

# INFORMAL NETWORKS OF REGIONAL ELITES IN RUSSIA: A CROSS-TEMPORAL PERSPECTIVE

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**Abstract:** How do “*variags*,” or governors with no roots in the region, build their power networks? How do such networks differ from those of locally embedded leaders? This article examines the issue through the case of Russia’s Sverdlovsk Oblast, comparing the administrations of its first and current governors: Eduard Rossel’ and Evgeny Kuivashev. Based on biographical analysis supplemented by expert surveys, the author models the informal networks of both governors. With the help of Social Network Analysis, the paper reveals two different network strategies. These strategies ideally suited the political and institutional contexts at the time and played a key role in the relative political success of both governors.

What role do personal connections play in structuring the elite in Russia and other post-Soviet states? What shape do the social structures composed of patron-client relationships take? What explains different patterns of structuring informal networks? Are these patterns at all different? The growing interest in informal politics has already yielded important insights on these issues and offered new lenses for analyzing

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the structure<sup>1</sup> and dynamics<sup>2</sup> of Russia's federal elite. Subnational elites, however, remain overshadowed by this dominant focus, even though regional leaders are responsible for delivering social and economic benefits to citizens; developing transport, housing, and communal infrastructure; and attracting investments.<sup>3</sup> Governors in Russia were permitted a high degree of autonomy in policymaking regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, even if the primary intention was to shield the president from political responsibility for unpopular measures.<sup>4</sup> Regional leaders also play a significant role in delivering satisfying results in federal elections;<sup>5</sup> at the same time, the perception of regional elites as a competitor to federal power was the main driving force behind the ongoing centralization process that began immediately after Vladimir Putin came to power. Simultaneously a danger and a crucial policy actor, regional elites find themselves in an ambiguous context. They must be cohesive and strong enough to deliver political and economic results, yet divided and weak enough to avoid challenging the federal center. How are informal networks of regional elites in Russia organized, and how do they evolve in such a contradictory context?

Russia's regional elites operate in a constantly changing institutional environment. In 2005, following the Beslan school siege, direct gubernatorial elections were eliminated. The president secured the right to appoint regional leaders, who then had to be confirmed by subnational legislatures. Refusal to approve a presidential candidate could result in the dissolution of the regional parliament. The federal legislation changed again in 2012: following the mass protests of 2011-12, direct gubernatorial elections were reinstated. However, the new law imposed a so-called "municipal filter" that obliged a prospective candidate to enlist the support of no less than

<sup>1</sup> Alena Ledeneva. 2013. *Can Russia Modernize?: Sistema, Power Networks and Informal Governance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Filipp Chapkovskii & Viktor Diatlikovich. "Kto est' kto i pochemu v rossiiskoi elite" [Who Is Who and Why in the Russian Elite]. *Russkii reporter*. September 7, 2011, At [http://rusrep.ru/article/2011/09/07/who\\_is\\_who](http://rusrep.ru/article/2011/09/07/who_is_who), accessed November 16, 2020

<sup>2</sup> Henry Hale. 2014. *Patronal Politics: Eurasian Regime Dynamics in Comparative Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Alexander Baturo & Johan Elknik. 2016. "Dynamics of Regime Personalization and Patron-Client Networks in Russia, 1999-2014." *Post-Soviet Affairs* 32: 1: 75-98

<sup>3</sup> Ukaz Prezidenta Rossii of 4.02.2021 N 68 'Ob otsenke effektivnosti deiatel'nosti vysshykh dolzhnostnykh lits (rukovoditelei vysshykh ispolnitel'nykh organov gosudarstvennoi vlasti) sub''ektov Rossiiskoi Federatsii' [Decree of the President of Russia No. 68, dated 4 February 2021 "On the Effectiveness Assessment of the Highest Officials (Heads of the Highest Executive Body of State Power) of the Subjects of the Russian Federation"], At <https://base.garant.ru/400281504/>, accessed January 5, 2022

<sup>4</sup> Irina Busygina and Mikhail Filippov. 2021. "COVID and Federal Relations in Russia." *Russian Politics* 6: 3: 279-300.

<sup>5</sup> Tatiana Tkacheva and Grigori V. Golosov. 2019. "United Russia's Primaries and the Strength of Political Machines in the Regions of Russia: Evidence from the 2016 Duma Elections." *Europe-Asia Studies* 71: 5: 824-839; Ora J. Reuter 2013. "Regional Patrons and Hegemonic Party Electoral Performance in Russia." *Post-Soviet Affairs* 29: 2: 101-135.

5-10% of municipal deputies in 75% of municipal divisions. In 2013, the regions were granted the right to replace the direct elections of their heads with a parliamentary vote.

The changing institutional context brought about a new generation of regional leaders, the so-called *variags* (“Varangians”), who have few or no roots in their region. Between 2005 and 2012, when the appointment model was in action, 52 out of 88 governors were outsiders to the region to which they were appointed. Nor did the return of direct gubernatorial elections in 2012 overturn this trend. 105 new governors were appointed or won direct elections between 2012 and 2021, 70 of whom were *variags*.<sup>6</sup> Their lack of mass support in the region makes such governors highly dependent on regional elites, from whom they need political, economic, and media support in order to govern effectively. Failure to achieve such support produces explicit or implicit conflicts, often resulting in the governor’s dismissal. Contrary to the numerous accounts of the declining power of regional elites,<sup>7</sup> they are far from silent and feckless political actors. The regional elites often staunchly resist *variags*’ attempts to promote their clients into the regional bureaucracy. For instance, when Sergey Bazhenov (former governor of Volgograd Oblast) expressed the intent to bring his clients from Astrakhan, he faced an effective counterattack from the regional legislature: the parliamentarians introduced a bill requiring the governor to receive their support in order to appoint vice-governors. Meanwhile, Vladimir Miklushevskii (former governor of Primorsky Krai) faced lawsuits filed by the vice-governors he fired once he took office.<sup>8</sup> In the event of conflict, regional elites may foster an unfortunate media image of the governor and convince the federal center to replace this unpliant leader, as occurred in the cases of Alexander Tishanin (Irkutsk Oblast) and Murat Zyazikov (Ingushetia).<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Alexander Kynev. 2019. “Fenomen gubernatorov-‘variagov’ kak indikator retsentralizatsii (opyt 1991 – 2018 gg.)” [Phenomenon of Governors-“Outsiders” as an Indicator of Recentralization. Experience of 1991-2018]. *Politika: Analiz. Khronika. Prognoz (Zhurnal Politicheskoi Filosofii i Sotsiologii Politiki)* 2: 93: 125-150. Supplemented by the author’s calculations.

<sup>7</sup> For example: Vladimir Gel’man. 2008. “Leviathan’s Return: The Policy of Recentralization in Contemporary Russia.” In Cameron Ross and Adrian Campbell, eds., *Federalism and Local Politics in Russia*. London: Routledge, 17-40; Kynev, “Fenomen gubernatorov-‘variagov’”; Oleg B. Podvintsev. 2009. “‘Gubernatory-variagi’ i regional’nye politicheskie elity v sovremennoi Rossii: uslovia i tendentsii vzaimodeistviia [Governors-Varangians and the Regional Political Elite in Modern Russia: Conditions and Interaction Tendencies]. *Politicheskaiia ekspertiza: POLITEKS* 5: 2: 56-71

<sup>8</sup> For these and other illustrations of the conflicts between governors-Varangians and regional elites, see: Minchenko Consulting. 2012. *Politicheskie strategii gubernatorov-novichkov, naznachemykh na svoi posty v kontse 2011-2012 gg.* [Political Strategies of the New Governors Appointed to their Posts at the End of 2011-2012]. At [http://www.minchenko.ru/netcat\\_files/File/New\\_gubernatory\\_summary\\_final\\_23\\_04\(1\).pdf](http://www.minchenko.ru/netcat_files/File/New_gubernatory_summary_final_23_04(1).pdf), accessed January 5, 2022.

