the region, his deputies, the heads of the executive, representative authorities, and local self-government. Thus, we accept their working definition of the political regional elite as ‘a social group that is the subject of preparing and making the most important decisions in the region and performing the function of coordinating these decisions with other subjects of the political process both within the subject of the Federation and at the level of the federal centre’. That is, we extrapolate the broad understanding of the term “elite” to the concept of a regional elite.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that there is an ongoing discussion about the content of the concept of ‘regional elite’. The internal inconsistency of the term is mentioned by several authors, including Permian elitologist V. Mokhov: ‘from the point of view of classical theory, this concept is not entirely correct, since “by definition” the elite are the highest, best, most influential. The regional strata of those in power are in the middle between the upper strata of society and the masses. This situation is not saved by the reservation that the regional elite are the highest, best, or most influential strata of the regional community’ [Mokhov 2003]. V. Mokhov suggested resolving this methodological problem by choosing between three approaches: normative, altimetric and functional. The normative approach is associated with the meritocratic approach; the altimetric one relates to the very principle of staying in power; the functional one relates to the understanding of the elite as a social group that performs certain vital functions in society. At the same time, from the functional approach’s point of view, the composition of the regional elites should be expanded through wider groups of influential regional actors, which is very important in the context of this study. V. Mokhov distinguishes two components in the structure of the regional elite: the actual industrial (hierarchical) and post-industrial (network) components. In this study, we will try to consider both.

Elites of Perm: Literature review

Among the studies dedicated to the regional political elites of Perm, we should distinguish the works of O. Podvintsev, K. Punina, L. Fadeeva, M. Nazukina and other scientists from Perm State University. For three decades, the Perm school of political science has been dealing not only with general theoretical issues (primarily the problems of identity) but also with their implications for the local and regional context. Local elites of Perm region are also in their focus [Krasilshchikov 2022].

In particular, referring to the modern history of the region, K. Punina [2003] writes: ‘The formation of a new regional political elite occurred through the conclusion by various groups (the ruling [group], the moderate part of the opposition and other political actors) of the so-called pact, i.e., agreement on the rules of interaction in the new conditions. At the same time, the “pact” is also a peculiar way of obtaining guarantees for the former regime in exchange for democratization. As a result, according to researchers, by 2000, the region saw the development of a polycentric model of power, implemented by multiple individuals acting simultaneously and

distributing responsibility and authority'. To what extent are the conclusions drawn in the early 2000s still relevant twenty years later.

Around the same period, as part of the “Perm Option-2” project, realized by the Center for Elite Studies of the Academy of Political Science, L. Fadeeva wrote about the “Perm phenomenon”, which lied in the fact that a significant part of the population (more than 30 %) was convinced that the development of the region was on the right track, in the right direction, while the country was developing somehow wrongly. Today we can state rather the opposite picture. With the general support of the federal government, over the past few decades, Permians have had many questions to the regional authorities (the level of trust in the ex-governor M. Reshetnikov at the best of times reached 19 %²; during the elections of the incumbent governor D. Makhonin, large cities showed a turnout significantly below 30 %³).

Studying the features of Permians' regional identity, M. Nazukina [2018] sees the problem of duality and internal inconsistency: ‘Different levels and types of identities are closely intertwined in the matrix of the territorial identity of the Permians. Similarly, at the political level, image projects are being promoted, positioning the region both as part of the Volga region and as part of the Urals’, which generates a conflict. According to her, the art object ‘Neither fish nor meat’ by the artist A. Zhunev personifies the Perm region. Indeed, the self-identification of Permians as Uralians has both strengths and weaknesses. As O.B. Podvintsev noted, ‘the informal name of the region was Western Ural и Prikamye (Kama area), then ‘Prikamye’, which was by no accident established during the period when regional identity was actively being constructed, since it emphasized not the peripheral (the main massif of the Urals is outside), but self-sufficient (Kama is an internal axis) character of the region”. Today, the toponym ‘Prikamye’ dominates the media. It does not contain the stipulated contradictions, but it also, apparently, has little content that could mobilize the identity of the region’s inhabitants.

Residents of the Perm Krai associate themselves with their closest neighbours, primarily with their main competitor for the title of the capital of the Urals — Yekaterinburg. In recent years, this region has developed very dynamically in terms of economy, culture and especially infrastructure. The latter creates noticeable differences between the two cities. O. Podvintsev suggested that ‘a significant external challenge that can affect the development and transformation of regional identity in the Perm Krai is the obvious significant progress in many neighbouring regions, against which the region appears to be on the losing side’. However, today the divergence between Yekaterinburg and Perm becomes more and more obvious: the first one is a region with strong liberal traditions, which ‘shows attitude’ to Moscow even amidst the extremely regulated social and political life (as seen on the case of the sharp controversy between the governor E. Kuyvashev and propagandist V. Solovyov and,

