

14. Higher education and regional elite formation in Russia

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INTRODUCTION

Massification of higher education in the late twentieth century contributed to the transformations in the social structure of society and affected the formation of political elites. As higher education has become a social norm for better-off social groups (Cantwell et al., 2018), the new cohorts of political elites found themselves more educated than the population on average. Political leadership is far from representative of the population in terms of educational background (Aberbach et al., 1981). In developed nations, all recent cohorts of political elites have attended university (Zarifa & Davies, 2018). In Denmark, Belgium and France, between 75 and 90 per cent of parliament members have the equivalent of college or graduate degree (Bovens & Wille, 2017). The professionalization of the political sphere, the emergence of full-time, highly specialized politicians allow to observe the academization of the political elite and diploma democracies (Bovens & Wille, 2017).

Massification of higher education system may have changed significantly the roles of different types of universities in elite class formation (Williams & Filippakou, 2009). However, as the elite institutions maintain their elite status (Cantwell et al., 2018) they continue to train political elites, and are vastly over-represented in legislative bodies worldwide (Best & Cotta, 2000). Oxbridge produces more than half of judicial, parliament, government elites in the UK (Poverty Commission, UK, 2014). In France, the pathway to top positions in politics is strongly linked to the *Grandes Ecoles* (Hartmann, 2006). Law and economics majors at Tokyo University, Hitotsubashi University, Kyoto University and Waseda University are crucial for entering the Japanese administrative bureaucracy (Zang, 2004). The same majors at the University of Oslo and the Norwegian School of Economics pave the way to the Norwegian elite (Mangset, 2017). The political science faculty of Ankara University has traditionally been the principal educational institution for the training of Turkish bureaucrats (Sayarı & Bilgin, 2018).

While the educational background of political elites in general has been widely studied, some questions have been left on the periphery. First, social sciences focus mostly on the political elite at the centres of power, with regional elites receiving little attention. They, however, comprise larger numbers than central elites, and can later climb into central positions. Second, the analysis of political elites usually does not take into account the transformations of the higher education system – stratification of the sector, the differences between elite and mass segments, changes in the dominant fields of studies – and how these might intersect with elite formation.

This chapter aims at addressing the above limitations. It focuses on the Russian regional political legislative elites. We analyse changes in their educational background and connect those changes to transformations in the higher education systems and larger society.

THE RUSSIAN CONTEXT

The Russian Federation includes 85 constituent units, including republics, *oblast* and others, as well as three cities with special status, including Moscow and St Petersburg. The regions vary from 44,000 people in Nenets AO in the north to 13 million in Moscow. They are also diverse economically. Each has a regional parliament which is elected for five years. According to the 2010 decree, the size of regional parliaments should be 15–110 deputies, depending on the number of voters in the region. The approximately 4,000 members of these parliaments comprise the group of regional legislative elite, the focus of our empirical study. Regional parliaments are politically weak and de facto subordinate to the administrative authorities (Bystrova et al., 2020), but still matter at the regional level.

In the Soviet time, political elite formation had a distinctive model. The political elite was recruited from the wider population. Belonging to the political elite meant geographical mobility as the party and the state required (Kryshtanovskaya, 1995). The top elite appointments and positions, *nomenklatura*, resulted from internal recruitment (Semenova, 2012). Formal and informal rules maintained the stability and internal rotation within the elite structure. The career structure was hierarchical, with steady predictable career movement and no unexpected rises. During perestroika in the late Soviet period the system was disrupted: political control ceased to be concentrated in the hands of the Communist Party and moved towards executive powers, while elite recruitment was supplemented by elections. By the early post-Soviet time the old Soviet *nomenklatura* was divided into the political elite, which held positions and political power, and the economic elite, which owned and controlled capitals (Kryshtanovskaya, 1995). While the early post-Soviet elite

largely originated from the Soviet elite, the later generations were formed differently (Bystrova et al., 2019).

The current political system can be characterized as ‘pervasive centralisation’ (Yushkov et al., 2017). Elite co-optation has become the subject of electoral engineering (Turchenko, 2020). Entry into the political elite depends on the highest executive authority (governor) in the region (Golosov, 2017) and is shaped by clientelism (Gilyov, 2017). Two groups have been increasingly strong: *siloviki* (people with military background) and business persons. There has been a notable influx of former KGB and military staff into positions of power, although this is sometimes overestimated (Rivera and Rivera, 2014). The proportion of business people in the federal political elite, including top managers of private and public companies, is significantly higher than both the share of this category in the population, and the share of other professional groups in the elite. In the federal parliament, it exceeds the equivalent proportion in Europe (Gaman-Golutvina, 2014). Duka (2019) argues that recruitment of political elites from top economic/business positions is an indicator of plutocracy.