<sup>9</sup> Podvintsev, “‘Gubernatory-variagi’ i regional’nye politicheskie elity.”

How, then, do *variags* govern in practice, and how do they build their power networks? How do their strategies of network-building differ from those of locally embedded leaders? I will address these questions by comparing the informal networks of two governors of Sverdlovsk Oblast: Eduard Rossel' and Evgeny Kuivashev. This region faced enormous challenges after the collapse of the USSR, as its economy was inextricably linked with the defense sector and heavy industry, and the state had been its primary customer. However, Sverdlovsk Oblast not only managed to successfully overcome this profound crisis and become a donor region, but also redefined its relations with the federal center in the 1990s. Its first governor, Eduard Rossel', was among the cohort of regional "heavy-weights," remaining in office for more than 15 years. Scholars ascribe the oblast's economic and political results to the strong informal networks Rossel' built.<sup>10</sup> However, these assumptions remain quantitatively untested. Kuivashev's leadership can also be considered a success in its own right. He is one of the 15 incumbent governors appointed in 2013 or earlier, of whom only five are *variags* like Kuivashev. Despite the unpromising outlook upon his appointment in 2012, Kuivashev has been in power for a decade in a region with strong and diverse economic, media, and political elites. How different are the networking strategies of these two governors, who both have been politically successful, although in strikingly different circumstances? I will empirically address the question with the help of Social Networks Analysis (SNA), following a brief theoretical discussion on the link between strategies of coalition-building and political survival as well as an overview of existing research on clientelism and informal networks in Russia and the USSR.

### **Clientelism, Informal Networks and Coalition-Building: Theoretical Expectations and Post-Soviet Contexts**

Theories linking patronage, power coalitions, and political survival embark upon the same axiom: no ruler rules alone. However, the winning coalition's size may vary, with consequences for the leader's political longevity and the optimal strategy for allocating resources. Selectorate theory<sup>11</sup> predicts that the larger the size of the winning coalition relative to that of the selectorate (those who have a formal say in the selection of leadership), the less effective it is at providing clientelistic benefits to coalition members. The important implication of this rule is that leaders in all political settings are

<sup>10</sup> Gerald Easter. 1997. "Redefining Centre-Regional Relations in the Russian Federation: Sverdlovsk Oblast'." *Europe-Asia Studies* 49: 4: 617–635; Thomas Carter. 2015. "Networks and Regional Leadership in El'tsin's Russia: The Case of Eduard Rossel' in Sverdlovsk Oblast, 1989-1999." PhD diss., University College London.

<sup>11</sup> Bruce Bueno De Mesquita, Alastair Smith, Randolph M. Siverson, and James D. Morrow. 2005. *The Logic of Political Survival*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

interested in keeping the coalition small, as this increases its loyalty and reduces the chances for defection. Arriola's comparative study of African polities<sup>12</sup> somewhat contradicts this tenet. Enlarging cabinet size decreases the hazards of extra-constitutional change in the chief executive, such as coups and revolutions. However, extending the patronage coalition is conducive to political survival only up to a point. Further extension is associated with a necessity to divide the resource pie into thinner slices, which stimulates dissatisfaction within the coalition, thereby increasing the chances of a coup rather than minimizing them. The theory of neopatrimonialism also stresses the stabilizing effects of patronage in some cases. For instance, Bach<sup>13</sup> distinguishes between predatory and regulated forms of neopatrimonialism. Under the former, rulers extract public resources for their own and their extended families' private gain, as exemplified by the regimes of Bokassa in the Central African Republic and Mobutu in Zaire. Predatory neopatrimonialism often leads to economic crises, sovereign default, civil wars, revolutions, and foreign interventions. By contrast, within regulated neopatrimonialism, rulers abstain from monopolizing political and economic resources and use patronage appointments to co-opt different clans into the winning coalition. Examples include the regimes of Jomo Kenyatta in Kenya and Félix Houphouët-Boigny in Côte d'Ivoire. This strategy helped the fledgling independent states to soothe intra-elite conflicts and achieve relative political stability.

These theories provide helpful conceptual tools for understanding the logic of coalition-formation yet are not particularly tailored to analyzing the subnational level of power. All the theories mentioned above are based on at least three assumptions: a) all leaders are interested in holding their position; b) occupying the highest position in a power hierarchy, a leader acts as a principal and never as an agent; and c) the elite is a nested structure: a leader is a part of the winning coalition, whose support is sufficient for gaining and keeping power; at the same time, members of the winning coalition can come from the broader category of those who have a formal say in determining the leader (the selectorate). The organization of Russian subnational elites violates all three assumptions. First, governors are interested not necessarily in keeping their office, but rather in advancing their careers: positions at the federal level are often associated with broader resources and influence. Second, regional leaders act not only as principals in their own territories, but also as agents of the federal center, making them accountable to the latter at least to the same extent as they are to the local elites and population. Third, since the

<sup>12</sup> L. R. Arriola, 2009. "Patronage and Political Stability in Africa." *Comparative Political Studies* 42: 10: 1339-1362.

<sup>13</sup> D. C. Bach, 2011. "Patrimonialism and Neopatrimonialism: Comparative Trajectories and Readings." *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics* 49: 3: 275-294.

elimination of direct gubernatorial elections in 2005, those who actually determine the regional leadership (or the winning coalition, to use the terms of selectorate theory) are now located outside the region. Regional legislatures have never declined to appoint a gubernatorial candidate selected by the president. Following the return of direct gubernatorial elections in 2012, 95% of officials appointed as acting governors before the elections went on to win.<sup>14</sup> De facto, the support of the Presidential Administration is sufficient to attain the post of regional chief executive. However, as described above, local elites can find ways to push undesired leaders out of the region; hence, their support is often necessary yet hardly sufficient for holding onto power. An intermediate position in the formal hierarchy, divided accountability, and the peculiarities of the appointment process generate specifics crucial for understanding coalition-formation strategies in Russian regions. In other words, there is an essential interplay between different levels of power, and theories of coalition-formation do not address this interplay, although they admit this as a limitation.

Soviet and post-Soviet studies have also been concerned with the mechanisms of coalition formation in the region and have emphasized the informal side of this process. The emergence of scholarly interest in informal aspects of elite organization can be traced back to the 1980s, when Willerton<sup>15</sup> analyzed patronage networks in the Soviet CPSU Central Committee under Brezhnev. Looking at official biographies, he uncovered the complex structure of the network, with different cliques based on shared geographical (Dnipropetrovsk, Moscow, Moldova, Kazakh clans, etc.) or organizational (military-industrial and internal security complexes) backgrounds. The network perspective on the structure of the top Soviet elite opened up a broader discussion on the role played by patronage in Soviet-era career mobility. Reisinger and Willerton<sup>16</sup> subsequently sought to identify the pattern of career advancement of regional Soviet elites during the broader post-Stalin period. Applying multivariate regression, they concluded that clientelistic ties with members of the all-union elites turned out to be a more pronounced factor in the upward career mobility of regional *apparatchiki* than the economic success or salience of the region they led.

Nor was the role of patronage confined to the routine functioning of the Soviet political regime. Personal connections were also essential

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<sup>14</sup> Kynev, "Fenomen gubernatorov-'variagov'"; Podvintsev, "'Gubernatory-variagi' i regional'nye politicheskie elity."

<sup>15</sup> John Willerton. 1987. "Patronage Networks and Coalition Building in the Brezhnev Era." *Soviet Studies* 39: 2: 175–204.

<sup>16</sup> William Reisinger and John Willerton. 1988. "Elite Mobility in the Locales: Towards a Modified Patronage Model." In David Lane, ed., *Elites and Political Power in the USSR*. Aldershot: Elgar, 99-127.

to building the power institutions of the fledgling Soviet state. Easter's<sup>17</sup> influential work challenges the conventional view of the success of the Soviet state-building in the 1920s, which attributes it to the developed organizational capacity of the Bolshevik party. Instead, Easter argues that in a context of devastated political, financial, transport, and even communication infrastructures, the Bolsheviks managed to spread their rule across the territory of the former Russian Empire using personal ties that they had forged in the pre-revolutionary underground and on the battlefield during the civil war.