² Savelli S. Reshetnikov as the governor was recognized by every second Permian. The results of a regular opinion poll: data on the edge and Perm differ. The figures on trust are interesting. Retrieved June 15, 2022, from <https://ura.news/articles/1036270832?ysclid=17dr4zvaki541761611>

³ Permians have given a credit of trust to Governor Mahonin. Retrieved June 15, 2022, from <https://news.myseldon.com/ru/news/index/237357725>

to an even greater extent, ex-mayor E. Roizman's arrest in the summer of 2022), while Perm does not cause problems for the federal centre and is an example of unity with it⁴. This position is traditional for the region. According to L. Fadeeva [2003], 'the Perm region is distinguished by greater moderation, the predominance of conventional forms of behaviour over non-conventional ones, a tendency to centrism, the absence of claims to leadership and messianism, and a calmer self-identification'. L. Fadeeva notes that the characteristics of the style of the Permian political elites remains stable and 'in general, such characteristics apply to all major regional leaders of the Perm Krai throughout its history', starting from the times of Tsarist Russia. These assessments continue to remain relevant, as are the conclusions of sociologists E. Plotnikova and N. Borisova [2008], who indicated that 'for many years, the regional policy has been characterized by liberalism (especially in the economic sphere) and a relatively stable inter-elite consensus (in the political sphere), and in the last two or three years, technocratism has become a distinctive feature of the region in terms of political decision-making. The technocratism, which replaces politics, as well as project management in the conditions of the region's diversified structure, have led to a fairly active innovative regional policy, oriented, among other things, towards the accelerated reform of the social sphere'. However, the success of the technocratic approach in the face of reduced civilian oversight and elite consensus remains less optimistic in 2022 than it was in 2008.

The theme of the Perm region as a Project in general and a sum of ambitious projects, in particular, is an important leitmotif of the regional political discourse. This is largely due to the ambitious Soviet projects (e.g., subway, large-scale construction in the Kama Valley). A number of infrastructure projects that have not been implemented to date (the new stage of the opera house, the construction of an art gallery, the third automobile bridge in Motovilikha) was planned back in the 1970s⁵, but were not developed due to the economic difficulties of the 1980–1990s, and were not implemented in economically prosperous 2000–2010s either. Some of these projects continue to be relevant, as regional authorities bring them up when they go to the polls, but their implementation is still being delayed. During the governorship of M. Reshetnikov, several transport and infrastructure innovations were added to the list of announced but unrealized projects⁶.

Both regional and federal authorities understand that the enchanted course of unrealized projects must be broken: the incumbent governor D. Makhonin went to the polls with this agenda. He promised to implement projects of top priority

⁴ "Absolute trust": Political scientists on the meeting of the president with the governor of the region. Retrieved June 15, 2022, from <https://perm.rbc.ru/perm/freenews/61e16cb79a79479b9a5d1f58?ysclid=17drct46du923540155>

⁵ Semileyskaya T. Soviet fiction. Retrieved June 15, 2022 from <https://www.chitaitext.ru/novosti/sovetskaya-fantastika/?ysclid=176k08jwqz166022520>

⁶ A constellation of plans. Top 5 unrealized projects of ex-governor Maxim Reshetnikov in Perm. Retrieved June 15, 2022, from <https://www.business-class.su/news/2021/01/21/sozvezdie-planov-top-5-nerealizovannyh-proektov-eks-gubernatora-maksima-reshetnikova-v-permi?ysclid=176jpa31o7313815193>

by the 300th anniversary of the city in 2023: these projects include improving the central streets — Komsomolsky Prospekt and Lenin Street; reconstructing the esplanade; constructing a new building for the regional hospital for infectious diseases; reconstructing the railway station; renewing the public transport fleet; developing the infrastructure of the Perm airport; constructing a new stage for the Perm Opera and Ballet Theatre, etc. These projects are being implemented with a large share of the federal centre's participation, however, the regional authorities face serious challenges in qualified communication with it: *“Not a single project is implemented without the federal government and federal money: the regional budget will just crack. The Krai can paint the schools by September 1, but bridges, roads, and large facilities cannot be done without the federal centre. To receive federal support, it is not enough to know the President, you must be able to do the paperwork”* Expert L.

As E. Plotnikova and N. Borisova [2008] wrote in their report ‘The Sociological Portrait of the Perm Krai: Regional Socio-Cultural Traditions in the Conditions of Political and Administrative Innovations’, the Perm Krai is an example of co-innovative (follows the innovations of the centre) and at the same time innovative (produces innovation itself) development. At the same time, the integrative process, the municipal and administrative reforms, and social policy all turn out to be some kind of ‘projects’ implemented by the regional authorities. Over the past three or four years, the Perm Krai has often been referred to among journalists as a project, which implies potential, aspiration for the future. However, the amount of accumulated unrealized or unfinished projects over the past decades creates a negative symbolic capital for the regional authorities both in the eyes of the local population and the federal centre. In a series of expert interviews, we discussed the reasons why there is a stable model of Perm as a region of unfinished projects, as well as the identity of Perm Krai's inhabitants.