The above trends are apparent at the regional level. Duka (2019) notes that between 2015 and 2019, the share of business people and managers among regional parliament deputies rose in ten regions selected for closer analysis. People with top business and manager positions, as a second job alongside that of deputy, comprised up to 63 per cent.

The incorporation of business people into political power is mostly facilitated by the legal framework. Only in two Russian regions – St Petersburg and Chechen Republic – are regional deputies required to be full-time with no other employment. In all other regions the decision is left with the deputy, or there is a restriction on the number of full-time deputies (Duka, 2019). Keeping their business roles, powerful economic actors seek to secure their economic positions with publicity and political influence, fostering the concentration of political and economic capitals. Regional elites are self-reproducing: up to 90 per cent are recruited from regional business and administrative elite groups (Bystrova et al., 2020).

In this environment the population is generally discouraged from participation in politics: issues are taken out of political discussion and made a matter of organizational-economic arrangements. The proportion of the working and middle classes in Russia’s regional political elite is gradually declining. Arguably, there is a trend to the formation of new regional hereditary nobilities, accumulating and converting economic, political and symbolic capital, and thereby strengthening family positions across generations (Bystrova et al., 2020).

With the pool of regional elite recruitment shrinking since Soviet times, the representativeness of the regional legislative elites – which social, economic

and political interests they represent – has decreased. This in turn might affect the legitimacy of these elites (Bystrova et al., 2020; Duka, 2019). The low level of regional turnover is linked to the dominant party regime at both federal and regional levels. During the last four rounds of regional assembly elections, the United Russia party has overwhelmingly dominated (Ross, 2018).

The Role of Higher Education in Political Elite Formation in Russia

What is the role of higher education in the formation of these elites? Higher education has never been a formal prerequisite for an elite position in the regional or federal legislature in Russia – everyone has the right to be elected. However, legal requirements exist for the civil service: at least a specialist or master's degree is required for top civil service positions. Some other positions require at least a bachelor degree (Federal Law on State Civil Service, 2004).

Overall, the educational level of both Soviet and contemporary political elites is higher than the average of the population, though the data are limited, especially at regional level.

In the late Soviet period, up to 70 per cent of the elite had higher education, with the majority having degrees in engineering and only 25 per cent in humanities. In the post-Soviet period, at the federal level, almost all Russian parliamentarians and cabinet ministers between 1991 and 2011 had at least one university degree (Semenova, 2012).

Among regional deputies in eight regions in 2012, 524 out of 606 (86 per cent) had higher education: 43 per cent had engineering education, 16 per cent economics and finance and 10 per cent military education as the first degree (Bystrova et al., 2017). The data vary by generation with the older tending to have engineering education, as in the Soviet time, while economics and finances are more prominent in the younger cohorts (Kolesnik, 2019). Analysis of over a thousand city council elections between 2014 and 2018 showed that self-nominee candidates formally affiliated with the ruling party had higher chances regardless of educational level, while for those who were not, higher education was found to be significant along with the previous experience in the position (Tkacheva & Turchenko, 2022).

Among the top federal civil servants, the majority graduated from Moscow and St Petersburg higher education institutions, with three institutions particularly important: Moscow and St Petersburg state universities, and MGIMO University (Moscow State Institute of International Relations), where 18 per cent studied (Tev, 2015). A study of six regions found that the regional political elite tend to graduate from the comprehensive or engineering institutions located in the regions, not in Moscow and St Petersburg (Kolesnik, 2019). Hence the three higher education institutions that lead in federal elite formation do not play a dominant role among regional politicians (Kolesnik, 2019).

One institution is prominent for the regional elite, but mostly in relation to regional administration, rather than the education of future deputies. This is the Russian Academy of National Economy and Public Administration, which has dozens of branches around the country (Kolesnik, 2019). It was established on the basis of the Higher Communist Party School which trained and re-trained Soviet elites.

Previous research highlights the actual changes in the elite composition, but is not conclusive about the role of higher education. The next section will discuss our own empirical analysis of Russian regional political elites and their educational backgrounds.

AN EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS OF THE RUSSIAN REGIONAL POLITICAL ELITE

Data Collection

Our focus is on politicians who obtained their first elite position on average 5–8 years ago, when the main features of the current recruitment model had already been established.