Afanasiev's classic work<sup>18</sup> examines the role of clientelism in Russian statehood more broadly—from the Tsardom of Muscovy to contemporary Russia. Examining the norms and practices of public administration throughout this period, Afanasiev puts forward the idea that none of the most extreme modernizations in Russia (chief among them those of Stalin and Peter the Great) or revolutions (including the democratic reforms of the 1990s) have managed to shake patronage's leading role in structuring Russian bureaucracy. Similarly, Ledeneva<sup>19</sup> notes the continuity between the Soviet administrative system and the Russian *sistema*. Studying the informal networks of Russian elites, Ledeneva identifies four types of networks, which she calls "inner circle," "useful friends," "core contacts," and "mediated, or periphery, contacts." These types can be distinguished based on the primary context in which they operate (private or public) and the frequency of contact (strong or weak). At the same time, different types of networks possess different functionality, ranging from financial support for the big *sistema* network to the selection of its members.

Viewing post-Soviet politics as driven by patronage and informal networks has provided new tools for understanding not only the structure of elites, but also elite dynamics. Thus, Hale<sup>20</sup> suggests a comprehensive comparative interpretation of post-Soviet politics through the lens of *patronalism*. The key difference between post-Soviet politics in this perspective is whether they are organized as a single-pyramid patronage structure or experience competition between several distinct pyramids. The particular structure may change depending on elite expectations as to who would be the most powerful patron and thus best able to deliver political and economic resources. Hale pays particular attention to the role of constitutions in shaping such expectations and calls for a deeper understanding of a variety of mechanisms that can produce them. Thus, change of elite expectations is the main source of regime dynamics in patronalist

<sup>17</sup> Gerald Easter. 1999. *Reconstructing the State: Personal Networks and Elite Identity*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>18</sup> Mikhail Afanasiev. 2000. *Klientelizm i rossiiskaia gosudarstvennost'* [Clientelism and Russian Statehood]. Moscow: Moskovskii Obshchestvennyi Nauchnyi Fond.

<sup>19</sup> Ledeneva, *Can Russia Modernise?*

<sup>20</sup> Hale, *Patronal Politics*.

societies. Hale also distinguishes between three main building-blocks of any patronage network in the region: oligarchs, regional political machines, and top officials. Chapkovskii and Diatlikovich's<sup>21</sup> research quantitatively examines part of the last category: top executive-branch officials. Utilizing network analysis, they have shown that almost 80% of the highest-ranking federal officials in Russia had at least one connection with other members of the network as of 2008. Four institutions proved to be the primary sources for personal acquaintances: St. Petersburg State University, St. Petersburg City Administration, the KGB, and the dacha housing cooperative "Ozero." Importantly, their comparison between 2000 and 2008 networks attests to the growing density of the elite network in Russia and the progressive withdrawal of independent actors therefrom. Along similar lines, Batur and Elknik<sup>22</sup> have shown that the strengthening patron-client pyramid headed by Putin can be seen as a crucial source of regime personalization in Russia. Combining a dataset on patron-client relations with expert assessments of policy influence, they found that Putin's patronage pyramid overtook other pyramids (chiefly Yeltsin's old network) as early as 2004.

Despite growing interest in studying patronage and informal elite networks in Russia, there are several gaps that limit our understanding of how such networks are structured and how they function. First of all, as the studies presented above suggest, personal networks indeed define the structure of—and an individual's very possibility to join—Russia's federal political elite. However, this problem has an important regional dimension, which remains on the margins of scholarly interest (even if emerging research<sup>23</sup> is starting to cover this gap). Informal networks tend to be regionally limited. Indeed, the set of candidates for an appointment tends to be limited to the region where a patron studied or built their career. Can we observe an analogous closure of regional elites in Russia? Do regional informal networks operate in the same manner as those at the federal level? Alternatively, does regional informal governance have its own logic? How does the federal center manage to make regional elites strong enough to deliver satisfying political and economic results yet weak enough not to challenge the federal center? Moreover, the constant growth of the number of *variags* in Russia's regions represents an enigma worth examining. How do they govern in practice, and why do some of them avoid falling victim to local elites while others resign quickly after failing to find an equilibrium with elites?

Secondly, students of informal networks only rarely take advantage

<sup>21</sup> Chapkovskii and Diatlikovich, "Kto est' kto."

<sup>22</sup> Batur and Elknik, "Dynamics of Regime Personalization."

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, Guzel Garifullina, Kirill Kazantsev, and Andrei Yakovlev. 2020. "United We Stand: The Effects of Subnational Elite Structure on Succession in Two Russian Regions." *Post-Soviet Affairs* 36: 5-6: 475-494.



of the methodological tools provided by Social Network Analysis. The hidden nature of informal practices makes it difficult not only to measure informal institutions, but even to operationalize them. Therefore, it is not surprising that the term “informal network” is often understood metaphorically rather than as a logically conceptualized category. Applying SNA to the study of informal networks necessarily requires clear definitions of at least two essential parts of a network: nodes and edges. Such operationalization comes with inevitable compromises yet could make the informal network a much more analytically grounded concept. Leaving aside metaphorical use of the term, the existing qualitative accounts of informal networks face typical limitations—the reliability and availability of witnesses, the acceptability of documents, and so on. Moreover, elites’ networks operate in accordance with an informal code that is often unavailable to outsiders. Sometimes informal rules are so embedded in group identity that they take the form of tacit knowledge, i.e., the type of knowledge difficult to express in verbal or written form but clear to everyone inside the group. Furthermore, due to the widespread perception of informal practices as semi-corrupt, the topic may be highly sensitive for a potential respondent, which can cause him or her to distort or conceal information—or even to refuse to be interviewed entirely. All of these factors severely constrain the reliability and replicability of the findings.

Two additional problems are especially important for studying informal networks. First, qualitative accounts fall short of inference about the scope of the phenomenon. Scholars can conduct in-depth analyses of the informal ties of particular politicians and businesspeople with a higher patron; however, such studies can hardly provide insight into the general scope of nepotism or clientelism in the political system. Second, as Keller has shown, qualitative studies of informal networks often examine “particular ties between individuals that have been identified in advance as particularly important,”<sup>24</sup> leading them to underestimate lesser-known politicians and ties between them. By contrast, SNA is *tabula rasa* in the sense that it does not define any actor as the chief patron in advance, instead seeking to take into account the relations between all possible pairings of actors. Moreover, as previously discussed, SNA accounts for the fact that informal networks can accommodate different types of ties—including horizontal and vertical ones.

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<sup>24</sup> Franziska Barbara Keller. 2015. “Networks of Power. Using Social Network Analysis to Understand Who Will Rule and Who is Really in Charge in an Authoritarian Regime. Theory, Method, and Application on Chinese Communist Elites (1982-2012).” PhD diss., New York University, 3.

## Method, Data, and Case Selection

In order to fill the highlighted gaps, the empirical portion of this research seeks to compare the informal networks of the two post-Soviet governors of Sverdlovsk Oblast: Eduard Rossel' and Evgeny Kuivashev. This region has already garnered interest among scholars of informal politics. For example, Easter<sup>25</sup> attributes Sverdlovsk Oblast's relative success in redefining its position in the newborn Russian Federation (for instance, it was the site of Russia's first gubernatorial elections after the adoption of the 1993 Constitution) to cohesive informal ties among Sverdlovsk elites, although he does not examine the case in detail. Sverdlovsk region is a typical case of a region ruled by a so-called regional "heavyweight" since the collapse of the USSR in the 1990s. Governor Eduard Rossel' remained in power for more than 15 years. Carter<sup>26</sup> attributes Rossel's long political dominance to the informal networks he constructed. Moreover, throughout its history, Sverdlovsk Oblast has been a heavily industrialized region, relying specifically on heavy and defense industries, for which the state is the main consumer. Therefore, the collapse of the USSR and the ensuing economic crisis in Russia posed an enormous challenge for Sverdlovsk elites. The ability of Rossel' to unify them around himself presumably played a decisive role in the region's political and economic success. Kuivashev's tenure offers an interesting parallel to Rossel's case. As a *variag* operating in a significantly altered institutional context, Kuivashev has nevertheless managed to stay in power for almost ten years, making him one of Russia's longest-serving governors. Therefore, the case of Sverdlovsk Oblast allows us to place in comparative context two successful network strategies, employed by governors who have entirely different institutional and career backgrounds vis-à-vis the region.

