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# BETWEEN GUNS AND MUSIC: LOCAL IDENTITY IN PROVINCIAL POST-SOVIET CITY<sup>1</sup>

Tatiana Vlasova – Konstantin Obukhov

## Abstract

### **Between guns and music: local identity in provincial post-soviet city**

The main topic of the article is the analysis of the contradictions of the local identity changes in Izhevsk. The empirical basis for this research consists of the interviews with the experts of different professions and a survey with a combined online and face-to-face strategy. According to data, it is possible to identify three ways of public presentation of Izhevsk: official pattern is associated with the personality of M. T. Kalashnikov, combination of military and soviet industry symbolism, and “antimilitarism” as a city of cultural industries. Residents of Izhevsk tend to support the first two ideas. The third image does not resonate with the townspeople. Contradictions in the representation of local identity affect the level of civic engagement of the population. Expressing a formal interest in urban change, residents are reluctant to invest significant resources in support of cultural institutions.

**Keywords:** Urban Policy, Local Identity, Culture, Symbolism, Representation, Activism

## Introduction

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the socio-economic conditions of urban life began to change rapidly throughout the post-Soviet space. In cities, the service sector began expanding, including tourism-related services; the creative industries began playing a more important role. Those changes led to the search for new types of urban identity. Izhevsk is a typical city with a Soviet industrial heritage. Until the 1990s, it was a city with a significant share of military-industrial complex enterprises. In the situation of economic diversification of the 1990s and 2000s, the ratio of economic sectors in Udmurtia changed – mining, the service sector, and the agro-industrial complex shares increased. It should be noted that Izhevsk is the administrative center of the ethnic region – Udmurtia. Government’s attempts to diversify the regional and urban economy have led to the actualization of rural agenda and increase in interest in ethnic history and culture. In addition, a series of anniversary events took place in 2020: the 260th anniversary of Izhevsk, the 100th anniversary of the Udmurtia statehood, the 180th anniversary of P. I. Tchaikovsky, and a little earlier, in 2019, the 100th anniversary of M. T. Kalashnikov. In this regard, discussions of the unique features of Izhevsk intensified. In this context, the description of the most common images of Izhevsk

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<sup>1</sup> The research was carried out with the support of the Russian President Foundation “Deryabin assembly: Industrial City Development” (№ 19-2-021122 2019-2020). This text contains excerpts from the monograph Vlasova T., Obukhov K., 2020.

is of particular interest. The purpose of the present study was to determine the ways of representing the historical and cultural heritage in the practice of the city's developing narratives.

### **The transition from industrial to post-industrial development**

By itself, the transition from industrial to post-industrial development in cities is quite typical for most developing and developed countries. The first ones to make such a transition were the cities of North America and Europe. This process has been well studied by specialists in economics, economic geography, and sociology<sup>2</sup>. Its important feature was not only the restructuring of the city's economy, but also the increasing role of symbolic production in the cities development<sup>3</sup>. At the same time, the processes of change were not always unambiguous: economic growth was unstable, support from citizens or local communities was often low, and a purely positive identity of the location was not formed<sup>4</sup>. Most of the post-Soviet cities entered this transformation with a delay; in addition, they were characterized by a number of peculiarities in handling the symbolic capital of a location and communities that existed in specific territories. For modern Russian towns, these features are associated with the general focus of the town authorities on the development of the local economy through the construction and restoration of production sector, without a significant attention to symbolic and human capital; although the governments formally support the importance of memory, history, and heritage<sup>5</sup>. From this point of view, the Izhevsk case may be quite indicative for tracing how the identity of the city in the perception of the townspeople changes under the influence of the ongoing transformations in Russia.

The present study combined qualitative and quantitative sociological methods. The use of a high-quality methodology allowed us to cover the existing variety of opinions and practices in working with the symbolic space of Izhevsk. Interviews with experts were conducted in November and December 2019. The total number of informants was 30. Among the informants were representatives of academic institutions (universities and research organizations), government bodies, Izhevsk municipality, directors and employees of museums, businesspersons, members of public associations and public organizations, employees of municipal institutions related to the provision of urban amenities. All

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<sup>2</sup> Molotch, 1976; Harvey, 2009; Zukin, 1995; Storper 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Winter, 2013; Hauge, 2007; Yo-Min, Se Hoon, 2017; Hesmondhalgh, 2013.

<sup>4</sup> Frobel, Heinrichs, Kreye, 1980; Zukin, 1995; D. Throsby, 2001.

<sup>5</sup> Gladarev, 2013; Tykanova, Khokhlova, 2015; Bogatova, 2019; Veselkova, Pryamikova, Vandyshev, 2016

informants were, to some extent, involved in the scientific activities and public initiatives. They knew each other to varying degrees, participated in events together or had common projects. Therefore, similar ideas, examples, rhetorical techniques were registered in the interviews. Thus, we can assume that a common space of shared ideas and values has formed in the sphere of urban activism.