Research methodology. This article to some extent continues the study ‘The Sociological Portrait of the Perm Territory’ and is based on a series of own semi-structured in-depth interviews with representatives of the regional elites. Experts were selected according to availability, keeping the proportion of the academic political scientists, representatives of regional authorities and public organizations, and media representatives: the experts included political scientists from Perm State National Research University, Perm Higher School of Economics; a member of the City Duma; the head of an ex-governor's office; a representative of the local community; an editor-in-chief of regional socio-political media. The formation of the guide with open questions was preceded by a content analysis of the regional media.

Results and discussion

The Perm Krai is one of the leaders in the economic development of Russia, a donor region, and one of the few regions with a diversified economy: it has a developed fuel and energy complex (“Lukoil-Permnefteorgsintez”, “Lukoil-Perm”, “Gazprom Transgaz Tchaikovsky”), chemical production (“Uralkali”), metallurgy, military-industrial complex, communications, construction, retail. Active business players work under

economic competition and have their own interests at the regional level. The region is traditionally considered liberal-oriented, much like neighbouring Yekaterinburg: however, compared to the latter, it is much more moderate and less successful in the political arena and social dynamics in general. Is this an element of chance, the result of relations established in the previous Soviet period, or maybe the result of economic competition and the disintegration of elites? The potential of the Perm Krai in terms of economic and human capital is enormous, but the socio-political development does not match it. During the interviews, we were interested in how experts see the place of the Perm Krai in the Ural and Volga macro-region, which subjects of Federation Permians relate their region to, and what they see as the reasons for similarities and differences.

Perm and Benchmark Regions: Causes of Decreased Socio-Political Dynamics

The respondents most often predictably named Yekaterinburg (there is some literature on the rivalry between two cities: [Nazukina 2006; Zhavoronkova 2015]) as well as Tyumen and Chelyabinsk, among the most frequently named regions to which Perm is compared. Thus, they identify themselves with the regions of the Urals and Siberia, and not with the Volga Federal District, to which they belong in terms of the administrative-territorial division of the Russian Federation. The Volga Federal District is seen by the Permians as much more traditionalist (*“Compared with Udmurtia, Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, Perm is a much more modern region in terms of connections”* Expert V.) and generally different from the sociocultural point of view.

Among the causes for Perm lagging behind other regions with similar socio-economic indicators, ethno-confessional composition, history of foundation and development, experts named:

- 1) domination during the Soviet period in the structure of the region’s economy of the defence industry, which suffered greatly in 1990–2000: *“Many serious enterprises were wasted by the lack of investment.”* Expert L.;
- 2) the “frondeur” positions of the first governors B. Kuznetsov and G. Igumnov, who opposed themselves to the President of the Russian Federation B. Yeltsin and the federal centre as a whole;
- 3) lack of internal competition between the city and the region, which is typical for many Russian regions, the conflict dynamics which create development impulses: *“The problem of Perm is that in the relations between the city and the region there is no tension, competition and own ambitions.”* Expert V. *“There is no tension. And the lifestyles of the residents of a metropolis and a regional centre can of course differ. There are centripetal processes in migration as with any metropolis.”* Expert S.;
- 4) lack of independent financial and industrial groups;
- 5) lack of a long governorship: the reverse side of the high quality of the local elites’ human capital was that the Perm region acted as a springboard for a quick transition to the federal level for effective leaders;

- 6) evident economic liberalism, the complete absence of regional protectionism;
- 7) lower quality of local oil compared to benchmark regions (Tyumen).

The general conclusion from the statements of the experts is that Perm lost the competition for the informal status of the capital of the Urals, thus also losing the symbolic and financial resources associated with it. Historically, the city had a more advantageous position due to its greater proximity to the Central European part of Russia, but during the Great Patriotic War more industrial enterprises were evacuated to Yekaterinburg, which created the basis for a greater influx of population, higher industrialization, and subsequently to the development of local business groups not directly connected with Moscow.

Among the unpopular opinions, the following was expressed: *“The region used to be a destination for exile, there are a lot of prisons, the gene pool is spoiled”*. Expert L.