SNA will be the predominant research method used to examine these two cases.<sup>27</sup> The main challenge of utilizing SNA to study patronage networks is operationalizing the network's elements. Any network consists of two essential elements: nodes and edges (ties). In this research, nodes will be represented by officials of the executive bodies of Sverdlovsk Oblast. These are defined based on decrees about appointments and the

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<sup>25</sup> Easter, "Redefining Centre-Regional Relations."

<sup>26</sup> Carter, "Networks and Regional Leadership."

<sup>27</sup> The interested reader can find an extended discussion of the method and applicability of network measures to studying patronage and informal networks at: Kirill Melnikov. 2021. "Klientelizm i neformal'nye seti regional'nykh elit v Rossii: opyt setevogo analiza na primere Sverdlovskoi oblasti" [Clientelism and Informal Networks of Regional Elites in Russia: Network Analysis of the Case of Sverdlovsk Oblast]. *Polis. Politicheskie issledovaniia* 6: 171-188. The remaining overlap includes the results section for the first period under consideration. Although this research supplements the methodological approach with expert surveys, the latter did not significantly change the network's structure and its interpretation.

composition of the government.<sup>28</sup> Although regional elites include a broader spectrum of actors—including mayors, legislators, and businesspeople—this study confines itself to the regional bureaucracy. Administrative elites are distinctive due to the direct appointment jurisdiction of the leader: the governor has direct and almost exclusive tools to shape the personal composition of this part of the coalition. This is not true for other segments of local elites, which therefore require different tools and techniques of co-optation and alignment.

Operationalization of edges is not a trivial task. The aforementioned empirical studies<sup>29</sup> took the same approach to inferring an informal tie between politicians. They analyzed officials' biographies and registered ties upon finding an occasion when two officials worked together before entering their elite positions (in the government or Politburo). I will adhere to the same approach as a first step. This entails compiling biographical data into a database that contains the career paths of high-level officials of Sverdlovsk Oblast from 1991 to present. The *Free Encyclopedia of the Urals*<sup>30</sup> and *Encyclopedia Federal Press*<sup>31</sup> served as the main sources of this biographical data. The database consists of 78 officials and 661 observations. This database was further passed through an algorithm (R script written by the author) that registered a tie only if two individuals worked or studied together a) in the same organization, b) in the same city, and c) in the same years prior to entering regional government or the gubernatorial administration.

However, this way of operationalizing informal ties can lead to its own bias. Registering ties based on shared career experience prior to entering elite positions can generate both false negatives and false positives. First, we may miss some ties due to subordination between organizations. Two politicians might work in different organizations but know each other very well because one organization is superior to the other. However, since they are different organizations, the model will miss this tie. Second, politicians obviously build personal connections elsewhere than the workplace—on sports teams, at their dacha, in non-governmental organizations, etc.—yet these connections will be excluded from the model. Third, the fact that politicians worked or studied together does not necessarily mean that they have any kind of personal connection that facilitated the promotion of one of them into a position in the regional government. They might have hostile or apathetic relations or even—in the case of a large

<sup>28</sup> The full list of officials can be found in the dataset, which is available at: <https://figshare.com/s/d29d109f43258b726069>.

<sup>29</sup> Reisinger and Willerton, "Elite Mobility in the Locales"; Chapkovskii and Diatlikovich, "Kto est' kto"; Easter, *Reconstructing the State*.

<sup>30</sup> The Free Encyclopedia of the Urals. n.d., At [http://энциклопедия-урала.рф/index.php/Свободная\\_энциклопедия\\_Урала](http://энциклопедия-урала.рф/index.php/Свободная_энциклопедия_Урала), accessed December 16, 2021.

<sup>31</sup> Encyclopedia Federal Press. n.d., At <http://lib.fedpress.ru/>, accessed December 16, 2021.

organization—not know each other at all.

In order to mitigate these difficulties, I validated the resulted ties using expert surveys conducted in May-October 2020. To that end, I identified 19 journalists, local deputies, political consultants, and political scientists with knowledge of regional politics. Experts were asked to amend a sociogram created from an automated search for work and study interactions. If they disagreed as to whether the interaction was meaningful, they changed the cell value from 1 to 0. If, on the other hand, they were certain that a pair of bureaucrats had a stable, loyal, and friendly relationship that the biographical analysis had missed, they changed the cell value from 0 to 1. If two or more experts agreed on an amendment, I introduced it to the network. Such a methodological strategy appeared to be the best way to reconcile the qualitative and quantitative approaches to studying informal networks, using the best aspects from each one.

In order to compare the network structures of the two governors, my analysis produced two temporal snapshots. That of Rossel's network represents the period of 2004-2005. One might suggest that considering Rossel's long stay in power, it would be worth making several snapshots of his term. However, Rossel's administration was strikingly stable, and almost all government members retained their positions from the end of the 1990s until the end of his term. Therefore, although formally based on actors' official positions in 2004-2005, the network represents a much lengthier period, at least from 1998 to 2007. The snapshot of Kuivashev's network covers the period from 2019 to 2020. Thus, both snapshots reflect periods far beyond the two governors' early years in office. This helps to avoid the inevitable fluctuations that accompany the beginning of a gubernatorial tenure and provides a perspective on the most stable periods in terms of team formation.

### **Results: The Network of Sverdlovsk Regional Elites in 2004-5**

The resulting undirected graph of Sverdlovsk regional elites in 2004-2005 consists of 37 nodes and 103 edges (see Figure 1).

First of all, the network shows that there are five politicians (13.5%) who have not been connected to anyone in the Sverdlovsk executive elite (isolates). Other politicians form the part of the network with quite dense ties to one another. Henceforth, I will refer to this part as the largest connected component (LCC). The density of the network equals 0.155, which means that 15.5% of all possible ties actually exist in the network. For the LCC, the same parameter equals 0.21. On average, all officials within LCC are just two connections away from each other (average geodesic distance equals 1.99), and the two most remote nodes can reach each other in four steps (network diameter).

SNA also provides tools for estimating how prominent actors in the network are, which in turn can allow us to make at least an approximate calculation of the informal power that officials in the network possess. In Figure 1, the node's size corresponds to the number of connections an actor has (degree centrality). It is visually evident that two leaders have almost equal degree centrality. Governor Rossel' has 21 connections, and Chairman of the Government Vorob'ev has 22. Trushnikov (15), Vetrova (13), Spektor (13), and Pinaev (11) are among the most degree-central figures.

Closeness centrality is often associated with actors' ability to spread and receive information or any other type of resources. In fact, it reflects how easily an actor can reach any other individual in the network; therefore, it can be useful in analyzing actors' ability to build coalitions across the network. Applying this measure to the 2004-2005 network, we see that the highest figures for closeness centrality belong to the same set of actors. These are Vorob'ev (0.76), Rossel' (0.74), Trushnikov (0.65), Vetrova (0.62), Spektor (0.62), and Pinaev (0.6).

Betweenness centrality calculates the shortest paths between all possible pairs of nodes in a network and then counts how many of them run through a particular node. Betweenness centrality is also often considered an apt measure of power because a node with high betweenness is in the right place to observe and to control the flow of resources. In the 2004-2005 network, the two highest positions in betweenness centrality are again secured by Vorob'ev (158.5) and Rossel' (128.1). Trushnikov scored 45.4 and again occupied the third place in the network. This tells us that there are three leaders of the network who have the largest number of allies and serve as bridges between all the groups of the administrative elite. This is why it is crucial to examine the personal relations between them.