We formed a data set that includes different background characteristics of individuals occupying positions in legislative assemblies in all Russian regions. The data was collected manually using official biographies of individuals available on the websites of regional parliaments and governmental organizations. All data available in official biographies were converted into 194 indicators for each individual in the sample. These indicators can be grouped into four categories: (1) basic information; (2) educational background; (3) career path (all previous jobs); and (4) other characteristics, such as political party membership, marital status and so on. The data were collected during September–November 2017 and represent the situation as of September 1, 2017. The total number of individuals in the sample is 3,737.

Basic Characteristics of the Regional Elite

The age of regional elite members in the sample varies from 23 to 89 years with a mean value of 52 years. The most numerous age cohorts are 44–55 (32 per cent) and 55–66 years old (34 per cent). The youngest cohorts are 23–33 (4 per cent) and 33–44 years (19 per cent). One in ten (11 per cent) is over 66 years old. The average time individuals from the sample are in office is 6.3 years. Women are significantly under-represented in regional legislative bodies. However, the share of females is growing: while in the cohort born in 1927–1940 it is less than 10 per cent, in the youngest cohort born in 1981–1990 it reaches almost 25 per cent.

Regional migration is an important aspect of elite formation. About half the current elites achieved their elite positions outside their home town or village. However, the share of those who took their first elite position in their home regions is growing and for relatively young elite members exceeds 50 per cent. Perhaps older elite members have more professional options over the longer time period, but this pattern may also reflect the imprint of the Soviet system which placed higher education graduates and *nomenklatura* across the country. Perhaps the typical career path is changing, with careers being made within the region of origin.

Educational attainment

An absolute majority of regional legislative elites (almost 90 per cent) have at least one higher education degree: 46 per cent have one degree and 43 per cent have at least two degrees (28 per cent) or a doctorate (Candidate or Doctor of Sciences) (15 per cent). One in ten (11 per cent) of regional elite members has a vocational education degree. Many of these represent industry-oriented regions such as the Sverdlovsk region, and the Kemerovo region, where the share of people with vocational education in the total employed population is relatively high.

Educational attainment of regional political elites is different from the Russian employed population: as of 2017, 45 per cent of the working population have a vocational education degree, 34 per cent have a higher education degree and less than 1 per cent have a doctorate qualification.

The majority of regional elites (82 per cent) attained their highest level of education before entering the first elite position in their career track (positions in regional parliament or management position in regional government). However, continuing education after securing their first elite position is not unusual: 18 per cent either obtained their PhD or received their second higher education degree, usually in economics, management or public administration.

Field of study

The most common fields of study for the regional elite members are engineering and technology (36 per cent), social sciences (23 per cent) and education (12 per cent) (see Table 14.1). Elite members representing relatively old age cohorts which obtained university degrees during the Soviet period specialized mostly in engineering and technology. Elite members of the younger age cohorts who obtained higher education after the collapse of Soviet Union mostly specialized in social science.

These changes correspond to transformations in the national higher education system. Between 1990 and 2002 the share of graduates in social science almost doubled while at the same time there was a reduction in the proportion that were engineering graduates.

Table 14.1 Distribution of Russian regional political elite by field of study of highest level of education (combined birth cohorts, from 1927–1940 to 1981–1990)

Field of study	Proportion of total (%)
Engineering and technology	36
Social science	23
Educational science	12
Humanitarian science	9
Medical science	7
Agricultural science	6
Mathematics and natural science	3
Military science	2
Art and culture	1
Total	100

Source: Authors.

We looked at how the educational background of regional elite members is related to the structure of the respective regional economies. We did not find any consistent patterns. For example, in three industry-oriented regions, the larger number of elites studied engineering and technology (38 per cent in Kaluga, 40 per cent in Kemerovo), but in Sverdlovsk it was social sciences (42 per cent) that dominated. In service-oriented regions the specialization focus was more diffused, but engineering and technology fields are strong: 25 per cent in Bryansk, 37 per cent in the Khakassia Republic, 22 per cent in the Altai Republic plus 24 per cent in social sciences.

The Status of Higher Education Institutions

For our analysis we define the leading group of institutions as including only comprehensive universities (in Russia called ‘classical universities’ in contrast to specialized universities) located in regional capitals. During the Soviet period, they had a special role in training the elite, especially at federal level (Froumin et al., 2014). Comprehensive universities established in the post-Soviet period often resulted from mergers or transformation of a specialized institution. Classical universities expanded after 1990 due to the new programmes in social sciences and business, mostly in economics, law and management. There was also growth in specialized institutions of economics, law, foreign languages, business studies and public administration.