As for the question of **how the elites of the Perm Krai are structured**, what role political, business, law enforcement, and criminal elites play, whether they are grouped around specific political and economic figures or are associated with the largest taxpaying enterprises, which business elites are the most politically active, and is it possible to say that the most important economic and political players of Prikamie have got their representatives in the authorities, we got the opinion of experts, which comes down to the following:

1. The elites are structured mainly by belonging to a large business, primarily mining. *“The son of Yu.P. Trutnev also begins to engage in regional politics. And there is the influence of the construction business. They actively work with regional and local authorities, because the specifics of the business (areas, social infrastructure) make them interact all the time. Oil, gas, and chemical businesses also need it, but they came to the region without the participation of local elites.”* Expert A.
2. The political elite is homogeneous: the governor and his entourage, the Legislative Assembly, and the City Duma, as well as friendly business elites, represent a circle of people connected with each other, as well as with large businesses in the region: *“There are no plural political elites in Perm. There is one political elite: the governor and his entourage, the Legislative Assembly striving for them, in which the business elites and the City Duma are represented. All of them act strictly in line with the governor’s policy, fully coordinate all decisions with him.”* Expert A. *“There is communication between the elites, they created a group of industrialists in the Legislative Assembly and come up with a single agenda.”* Expert V.
3. Recruitment of political elites takes place through an informal institution of quotas for representation in the Legislative Assembly and the City Duma for the largest enterprises: Gazprom, Lukoil, Uralkali, Sibur, — but their goals are not limited to lobbying. Along with the representation of business interests, which are mostly carried out “through Moscow”, participation in government bodies is a form of “social burden” for the largest enterprises in the region: *“In the City Duma and the Legislative Assembly, big business*

is supposed to have its own representatives: Lukoil — Zhukov, Cherepanov, Mineral Fertilizers — Shilov, Perm Motors also have a representative. But these are not so much lobbying goals as image goals, this is an established informal institution. A deputy mandate is an entrance to the political elite and facilitated communication with the authorities, but on the other hand, it is an additional obligation to support the interests of voters.” Expert A. Moreover, the informal institution of quotas is quite dynamic: *“Uralkali is more active than Lukoil in these elections (2021), it is increasing its quota.”* Expert V.

4. All large business in the region is represented by the federal centre, there are practically no independent financial and industrial groups in the region that have their own, different from federal, interests in the region and are ready to lobby for them. *“All large business is vertically integrated, federal, such as Lukoil. Their interest in politics is declining. Traditionally, Lukoil, Gazprom-Tchaikovsky, Uralkali have informal but stable quotas in local government and the Legislative Assembly. In those territories of the region where mining enterprises are located, they have a kind of fiefdom in terms of business, deputy mandate and interaction with the heads of local administration.”* Expert V.
5. The growing influence of people from law enforcement agencies in recent years *“Now people from October 25 Street (UFSB in the Perm Region) have an increasingly important role. Power structures are not thinking about development.”* Expert L.
6. As the only exception of regional business not directly connected with the federal centre, experts name the head of the Perm Financial and Production Group (PFPG) A. Kuzyaev, who was more actively involved in regional politics in a public and non-public format in the past, and recently moved away and lost interest. *“The only local large business of A.R. Kuzyaev’s ER-Telecom is somehow present in politics and promotes its agenda but does it informally.”* Expert A. *“A. Kuzyaev has always had a certain influence on all governors. He always occupied his niche under the governor”.* Expert L. He is also called one of the most patriotic and region-oriented representatives of the region’s political and business elites.

The problem of the head of the region and their rotation is one of the key issues in the conversation about politics in the Perm Region. A situation that is paradoxical for the modern Russian political process arises: power is regularly replaced, and this is a negative factor in the development of the region not only in the eyes of the broad masses and expert officials but also academic experts. Over the past 20 years, the region has had five governors, which, however, is not evidence of the dynamic change of power resulting from a democratic political process, but of a turnover of management personnel. *“The frequent change of governors is an irritating factor for voters,”* political analyst E. Minchenko said following the results of the 2021 gubernatorial elections⁷.

⁷ Permians have given a credit of trust to Governor Mahonin/ Society/ Seldon News (In Russ.) Retrieved May 30, 2022, from myseldon.com

When it comes to the curators of the internal political bloc of the Russian President's Administration, they regard experience, rootedness in the region and connection with its elites, own political significance, and the presence of a workable team as both advantages and disadvantages for the gubernatorial candidates. Governors must meet several criteria: to be in the ranks of the presidential reserve, fit the definition of a “young technocrat”, be born in the region, gain experience in the federal government and be equidistant from regional elite groups, which is difficult to achieve for one who has political or entrepreneurial experience in the region. The following statement by one of the experts illustrates well the ambivalence of the problem of regional political leadership: *“All the governors followed their own interests: they used the region as a launch pad (M. Reshetnikov), as a place to do business (Yu. Trutnev, O. Chirkunov) or a source of enrichment (V. Basargin). Few people in the region are committed to the development of the region. The current governor (D. Makhonin) is young, without leadership experience and understanding of the region, he is under external leadership, without own understanding.”* Expert L. Governors M. Reshetnikov and D. Makhonin met these criteria, and at the same time, they partially appear in the eyes of voters as “Varyags” sent from the federal centre.