SNA makes it possible not only to discern the most central figures in a network, but also to examine how centralized the network is as a whole. The centralization score of the 2004-2005 network is 26.4%, which indicates a moderate degree of centralization. Indeed, while there are two actors with a decent margin in all centrality scores, all other actors are densely intertwined among themselves, meaning that the leaders of the network are not the only channels for spreading information, allocating resources or building coalitions.

Any network has its own structure. First of all, we can identify the core of the network. Based on the *k-cores* method,<sup>32</sup> I define the network core as a group of *k* vertices with at least *k* connections, considering that the *k* parameter is the maximal.

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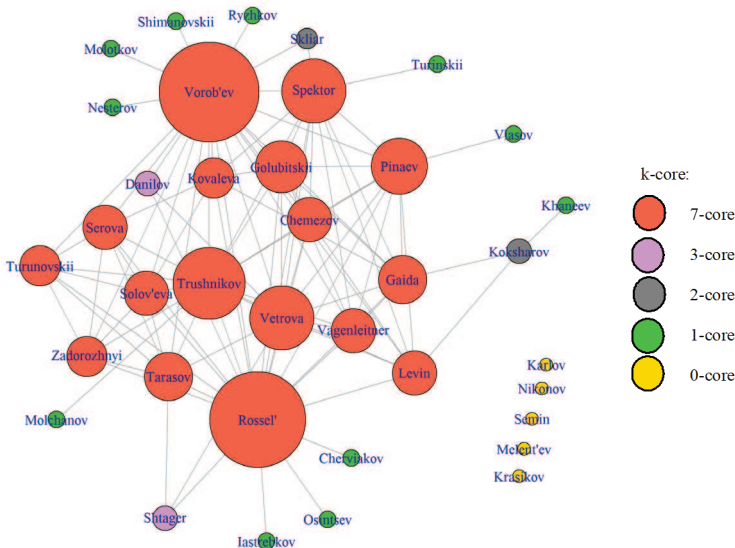
<sup>32</sup> Stephen Seidman. 1983. "Network Structure and Minimum Degree." *Social Networks* 5: 3: 269-287.



A  $k$ -core decomposition of the 2004-2005 network is presented in Figure 2. Based on the proposed definition, 17 politicians constitute the core of the network. Such a decomposition allows us to spot that despite the moderate density of the network, its core is tightly intertwined (density—60.3%) and simultaneously quite large (53.1% of LCC). No doubt, the core of a network ensures its stability. Therefore, it would be valuable to examine in which settings members of this group have built their relationships with each other, whether any conflicts occurred within this group, and how this group sustained its durability. I will address these questions below.

Another issue is identifying communities within the network. A network community is defined as a group of vertices where vertices inside the group are connected with many more edges than between groups. The label propagation algorithm,<sup>33</sup> which is especially suitable for small networks, identified just one community within the network, which coincides with LCC. This means that we cannot distinguish any minor densely connected communities, and members of LCC represents quite a cohesive group.

**Figure 2. A  $K$ -Core Structure of the 2004-2005 Network**



Source: Compiled by the author on the basis of research.

Notes: Implemented in R {igraph}. Layout: Fruchterman-Reingold.

<sup>33</sup> Douglas A. Luke. 2015. *A User's Guide to Network Analysis in R*. New York: Springer, 118-124.

### *Interpretation*

After the Declaration of State Sovereignty of the Russian SFSR was signed in 1990 and Yeltsin claimed victory in the first Russian presidential election in 1991, the process of establishing new regional administrations in Russia began. Like many other new heads of regional administrations, Rossel' was appointed from the regional *Oblispolkom* (Regional Executive Committee). Two factors probably determined this choice. First, despite his long-term membership in the Communist Party, Rossel' had never been considered a member of the Party elite and had joined *Obkom* (the Regional Party Committee) only in 1990. Second, as Chairman of the *Oblispolkom* and former head of *Glavsreduralstroi*, the largest building trust in Sverdlovsk Oblast, Rossel' was considered by Yeltsin to have the necessary experience to lead the region. As this research shows, Rossel' followed the same logic when filling administrative positions in the region. He relied on a personal network of managers who had proved their ability to perform complex economic and administrative tasks.

Of 138 registered connections, 68 were established in two organizations: the Regional Duma (40) and the *Oblispolkom* (28). The key group within the network's core consists of seven politicians who served together in the *Oblispolkom* under Rossel's leadership: Trushnikov, Vorob'ev, Turunovskii, Solov'eva, Serova, Tarasov, and Zadorozhnyi. All of them headed key departments or served as Rossel's deputies in the *Oblispolkom* and accepted his invitation to enter the new regional government. With the exception of Trushnikov, whose case I consider later, they had advanced in their careers by 2005.

The other most valuable context for establishing informal connections was the first Regional Duma (1994-1996). One can argue that a seat in a regional legislature is already a marker of belonging to the regional elite and that these connections should therefore be excluded from the model. However, with the exceptions of Rossel' and Vorob'ev, none of the actors served in the regional executive before getting a seat in the Duma. In fact, the Regional Duma not only became a springboard for Rossel's return to the Regional Administration (following his dismissal in 1993 by Yeltsin for promoting the idea of uniting the Ural regions into a Ural Republic that would have enhanced legal status), but was also a rich source of recruits to the executive branch following his victory in the first gubernatorial elections. Observers claim that the first Regional Duma acted as a unifying actor against the Regional Administration headed by Strakhov:<sup>34</sup> it adopted a regional Charter stipulating direct gubernatorial elections and bicameral legislature, while other laws established an institutional framework of

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<sup>34</sup> Strakhov was appointed Head of the Regional Administration after Rossel's dismissal in 1993.



regional power.<sup>35</sup> Alongside Trushnikov and Vorob'ev, who worked in the Duma in 1994-1995, other politicians worked with Rossel' in the Regional Duma when he was its Speaker—namely Spektor, Chemezov, Vetrova, Levin and Pinaev. They later became Rossel's closest allies and received high positions in the regional executive following his victory in the 1995 gubernatorial elections.

Members of the *Oblispolkom* and deputies of the Regional Duma constitute the core of Rossel's network. The former helped him to maintain control over key economic sectors in the first years following the collapse of USSR, while the latter enabled him to win tough battles with the Regional and Presidential Administrations. Importantly, many of them were members of *Preobrazhenie Urala*—the regional political association established by Rossel'. Both groups passed important loyalty tests. The deputies of the regional legislature were not afraid to confront Strakhov's administration and helped Rossel' win the highly competitive 1995 gubernatorial election. The servants of the *Oblispolkom* dared to confront the threats posed by the *Obkom* leaders and left this body to serve with Rossel' in the new administration. Loyalty to Rossel' was potentially highly costly for them, considering the concurrent August Coup, a point that Rossel' himself emphasized in interviews.<sup>36</sup> (If the coup had prevailed, they would have lost at least their careers.) Thus, these groups were highly intertwined not only by shared work experience but by the serious clashes from which they emerged victorious. Three people—Rossel', Vorob'ev, and Trushnikov—served as bridges between the two groups, having worked in both bodies. Not surprisingly, they are the most central figures in the network. While Trushnikov has generally been missing in qualitative accounts of the region's elite evolution, SNA highlights the importance of all three actors and calls for a brief discussion of the triad's relations.

If the bond between Vorob'ev and Rossel' represents a typical patron-client relationship, relations between Rossel' and Trushnikov were far more complicated, and SNA demonstrates a quite surprising heuristic potential here. Trushnikov, the third most central figure in the network, dared to participate in the first gubernatorial elections and to criticize Rossel' during the campaign. He went on to back Rossel' in the second round of the election, becoming Head of the Government as part of the deal. However, Rossel' dismissed him a year later, accusing Trushnikov of “splitting the team.”<sup>37</sup> Despite this, Trushnikov remained a popular

<sup>35</sup> Anatolii Kirillov. 2008. *Politicheskaia istoriia Urala i Ural'skogo federal'nogo okruga. 1985-2007* [Political History of the Urals and the Ural Federal District. 1985-2007]. Yekaterinburg: Ural'skii rabochii, 240-241.