In our sample, 29 per cent of elite members obtained their university degrees in classical comprehensive institutions. This is comparable to the

Table 14.2 Russian universities with the largest number of regional elite members among graduates

	Number of graduates among regional elite	Number of graduates among regional elite (graduation before 1991)	Number of graduates among regional elite (graduation after 1991)
Ogarev Mordovia State University (B)	57	38	19
Dagestan State University (B)	53	25	28
Lomonosov Moscow State University (A)	51	10	25
Saint-Petersburg State University (A)	45	11	29
Kabardino-Balkarian State University (B)	45	23	8
Tyumen State University (A)	38	9	25
Tomsk State University (A)	37	5	31
North-Eastern Federal University in Yakutsk (B)	33	9	24
South Ural State University (A)	30	14	13
North Ossetia State University (B)	28	8	20
Chuvash State University (B)	28	10	18

Source: Authors.

share of comprehensive university graduates in the total number of graduates nationally. This means that the regional elite is not recruited mostly from comprehensive universities (Platonova & Semyonov, 2018). However, among the youngest cohorts, those born during 1971–1980 and 1981–1990, the share of those graduated from classical universities is more significant than for the oldest cohorts

In the younger cohorts the role of specialist institutions in engineering and technology declines; as does the share of elite members who graduated from military universities. One possible explanation for the latter is that military graduates typically obtain a regional elite position after a long military career, typically about 20 years. The share of elite members graduated from pedagogical and agricultural universities also decreases over the age cohorts. During the Soviet period agricultural institutes were one of the main regional elite providers in the regions, reflecting the significant share of agriculture in some regional economies, mostly in the southern part of Russia. After 1991 the channels of upward social mobility that existed in the Soviet period for people specialized in agriculture disappeared and the share of people graduated from these universities in the regional elite also decreased. In the post-Soviet period, the prestige of pedagogical education also decreased.

There are also geographical differences across regions. Polytechnical institutions prevail over classical ones in Central, Far Eastern, Siberian and Southern federal districts. In the remaining federal districts (North-Caucasian, Northwestern, Volga), most regional elite members were graduated from classical universities. These differences may be associated with both the structure of regional economies and the geographical distribution of university types.

Table 14.2 sets down the universities with the largest number of regional elite members among their graduates. Leading national universities (Moscow State University and Saint-Petersburg State University) are type A; universities located in national republics are type B.

Are the Elite Groups Shaped by the Same Fields of Study or the Same University?

In order to analyse the homophily level of elite members in terms of the educational background (university, field of study) we have calculated a concentration Herfindahl–Hirschman (HH) index according to the following formula:

$$HH = S_1^2 + S_2^2 + \dots + S_n^2, \text{ where}$$

S_i^2 - squared share of elite members in the region
representing particular field of study or university.

The HH index varies from 0.01 to 1, where 1 corresponds to the situation when the whole regional legislature elite have the same educational background and 0.01 corresponds to the situation of the absolute diversity of universities or fields of study. Using this measure the distribution of regions by HH index is quite skewed. In total 49 of the 82 regions where we have data have an HH index within the interval from 0 to 0.1, and 21 have an HH index within the interval 0.1 to 0.2, meaning that there is a high level of diversity in the regional elite group in terms of fields of study. Only two regions have an HH index higher than 0.4 – the Dagestan Republic where most regional elite members studied social science and the Krasnodar region where the dominant field of study among elite members is engineering.

The distribution of regions by HH index measuring diversity of regional elite in terms of their universities is even more skewed. In total 70 of the 83 regions in the data using this measure have an HH of between 0 and 0.15. There are just two regions with high values: the Tatarstan Republic and the Novgorod region. Hence in most regional legislatures, the political elite consists of people representing a wide range of universities and different fields of study.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

Lack of data on the social origin of political elites prevents researchers from establishing correlations between education and family background that could help to answer the key question: does education reproduce inequalities or provide opportunities for upward political mobility? However, our study has taken this domain of research forward in some respects.

The main contribution of the study reported in this chapter has been to connect changes in elite formation with the transformation of the national higher education system and the larger society. The changes in the educational background of the Soviet and post-Soviet elites partly reflect the post-Soviet restructuring of the Russian higher education system and the changing social role of higher education.