The problem of the “Varyags” in Russian regional policy was discussed in the context of the imperial model of governance in modern Russia in the works of O. Podvintsev [2009]. As A. Flyagin [2021] states the governorship was a springboard to the federal level in most careers of Russian governors. That policy of “recentralization” in practice, means the marginalization of regional and local politics. In the terminology of R. Turovsky, most of the current governors are “half-Varyag returnees”⁸. However, in a conversation with experts, there is substantial ambiguity in the concept of “Varyag”, as they use the term with different connotations:

“Local origin does not have any role. When Basargin attracted inefficient people, they were perceived as Varyags. But T. Currentzis was not labelled as Varyag. The Varyags are people who do not associate their future with Perm, have a negative impact, are projectors who do not realize the scale of the project and do not have any competencies. The percentage of Varyags in our region is growing. The tragedies of the past (the fire in the Lame Horse club, etc.) haven't taught them anything, this is not their personal experience.” Expert A. The authorities are aware of the fact that the problem of the “Varyags” after the governorship of V. Basargin (*“Basargin was a Varyag and had nothing to do with the region”* Expert L., *“Basargin and Reshetnikov did not justify the trust of the authorities”* political technologist O. Borisenko⁹) is one of the most painful in Permian politics, therefore, in his election campaign, D. Makhonin placed special emphasis on this, focusing on his personal and family ties with the region.

⁸ Expert interview with R. Turovsky in: Ashikhmina Ya. G. Direct elections of the heads of the subjects of the Russian Federation (1991–2005): typical features and trends of evolution: Abstract of the PhD Thesis. Perm, 2007

⁹ Power retention mode. How the transfer of power took place in the Kama region. Retrieved June 15, 2022, from <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4625678?ysclid=l7gonoixm2802993796>

“D. Makhonin has in mind the “problem of the Varyags”. Therefore, in his first public speeches, he focused on the medium- and long-term perspective of the governorship: he said that for the development of the Region, all projects should be planned for 8–10 years, that is, 2 gubernatorial terms. In general, the “problem of the Varyags” is acutely perceived by the elites, the broad masses do not care.” Expert V.

Expert S. considers that the “problem of the Varyags” has to deal with the anti-Moscow sentiments, which *“nobody cancelled”*.

Expert L. summarizes the idea of the “Varyags”: *“Varyags are not Permians. People of the region have never liked people from another region to be appointed. You need to understand the region, who is who, and you need to know people. Otherwise, they can quickly get confused. Leadership positions require a Permian.”*

The fact is that a “Varyag” is not so much a politician who was not born in the Perm region, but an incompetent manager who does not know the specifics of the region has a short-term planning horizon and does not connect his personal fate with the fate of the region. In this case, such successful regional leaders who have political ambitions at the federal level, like M. Reshetnikov, are perceived as “Varyags” who *“hit and quit”* the region, since they are *“always looking towards Moscow”*. The less ambitious and charismatic, like D. Makhonin, are perceived better, as there is hope that *“he will not be taken to Moscow but will be allowed to work in the region”*.

In the discourse about the “Varyags” in the scientific literature and the media, special emphasis is placed on the figure of the governor. While, according to our observations, the ones who cause particular rejection are the “Varyags” that are lower-level managers, and members of the governor’s team who are not familiar with the region. People accept the appointed governor as a political figure but expect him to lead a local management team. Personnel issues of the managerial level are of concern to experts: *“All the best minds are leaving for Moscow. A lot of people followed Trutnev, Chirkunov went abroad, Basargin was a Varyag and had nothing to do with the region, and Reshetnikov always looked towards Moscow. And a lot of people left with him, even line staff. Some stayed because of their age. 90 % of Reshetnikov’s team left with him and did not want to look towards the Region.”* Expert L. Another expert is equally sceptical: *“Makhonin does not have his own team. His team is not perceived as effective. In business and politics, everyone bows and swears allegiance, but among themselves they discuss that the governor’s team lacks competencies. The workers remain the same, the system lacks life. There is nowhere for a fresh stream to come from.”* Expert V.

In the early 2000s, Permian researchers O. Leibowitz and N. Shushkova [2002, 2005] interpreted **Permian political practices as paternalistic**: the Perm region was characterized by clannism, the primacy of territorial ties over social ones, politicians sought to create their own clients, the governor acted as an arbiter. To what extent are these approaches justified and to what extent do they remain relevant today? On this issue, the opinions of experts are divided. On the one hand, it was noted that in comparison with neighbouring Udmurtia,

Tatarstan, and Bashkortostan, Perm is a much more modern region in terms of social relations, while the governor remains the only significant political person. However, as many experts mentioned, the governors (Kuznetsov, Igumnov, Reshetnikov, Makhonin) rarely had a constant and loyal team. The expert's personal ideological and political orientation had an important role in answering this question: liberals tend to agree with the idea of dominating paternalism in Permian politics (*“Rather, yes. Frequent changes of governors demonstrate that local elites are much more rooted in the local agenda, as well as in tradition and minded clients.”* Expert S.), while more moderates perceive such an assessment with scepticism: *“The term paternalism is not entirely appropriate. Leibowitz’s estimates are not credible. There were a lot of people around Igumnov. He was a strong business executive, but a weak politician and manager with an inconstant team. He was not the centre of attraction. People came to power to solve their problems, to earn their capital. His environment eventually betrayed him. Trutnev had a team of associates. Chirkunov’s entourage was most prone to paternalism.”* Expert A.