<sup>36</sup> Sergei Tarabintsev-Romanov. “Legendy Ural'skoi politiki. Beseda pervaiia” [Legends of Ural Politics. Conversation One]. *Uralpolit.Ru*, October 10, 2017, At <https://uralpolit.ru/article/urfo/09-10-2017/122619>, accessed December 16, 2021.

<sup>37</sup> Aleksei Ivanov. 2014. *Eburg* [Eburg]. Moscow: Izdatel'stvo AST, 140.

politician in Sverdlovsk Oblast and secured a seat in the regional legislature again in 1998. In 2002, Rossel' co-opted him back into the network, but to a position outside regional politics—namely as a Representative of the Governor under the Federation Council of the Russian Federation. Trushnikov's case reveals that sometimes even lasting informal relations can devolve into rivalry if a subordinate actor gains too much formal and informal power.

### **Results: The Network of Sverdlovsk Regional Elites in 2019-2020**

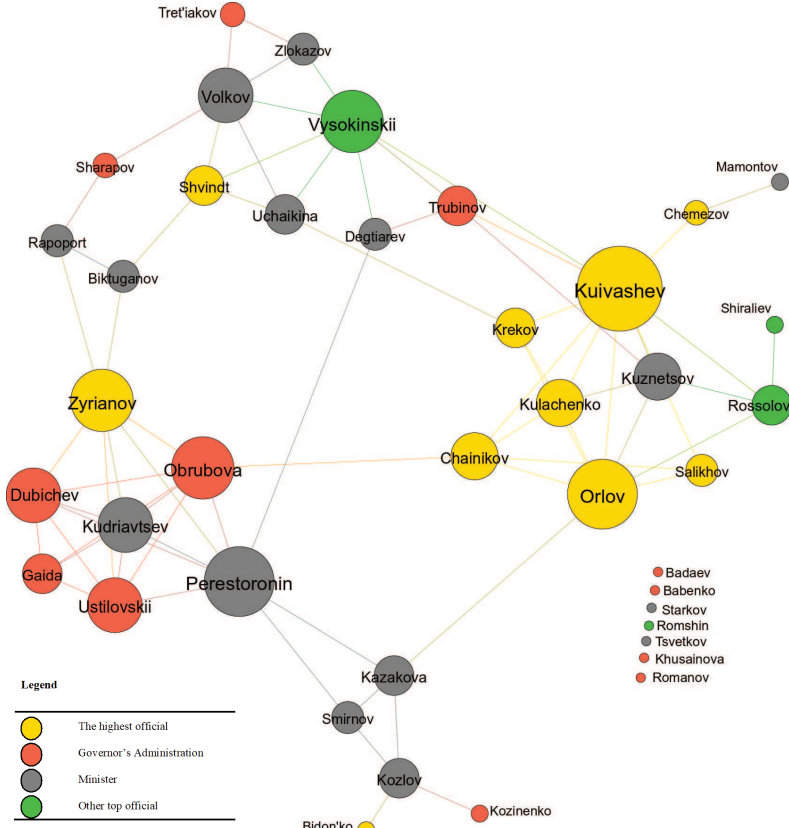
Even a quick look at the network of the Sverdlovsk elite under the current governor, Kuivashev, shows that its structure differs significantly from that of Rossel's network (Figure 3). Network statistics confirm this assumption; the density of Kuivashev's network is slightly more than half of Rossel's. The LLC is also less densely intertwined (Table 1). Generally speaking, the 2019-2020 network is more dispersed. On average, all officials in the 2019-2020 network know each other through three former colleagues, while the two most remote individuals are seven steps away from each other. Presumably, this indicates that unlike Rossel's network, there are several communities (not just a single one).

Similar to the previous period, the governor is among the most degree-central figures in the network. However, the absolute and normalized (by the size of the network) degree centrality of Kuivashev is lower than that of his predecessor (only eight connections). This is a direct consequence of his career path outside the region. Before his appointment, Kuivashev served in the Administrations of Poykovsky (Khanty-Mansi autonomous okrug), Tobolsk, and Tyumen (Tyumen Oblast), as well as—for a short time—as a Plenipotentiary of the Russian President in the Ural Federal District. Therefore, his ties are confined to his former colleagues, primarily from Tyumen, whom he invited to serve in Yekaterinburg, the administrative center of Sverdlovsk Oblast. Most of them took the highest official positions in the administrative hierarchy (yellow circles).

An interesting peculiarity of the 2019-2020 network is that there are many officials who possess an almost equal number of connections. These are officials who worked together in the Governor's Administration or ministries under previous governors in minor positions and have built connections with other members of the regional establishment. Moreover, they hold strategically important positions in the network, which is reflected in their betweenness centrality (examples include Vysokinskii and Perestoronin).

Consequently, the centralization index of Kuivashev's network is dramatically lower than that of Rossel's network, indicating uncertainty as

**Figure 3. The Network of Sverdlovsk Oblast Officials, 2019-2020**



Source: Compiled by the author on the basis of research.

**Table 1. Network Summary Statistics**

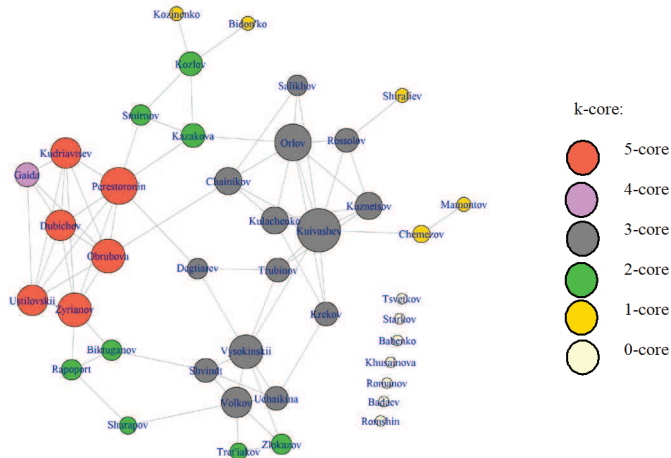
Parameter	Network 2004-2005	Network 2019-2020
Size (number of nodes)	37	41
Number of edges	103	73
Number of isolates	5 (13.5%)	7 (17.0%)
Density (optimized for LCC)	0.155 (0.21)	0.089 (0.13)
Average geodesic distance	1.99	2.92
Diameter	4	7
Centralization	26.4%	11.6%

Source: Compiled by the author on the basis of research.

to where the core of this network is and suggesting the presence of multiple powerful groups in the network.

A  $k$ -core decomposition (Figure 4) reveals surprising results. It is not the governor and his inner circle that constitute the core of the network. Compared to all other groups, the group of officials who served together under previous governors possesses the highest number of connections within itself. This is not to say that this group is the most powerful; its members are still subordinate to the governor. However, they represent a cohesive community with profound experience in regional politics, thereby presenting a group to reckon with. This decomposition tells us that governors appointed from another region could find themselves on the periphery of an informal network.

**Figure 4. A  $K$ -Core Structure of the 2019-2020 Network**

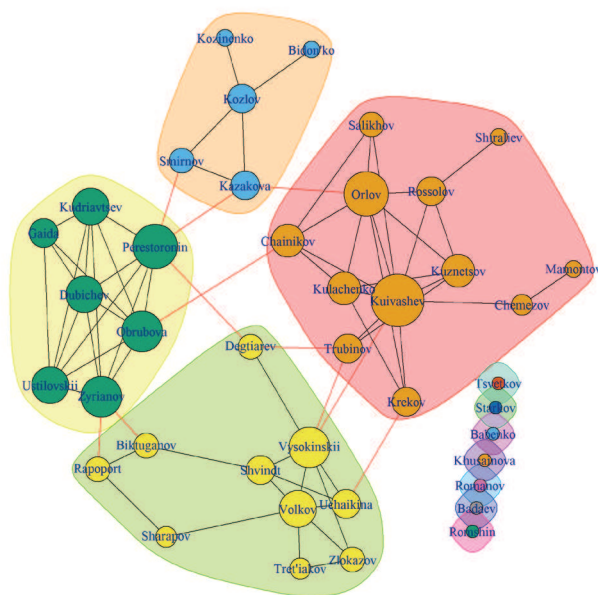


*Source:* Compiled by the author on the basis of research.