Rapid massification of higher education in the USSR and Russia has been an important social process. Stimulated and supported by the Soviet government, which established a nationwide network of higher education institutions and encouraged participation, higher education was a mass sector by the late Soviet period, enrolling about a quarter of the age cohort (Smolentseva et al., 2018). This rate was comparable to the US and Western Europe during that time. Already in the Soviet time, higher education was a social norm for certain social groups such as specialists and public administrators who enrolled their children in higher education even if they had not received it themselves (Konstantinovskiy, 2017). That not only showed the inequality of opportunity in the USSR despite the large-scale efforts to provide opportunities, but also the persistent reproduction of the Soviet elite class, especially those in power and in the *nomenklatura* positions. Most of the Soviet elite had higher education (see, e.g., Semenova, 2012). Not surprisingly, their children also received higher education.

The massification of higher education continually fosters growing aspirations and is a self-reinforcing process. Soviet massification was the platform for a further increase of participation which by the mid-2000s had reached about 50 per cent in Russia (Smolentseva et al., 2018). The national micro-census of 2015 found that 40.5 per cent of the 25–34 age cohort held higher education degrees, though there was an attainment gap between men (33.7 per cent) and women (47.2 per cent) (*Indikator obrazovania*, 2020). By then having higher education was a social norm for many people, including the political elite. The low level of participation by working-class and peasant families means that the political elite is drawn from the better-off groups for whom higher education is more customary.

Here higher education is not a prerequisite – no one formally requires it – but it is a form of cultural and symbolic capital that has become essential in

elite reproduction. Elite post-holders obtain higher education prior to the first post and often obtain a second degree or a PhD.

Another dimension of higher education is that of field of study where there have been significant changes in graduation patterns. Soviet higher education was strongly oriented towards applied engineering and technology fields: 41 per cent of graduates received engineering degrees in 1988 (*Narodnoe obrazovanie i kultura v SSSR v 1988*, 1989). Over the post-Soviet period, higher education has shifted sharply towards business, economics and management. In 2010, enrolments in those fields comprised 36 per cent, with 22 per cent in engineering. This transformation was driven by the social aspirations of the population and facilitated by the dual-track tuition fee model which enabled public institutions to charge tuition fees in the popular and cheap fields in order to complement shrinking state funding (see Smolentseva et al., 2018, which provides detailed analysis of the changes in higher education). Accordingly, if Soviet elites were mostly educated in the engineering, natural sciences or medicine, the changes in the educational background of the post-Soviet political elites towards business and management reflect the changes in the higher education system.

Previous literature has suggested that for the Soviet elite, a technical or natural science degree was a prerequisite for a high administrative position (e.g., Semenova, 2012), but it does not explain why this remained the case in the late Soviet period, when higher education was already massified. One plausible explanation is that an engineering degree functioned as the mass degree and the Soviet pool of elite recruitment was wide. Further, Soviet career promotion required work experience in industry. The Soviet economy was an industrial economy. To support the working population, higher education institutions offered special two-year courses for those who come from industry (*rabfak*), which provided preparation for entrance examinations. The entire Soviet system worked to promote those with the 'right' social background characteristics: working class or peasantry origin, work experience and education.

In the post-Soviet period, the site of mass higher education shifted from engineering to business, economics or management, including public administration, leading to the corresponding changes in the younger elite generations. This shift was related not only to the structural changes in the economy, from military-industrial to more service-oriented, but also larger societal changes. Modern society no longer requires narrow specializations of the Soviet time. It needs employable and flexible workers with broader knowledge and skills. In an economy where private business is closely related to the public domain, it is not surprising that administrators and managers are prominent in the recruitment pool of the new elites.

However, there are no particularly prestigious majors essential for a place in the regional elite. Even law and economics are not over-represented in the education of the regional political elite – which perhaps differs from the federal elite in this respect. On the other hand, certain fields have definitely declined in importance: pedagogy, health care, agriculture, all of which were more important in elite production in the Soviet Union.

Regional comprehensive universities play an important role in elite formation, as in Soviet times, though it is not a majority role. Deputies in Russia's regional parliaments are represented by graduates from a wide range of higher education institutions. The skew towards elite universities is not highly pronounced for regional political elites. The possession of a university degree or PhD seems to be more relevant than its actual quality or prestige. However, the recent policy emphasis on stratification of higher education institutions, through excellence funding and competition, might affect the formation of the political elite in coming decades.

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