Indeed, evaluating the activity, administrative specifics, and the system of building relations with local elites for the five governors, we can state that the conclusion about paternalism as a characteristic feature of the regional political culture (in N. Eremina’s [2011] terms) is not relevant. Rather, we should talk about the high degree of **dependence on the federal power resource**, which is characteristic of all Russian regions. Experts mention that in the regional electoral processes, the authorities always strive to emphasize the connection between regional and federal authorities. The resource of the support of the Russian President is very active. Experts attribute this primarily to the awareness by the inhabitants of the region of a direct relationship between the loyalty of the region, its elites, and the governor with the financing of infrastructure projects vital for the city and the region: *“Federal transfers are needed to implement the planned projects, so the governor and the elites are very focused on the federal centre. The more the governor associates himself with Moscow, the more support he will have, although not everything that comes from Moscow is perceived positively.”* Expert A. *“Without the federal government and federal money, none of the projects is implemented, the regional budget will fall apart.”* Expert L. *“The regional media do their best to emphasize the connection between the regional and federal authorities. The resource of the President’s support is still working and very actively.”* Expert V. However, Expert S. expresses a doubt: *“The level of support for regional authorities is very difficult to assess. Strong resistance is always hidden behind ostentatious reports and enthusiasm”*.

Communication with Moscow and lobbying the interests of the region is an important function of the regional elites, including those for whom the region has become a stage on their way to building a political career on the federal level. We asked ourselves how prominent a role the **Permian community** plays in Moscow, whether it is engaged in lobbying activities in the interests of the region, and how **Permian regional identity** remains relevant when Perm’s elites transition to Moscow for work.

With the predictable exception of the representative of the Permian community, the experts were unanimous in their responses, stating that:

1. Perm is, without a doubt, a training site for young careerists, a resource, and a starting platform. The high quality of human capital, including education and business qualities, allow people from Perm to be quite successful in the capital, even when they work for federal authorities. *“Through his activities, M. Reshetnikov has demonstrated that Perm is a training site for young careerists, a resource, and a starting platform. He went back to the region, in order to return to Moscow, he did not conceal that.”* Expert V.
2. In comparison with other regional representatives, the Permian community nowadays is an inefficient body: *“The Permian community was a meeting point for former Permians and functioned while being supported by A. Kuzyaev, who lived in Moscow. At the time, the older generation from Perm, who retained its Soviet mentality and strongly associated itself with the region, played an active role in the community. Now it is a thing of the past, and the community has ceased to play its part.”* Expert V. *“The community does not carry out any function, it’s like a party, a team building, much like a class reunion. Lukoil supports it and maintains its Krai. This is a platform for organizing events. It does not have its own ideas and projects. There is a Stroganov Prize, which is quite controversial.”* Expert L.
3. The identity was preserved among the older generations of administrators from Perm, who belonged to the Soviet generation. The preservation of the identity is characteristic to a much lesser extent of the new generation, whose careers developed during the post-Soviet period. *“I think that the identity is being preserved, in a way that the language, basically, the dialect, manners, style, tastes are being preserved... gradually fading away under the influence of the capital city, new communication rules, the new, artificial language of Moscow and big money.”* Expert S.
4. The identity is based on regional patriotism and remaining family ties in the region: *“Many Permians used to work in the Moscow Government even before Reshetnikov. Once they hear the Perm dialect, Permians support each other in Moscow. We all love the region, we have families, and relatives there, and we have invested a lot, for example, in the construction of a cathedral. If you remove politics, then everyone keeps the region in their heart. We are leaving because working or living there has become impossible.”* Expert L.