The label propagation algorithm confirms the assumptions about the presence of cohesive communities in the network (Figure 5). Three of the four identified groups have a clear professional background. One group of officials served together in Tyumen and Tobolsk (red cloud), a second in the Governor’s Administration (yellow cloud), and the third served in the Yekaterinburg City Administration (green cloud). The fourth group is a residual category with no shared background.

### *Interpretation*

Kuivashev was appointed governor of Sverdlovsk Oblast in May 2012 after three years of Alexander Misharin, who replaced Rossel’ in 2009. Observers note that Misharin—who resigned relatively quickly—not only

**Figure 5. Communities in the 2019-2020 Network**

*Source:* Compiled by the author on the basis of research.

*Notes:* Implemented in R{igraph}. Layout: Fruchterman-Reingold. Algorithm for community detection: label.propagation.community()

underestimated the informal connections within his own team, but also failed to build informal ties with members of other regional elites, namely non-governmental organizations, mass media, and business elites. “Misharin, who worked in the railway system, a semi-military structure, tried to rule from a pinnacle of formal status and bureaucratic power,” an approach that contradicts the “remarkable peculiarity of Russian politics, namely the necessity to build informal connections with local elites.”<sup>38</sup> Consequently, Kuivashev’s main task as a newly appointed governor was to establish himself as an “anti-Misharin,”<sup>39</sup> smoothing relations with regional elites and putting an end to the conflict between the Governor’s and City of Yekaterinburg’s administrations that had flared up under Rossel’ and Chernetskii, the then-Mayor of Yekaterinburg.

The network’s structure confirms that Kuivashev has accomplished this. First, unlike Misharin, Kuivashev maintained in office the majority

<sup>38</sup> Svetlana Bocharova. “Misharin poprosil proshcheniia i ushel” [Misharin Apologized and Left]. *Gazeta.ru*, May 14, 2012. At [https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2012/05/14\\_a\\_4582785.shtml](https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2012/05/14_a_4582785.shtml), accessed December 16, 2021.

<sup>39</sup> Ruslan Mukhametov. 2016. “Politicheskie protsessy v Sverdlovskoi oblasti pri gubernatore E. Kuyvasheve.” *Studia Humanitatis* 4: 7.

of ministers from the previous government. Even eight years later and after quite an intense rotation in 2016, ten officials retain their place in the network, while one from Rossel's network has returned. Importantly, some of these ministers (namely Shvindt and Biktuganov) were even considered Misharin's direct clients, even if most of Misharin's inner circle resigned with their patron. The majority of the officials who stayed are servants of the Governor's Administration, who form quite a cohesive group, as described above.

Second, for the first time in Sverdlovsk Oblast's political history, a clearly identifiable group of officials has been incorporated into the regional network from the Yekaterinburg City Administration, the agency that had been the main irritant for the Governor's Administration since the profound rivalry between Governor Rossel' and Mayor Chernetskii.<sup>40</sup> The tipping point of the conflict was the appointment of Tungusov, a former deputy of Chernetskii, to the Governor's Administration in 2016. Despite the latter's resignation as early as 2018, an identifiable group of officials who worked in the Yekaterinburg City Administration still holds posts in the regional executive. Within this community, Vysokinsky is the most central figure. Having worked in the Yekaterinburg City Administration for 20 years, he became Deputy Governor in 2016. Following the abolition of mayoral elections in Yekaterinburg, Vysokinsky was promoted by the regional authorities to the post of mayor in 2018 while simultaneously holding a position in the regional government. Thus, by means of both formal status and informal connections, Yekaterinburg elites were co-opted into the regional network for the first time.

Recent interviews given by Rossel'<sup>41</sup> provide interesting evidence of Kuivashev's aspiration to maintain a dialogue with local elites, in striking contrast to Misharin's political style. Rossel' emphasized that he had invited Misharin to discuss the region's problems immediately following the latter's appointment and offered his advice, which the new governor blatantly rejected. Kuivashev, by contrast, often consults with Rossel' on different aspects of policymaking. Although this is a subjective and possibly politically motivated assessment of Kuivashev's intra-elite strategy, it perfectly matches the evidence provided by the network analysis. We can see that Kuivashev has managed to co-opt all major powers in regional politics into his network; a former member of Rossel's team (Anatoly Gaida) even holds an advisory position in Kuivashev's administration.

Simultaneously, Kuivashev has built his own inner circle based on connections established when working in Tyumen and Tobolsk. Even though this group has an almost equal number of members to the two other identified groups, its formal status is much higher. Orlov, Kulachenko,

<sup>40</sup> See a detailed analysis in Carter, "Networks and Regional Leadership," 185-206.

<sup>41</sup> Tarabintsev-Romanov, "Legendy Ural'skoi politiki."

Salikhov, Krekov, and Chainikov all serve as deputy governors. That being said, Kuivashev has installed in the same post one representative of each of the two groups mentioned above: Zyrianov (Governor's Administration group) and Shvindt (Yekaterinburg City Administration group). Moreover, these groups are connected by bridges made up of people who worked under Kuivashev's direct leadership. Thus, while Kuivashev's network is nowhere near as cohesive as that of Rossel', he has paid much more attention to constructing his network than Misharin did and probably opted for the only successful strategy available to a governor-*variag*. This strategy combines co-optation of different groups of regional elites with the alleviation of regional conflicts that date back to the 1990s.

### **Discussion—Insider vs. *Variag*: Network-Building Strategies and the Boundaries of Available Choices**

This comparative research reveals two distinct network-building strategies. Rossel' managed to create a cohesive bureaucracy with no identifiable communities, while Kuivashev's network accommodates several distinct elite groups. Rossel' unified the elites around himself, while Kuivashev can be seen as the center of just one community. Rossel' managed to extend his clientele at every step of his career and solidified his team through revealing loyalty tests and tough political battles. Considering the high degree of regional autonomy from the federal center during the 1990s, it comes as no surprise that Rossel's network spans the vast majority of the regional bureaucracy. Notably, his team was strikingly stable and generally kept their positions from 1998 until 2007, when his fourth term was about to end. Although Kuivashev's background was nearly as diverse as that of Rossel', he has confined his appointment strategy to making his clients vice-governors, who assume a high degree of control over other agencies. Meanwhile, such posts as ministers of education, healthcare, and communal infrastructure have been given to local elites. These positions require a deep knowledge of local problems and imply a high degree of political responsibility, with the potential for public criticism in the event of managerial failures. Thus, Kuivashev achieved three tasks at once. He provided status positions to locally embedded elites, seized bureaucratic control over the region's key political and economic processes, and avoided direct criticism for poor decisions in the most problematic policy areas. In the latter case, he has been able to channel public dissatisfaction by shifting responsibility and replacing a culprit, as with the dismissal of the healthcare minister amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

One can argue that as a *variag*, Kuivashev owes his political survival to the fact that he is a part of the bigger patronage vertical headed by Sergey Sobyenin (the mayor of Moscow). Having a powerful patron is

indeed a necessary condition for a *variag*'s political survival in a region, as the existing scholarship reveals;<sup>42</sup> however, it is hardly sufficient. For instance, having Vyacheslav Volodin (then the first deputy Chief of Staff of the Presidential Administration of Russia) as a patron did not help Sergey Bozhenov to remain in power as governor of Volgograd Oblast for more than two years.<sup>43</sup> Nor did Sobyenin's protection shield his former subordinate Victor Basargin (Perm Krai) from resignation before the end of his first term, albeit that the former continued to control the region,<sup>44</sup> while the latter remained in politics as head of the Federal Service for Supervision of Transport. Sverdlovsk Oblast itself provides an additional example of this rule. Alexander Mishharin was considered part of the mighty Russian Railways Company pyramid, yet his career in the region did not exceed two-and-a-half years. Thus, relying on the influential federal patronage pyramid is not sufficient for the long-term political survival of a *variag*. Considering that more or less pronounced intra-elite conflicts took place in all these cases, building stable alliances with local elites turns out to be of high importance. From an informal governance perspective, only a combination of these two factors can explain Kuivashev's long political career in the region.