Love for the homeland, its nature (as experts write, the most frequent formula for the manifestation of regional and, in particular, local patriotism in interviews with Russians can be depicted by the phrase: “I like the beautiful nature”), combined with acute contradictory feelings that the socio-political system causes, is characteristic of most residents of Russia. And one of the most painful emotions is generated by a sense of injustice associated with **the extreme insufficiency or even complete absence of nationally and regionally oriented elites** who would link their future and the future of their children with the place where they live, administer or extract rents. Regarding the degree to which the Perm elites are focusing on the region, what the

business and political elites of the region consider a norm regarding the matters of their children's education and asset storage, and whether there are any dynamics in this matter, the views of the experts significantly diverged. Nevertheless, it is possible to single out several common aspects:

1. The top managers of large businesses from Moscow, who live there temporarily, their families, children, and personal businesses have nothing to do with Perm.
2. Permian business elites are mostly focused on the Perm region. *“Their apartments, cottages, and yachts are located here, while their children grow up and work mainly in the city (Kuzyaev, Demkin, Trutnev). Chirkunov, along with his castle in France, turned out to be an exception.”* Expert A.
3. The elites prefer to give their children higher education in the capital or abroad: *“Everyone tries to send their children elsewhere to study. In the case of universities, without a doubt, they send them to Moscow. Everybody has more than one family after all.”* (Expert L.).
4. Experts do not consider nepotism and dynastic nature in political and business elites to be particularly pronounced, in comparison with other regions or the federal centre, by naming only several names. Expert A: *“In Perm, nepotism in politics is more of an exception. Trutnev's son is engaged in business and is in no way a public person. In addition to the Demkins, it's possible to name the father and son Bolkvadzes, David and Arsen. The father is the owner of a construction business, while the son is the head of the Economy Committee in the Legislative Assembly.”* Expert B: *“The Demkins also have a third representative in power: Yevgeny Demkin is now being elected to the Perm Legislative Assembly, while Demkin Sr. has already resigned from power. The theme of nepotism, dynastic nature and the transfer of power is just beginning to become relevant. For those who engaged in politics in the early 2000s and remain in power, it is too early to pass it on, their children are just starting to get to the age of entering politics. We will see many more such examples in the coming years.”* Expert S. mentions *“the dynastic nature of Trutnev”*. Expert L. sums everything up: *“Nepotism is a widespread occurrence. Perm is like anywhere else. Thought, for the most part, nepotism is not characteristic of it.”*
5. Generally speaking, the level of elites' focus on the region is situational and depends on specific people. *Non-interference in private life is considered the norm, it is not up for discussion* (Expert V.).
6. The representatives of the business and political elites (largely conjoined) who are focused on making investments in European countries and conspicuous consumption (*“Rybolovlev — “Monaco” football club, European art collection, Chirkunov — castle in France, vineyards, winemaking”*) (Expert S.) especially stand out, however, it is difficult to state, that they cause any distinct condemnation. Usually, experts also recognize their contribution to the region (development of regional business and cultural projects).

In general, the topic of the ***Perm Cultural Project***, as part of regional identity, on the one hand, and as an element of legitimization of power, on the other, occupies a central place in the regional discourse. D. Rogers [2015] from Yale University in his book ‘The

Depths of Russia: Oil, Power, and Culture after Socialism' dedicates a chapter to the Perm Cultural Project. It was launched under Governor O. Chirkunov, at the time was perceived controversially by the society, then nostalgically, under V. Basargin, however, under M. Reshetnikov it gained new momentum. To what extent has this become a specific feature, or code of the region? From discussions with the experts, we have established that the Perm Cultural Project, as O. Lysenko (2016) states is 'one of the most striking and high-profile attempts of transferring to our land the modern European technologies for developing a territory with the help of culture'. It is important for the elites, for the positioning of the governor: *"The Perm Cultural Project has entered the regional code. It is unlikely that the Governor can afford to ignore the culture. Makhonin continues to develop these projects, they are symbolic and significant for all Perm elites. Demonstratively dissociating from projects for the development of cultural space would mean a shame for the government."* Expert A. *"These projects are starting actively, but then, that energy disperses somewhere. Nevertheless, every governor strives to declare his sympathies for the cultural field of the region."* Expert S.

The most important parts of this project include the fate of the Opera House, Art Gallery, Perm cinema (*"Movies started being shot in Perm — Pechonkin. The film industry is developing under an active assistance from the authorities."* Expert A.), as well as the development of cultural tourism (*"Vishera, Chusovaya, and especially mass cultural heritage sites: Cherdyn, Kungur, Khokhlovka, Gubakha"*) Expert A.

To a lesser extent, experts mention contemporary art, which was the starting point of the Perm Cultural Project under Governor O. Chirkunov with the assistance of M. Gelman. At the same time, the experts note that the Project needs support from the local cultural elites, who are far from reaching a consensus on this issue. *"Under Chirkunov, this was an artificial project, and it did not have any basis in terms of public opinion. There was no attempt of engaging in discussion. It was implemented in a revolutionary, Bolshevik way. There was a separation between the local cultural stratum and the management. O. Chirkunov himself later admitted that the project lacked the support of the population, and the authorities were wrong in not trying to enlist the support of the society. Subsequently, the group of sympathizers, admirers and even fans of the project, especially among young people, expanded. The arrival of T. Currentzis played a huge role. Many people fell in love with opera. Gradually, this could have been consolidated if O. Chirkunov had not been dismissed. It didn't have time to take root. The idea of cultural capital lacked enough time. It did not get deeply embedded in the life of the society."* Expert V.