While two cases cannot provide sufficient grounds for generalization, it is nevertheless possible to delineate some preliminary theoretical assumptions about the factors behind the different network-building strategies available to regional leaders.

Based on the empirical findings of this study, it would be natural to assume that the differences in network configurations stem from the simple fact that one governor is an insider and the second is a *variag*. Deep rootedness in regional politics gives an insider the necessary tools to build a cohesive regional bureaucracy. First of all, rising up the ranks within a region connects a future leader with other groups of professional, business, and political elites who are familiar with the region's problems and have interest in and experience solving them. Internal career growth widens the clientele of a future leader and creates opportunities to test the loyalty and skills of prospective clients. Moreover, an insider's path not only makes a future leader familiar with regional elites, but also allows elites to become familiar with their prospective leader, giving their relations a higher degree of predictability and safety. Sometimes regional elites rally around a prospective leader if there are external competitors, as when the first regional Duma supported Rossel' in his tough negotiations with the regional administration and the federal center. Through such battles,

<sup>42</sup> Kynev, "Fenomen gubernatorov-'variagov'"; Podvintsev, "'Gubernatory-variagi' i regional'nye politicheskie elity."

<sup>43</sup> Minchenko Consulting, *Politicheskie strategii gubernatorov-novichkov, naznachennykh na svoi posty v kontse 2011-2012 gg.*

<sup>44</sup> Maxim Reshetnikov, the next Perm governor, was also a former colleague of Sobyenin.



different parts of the elite become incorporated into the personal clientele of a leader, which can make a network unified and cohesive.

By contrast, a *variag* by definition does not enjoy sufficient connections with regional elites. This results in two limitations that make building an equally unified and cohesive network impossible. First, an outsider's clientele (if he or she has one) is not embedded into regional decision-making circles and is much less familiar with the local economic and social context, yet a new governor needs to operate within it straight away. Second, even if a *variag* has a clientele sufficient to fill the different and sometimes highly specialized power positions, he or she cannot deploy it at full strength, as ignoring the interests of local elite groups can lead to the latter's dissatisfaction, sabotage or even elite splits. Instead, the viable network strategy for a *variag* is to incorporate other elite groups into the network, leaving only limited space for his own clientele.

However natural the assumption stated above might sound, this is probably only part of the story. Outsiders can sometimes be much more successful at building cohesive networks than insiders, as a comparison of Chelyabinsk and Perm elites reveals.<sup>45</sup> Both outsiders and insiders operate within certain boundaries imposed by available network strategies, which are a function of at least two essential interrelated factors: the nature of the tasks a leader faces and the degree of autonomy from the federal center he or she enjoys. The necessity to restore the regional economy, combined with profound political autonomy, gave Rossel' carte blanche in building his network, an opportunity that he used to the full. As time passed and the federal center took the reins, while the region largely successfully overcame economic hardships, the nature of tasks and the extent of regional autonomy have changed. The structure of Kuivashev's network clearly reflects both his main mission to reconcile different parts of the regional elites and a diminished degree of appointment autonomy.

This is not to say that the distinction between insiders and *variags* does not play a role in defining the range of available network strategies. The abolition of direct gubernatorial elections in Russia in 2005 and the appointments of *variags* were attempts to undermine cohesive informal networks in Russia's regions, which were thriving during the 1990s. Therefore, it would be surprising to see a *variag* have as dense a network as a regional "heavyweight" like Rossel'. However, the current appointment strategy for the regions is mixed, and both outsiders and insiders are limited in their available strategies. The leaders' degree of autonomy and the particular tasks they face essentially determine the boundaries of these

<sup>45</sup> Kirill Melnikov. 2021. "Biurokraticheskii patronazh i patterny administrativnogo rekrutirovaniia regional'nykh elit v Rossii: opyt sravnitel'nogo setevogo analiza" [Bureaucratic Patronage and Patterns of Administrative Recruitment of Regional Elites in Russia: A Comparative Network Analysis]. *Politicheskaiia nauka* 4: 210-238.

strategies and, in turn, are connected to the very question of whether an outsider or insider will be chosen to lead a region. How do these factors combine in defining particular network strategies? Presumably, belonging to the local elite can give an individual more chances to make the most of the available political freedom, even if this may still vary between regions and periods. Additional case studies would be required to test this hypothesis.

From a broader theoretical perspective on the formation of the winning coalition, the case of Sverdlovsk Oblast shows that not only does the coalition's size matter for the political survival of subnational leaders, but so too does the way it is constructed. There are endogenous and exogenous constraints on coalition-formation strategies. The diversity and relative strength of the local elites limit how power networks can be structured. In this sense, informal networks can be seen as quasi-representative structures that need to accommodate the diverse interests of the region's most influential groups, which is especially important for outsider governors. Since subnational leaders act not only as principals, but also as agents, they must keep in mind the tasks the federal center assigns to them. Given the influence the center exerts over their political careers, governors are likely to seek the best ways to satisfy its expectations, which also affect their coalition-formation strategies in ways going far beyond simple considerations regarding coalition size.

## **Conclusion**

This work breaks new ground by applying SNA to understand clientelism and informal networks at the regional level in Russia. Having captured the structures of the networks of Sverdlovsk Oblast officials in two periods, I identified rather different patterns. Quantitatively untested assumptions about the personalized nature of bureaucracy in Rossel's administration were validated. It turned out that the network of the first governor was made up of highly intertwined personal connections, with no identifiable communities. The individuals who made up the core of this network proved their professional abilities and passed different loyalty tests. This guaranteed a high degree of stability for Rossel's bureaucracy, as well as the cohesiveness and durability of his subnational regime, and played a significant role in restoring a local economy that had been jeopardized by the collapse of the USSR. Following the abolition of gubernatorial elections, the network structure changed significantly. The network's core became smaller, the density of ties decreased, and the distance between politicians soared. The governor invited from another region opted for a new network-building strategy. Kuivashev retained some of the elites who had been installed by his predecessors and managed to co-opt the other

part of the elite, which had been engaged in a rivalry with the regional authorities for more than two decades. The differences between these two strategies stem not only from the governors' insider or outsider career paths, but also from the particular tasks the leaders needed to accomplish and the degree of autonomy they were granted for these tasks by the federal center.

The exploratory nature of this research does not mean that the SNA-driven view of informal networks is valid solely for the description and re-interpretation of regional politics. With this more or less theoretically grounded model, we can test much more complicated and nuanced hypotheses, such as how formal power is distributed within informal networks, how network position determines the political survival of regional actors (controlling for other factors), and how the appointment of a new governor changes other parts of the elite. Answering the latter question would entail incorporating such essential groups as local mayors, deputies, and businesspeople into the model. It would also be helpful to further elaborate on more reliable operationalization techniques for inferring informal ties. In particular, considering sources of friendship and trust less formalized than a shared career path is of high interest. Recent developments in SNA allow for more detailed analysis of the dynamics of informal networks. The research presented here confined itself to two static snapshots of elite structure. Dynamic network analysis would make it possible to analyze networks in a continuous (month-by-month or even day-by-day) manner instead. Therefore, SNA's potential for studying regional informal networks is far from having been exhausted; exploiting it to the full could bring significant benefits to this field of research.