Indeed, the idea of the Perm Cultural Project lacked enough time to take over the broad strata of the population. Nevertheless, Perm, as one of the cultural capitals of Russia, has firmly established itself in the minds of the region's population, despite the short and dramatic history of development so far: *"All of this was present under the former governors, Trutnev and Chirkunov. Basargin demolished everything, the city became grey, dirty, and wicked. The festival movement was revived under Reshetnikov. People love festivities. The city has a rich cultural heritage, writer Ivanov. There are many world-famous people, remarkable surnames. Cultural projects are very important, the authorities cannot afford to disown them. People respond to them and*

participate collectively. They are a necessity for this city. Cultural elites play an active role, they possess significant power. No election can take place without culture and events.” Expert L. Nowadays, the cultural project is an important part of the regional identity and a brand of the region, which makes it quite attractive.

Nevertheless, there are also quite a few problems, sore subjects in the region, which are reflected in politics and become a source of uprising tension, although it’s still not possible to overcome them. The responses of the experts include (by frequency of referencing):

1. Depopulation, especially due to the degradation of rural areas and monotowns: *“The most serious demographic problem is the overflowing migration of the population. The countryside has degraded because governors from Igumnov to Reshetnikov pursued a policy of reducing social infrastructure facilities in rural areas. Monotowns suffered the most. The example of the Kizilovsky coal basin, a large area in the Perm Krai, associated with Gornozavodsk and Dvinyachinsk is demonstrative: a disaster, in fact, occurred there. Kizil, Verkhnyaya Gubakha, and other cities and towns in the area today look like Stalingrad. The second problem is the desolation of the Northern Perm Krai as a result of the elimination of large enterprises and institutions of the Federal Penitentiary Service. The Perm protest is when people just leave.”* Expert A.
2. On an ad hoc basis, there is often tension associated with the construction of residential complexes and sports facilities (Balatovsky Forest, Molot stadium) in adjacent areas or in place of forests: *“Motovilikhinsky plant: its products are not in excessive demand; however, entire neighbourhoods are tied to it. The plant has halted the maintenance of the entire social infrastructure, including the sports palace and the Molot stadium. The territory is up for construction, the density of which in the Rabochiy Posyolok is already quite high. This causes a huge discontent from the local population, which collects signatures and sends appeals to the President.”* Expert A. *“The construction is a red rag for Perm. The reaction of the authorities is situational and selective, it’s not systematic.”* (Expert V).
3. Traffic and infrastructure problems. The possible closure of the Mining Railway has caused strong criticism (M. Reshetnikov’s project), which may become a cause for a traffic collapse. *“If the Kama hydroelectric power station crossing, which is used by everybody, is closed, there will be a social revolt.”* Expert A.
4. The problem of the availability of gas supply and the corruption related to it.

Overcoming these and other difficulties, as well as awareness and use of the objective advantages of the region, lies at the heart of the strategy for the region’s development. During a meeting of the expert council under the head of Perm city, one of the most respected (according to the estimates of the interviewed experts) representatives of the Perm elite, businessman A. Kuzyaev, outlined several ambitious goals¹⁰:

¹⁰ “On the sidelines of development.” Andrey Kuzyaev — about the past and future of Perm, in which we will live Retrieved June 15, 2022, from <https://properm.ru/news/society/198011/?ysclid=17611ff5dx351614423>

1. Reassess the experiences of the previous development of the city and region.
2. Prepare in advance for the global energy transition, which will radically change the economic situation in the region.
3. Develop the existing advantages in such fields as culture, science (pharmacology, biotechnology) and education, digital economy, and space technologies, and return the status of a transport hub.

It is easy to notice that these problems, tasks, and advantages, in general, can be attributed not only to the region but also to the country as a whole.

Conclusion

The identity of the Perm Krai residents is somewhat blurred, being associated mostly with the geographical region of the Kama region. Liberalism in the regional economy and a relatively stable inter-elite consensus in the political sphere, based on technocratism, is characteristic of the region's policy for decades. The region is has low socio-political dynamics, comparing with the benchmark regions of the Urals and Siberia. Regionally oriented elites and businesses barely exist with rare exceptions, and “Varangians” of various kind are predominant in the political class of the region. The socio-political and cultural landscape of the region (Perm cultural project) appears as a launching pad and an asset for the elites. However the area does not receive reverse investments. Thus, the region remains in the status of a promising project that cannot be whenever realized.

Hence, we return to the original idea of the article — depicting Perm Krai as a model, the example of which allows us to study the development of Russia. Natural resources, the wealth of human capital (inevitably declining due to emigration, but, nevertheless, still extremely high), powerful culture, and a culture-centred society — all of this create a huge potential, though the Project aimed at the future remains unrealized. The problem, for sure, has to do with the human capital of the political elites.

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