The quantitative methodology assumed a combined strategy of data collection – an online survey and a questionnaire survey at the place of residence. The mass survey of Izhevsk residents was based on a questionnaire that had been tested during the implementation of the Izhevsk Mental Maps project in 2009<sup>6</sup>. Such a continuity of the toolkit (with minor changes) allowed to compare the data obtained during the 2020 and 2009 surveys, and to track changes in the attitude of citizens towards the main symbols of Izhevsk. The online survey was conducted from January 4 to January 18, 2020 (518 questionnaires were received), the face-to-face survey – from January 20 to March 5, 2020 (483 questionnaires were received). The total volume of the quota sample was 1001 people (according to the structure of the Izhevsk population, the following parameters were monitored: sex, age, area of residence), the confidence level was 95%, the confidence interval of the study was 3.09%.

### **Izhevsk as an Image**

The way Izhevsk residents see their city largely depends on ideas and images that are widely discussed in media. Those who most often have to talk about Izhevsk and Udmurtia within the framework of their professional speeches (at conferences, presentations, master classes, etc.) set forth the approach, content, and tone of such discussions. All interview participants were selected based on their professional involvement in the city's development process.

Based on the interview materials, three ways of public presentation of Izhevsk can be identified. The first method is that informants use an associative array related to the personality of the famous small arms designer M. T. Kalashnikov, who has lived in Izhevsk since 1948. Since the 1990s, M. T. Kalashnikov's personality has been actively used in the symbolic space of Udmurtia: the concern (now a group of companies) producing small arms, the avenue, and the university were named after him, a museum and exhibition complex of small arms was opened in 2004. The transformation of Kalashnikov's personality and name

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<sup>6</sup> Rupasov, 2009, p. 29

into a regional brand entailed the emergence of various types of souvenir products. A portrait of Kalashnikov or an AK-47 assault rifle can be seen on lighters, travel mugs, flasks, business card holders, notebooks, smartphone cases, flash drives, and key fobs. Gingerbread is made in the form of his assault rifle. Since 1995, Glazovsky Distillery has been producing Kalashnikov vodka, including gift bottles shaped to resemble the assault rifle. The prolonged use of paramilitary symbolism has contributed to the erosion of the significance attributed to it.

The images of M. T. Kalashnikov and AK-47 assault rifle are often combined with other markers filled with content associated with the production of weapons: “city of gunsmiths”, “capital of small arms”. This approach is used by those who often deliver long speeches at public events, including both municipal officials and representatives of the academic community.

The second way of constructing the image of Izhevsk is associated with the appeal to images that form the idea of the industrial history of the city. In that case, the products of factories popular since Soviet times (“Izh” motorcycles and cars), sports weapons are used as symbols. It is difficult to choose a generalizing – social or professional – category for those experts who use the second way to represent the city.

Finally, the third method was based on the rejection of militaristic associations. This approach was typical for young informants and those experts who represented art-related organizations and institutions. From their position, an alternative to the militaristic image was formed. They emphasized that in the 1990s Izhevsk was known as the gravity center for electronic music, artists, engineers, and creative space. In this case, the informants demonstrated an inclination toward conscious “myth-making” or the creation of an “alternative history”. This, according to one of the informants, could be a more efficient tool for the formation of urban identity than the official “brands” (male, 58, journalist, artist). Urban mythology fueled interest in relatively new monuments, such as the ironic monument to the crocodile or the little dog Zvezdochka (a Little Star).

The symbolic constructs offered by the experts were reproduced with some variations in the interpretation of urban locations, which served as significant points for constructing the identity of Izhevsk residents. More than a half of the townspeople perceive Izhevsk through its administrative function (as the capital of the Udmurt Republic) or as a city of gunsmiths; the next definition, which took the third position in the ranking, refers to the image of Izhevsk as a city packed with plants and factories (see Table 1). The number of



respondents who look at Izhevsk through the prism of ethnic diversity has significantly decreased.

**Table 1. Distribution of answers to the question “What statements best reflect the image of Izhevsk?” (% by column of respondents who answered the question; a respondent could choose up to 3 answers)**

	2020	2009
Izhevsk is the capital of Udmurtia	64.6	80.9
Izhevsk is a city of gunsmiths	56.6	71.5
Izhevsk is an industrial city	47.7	32.1
Izhevsk is a multiethnic city	24.6	45.2
Izhevsk is a cultural center	9.7	12.8
Izhevsk is a sports center	9.4	10.7
Izhevsk is an educational center	6.0	12.8
Izhevsk is an entertainment center	3.6	n/a <sup>7</sup>
Izhevsk is a tourist center	3.0	n/a

It is impossible to form clear profiles that would’ve described the adherents of one or another way of defining Izhevsk, the scene is extremely heterogeneous, and in most cases the deviations are within the statistical error. However, a number of implicitly expressed features can be distinguished. For instance, those who have lived in Izhevsk for 5 to 15 years are less inclined to define the city through the functions of the capital. Respondents who have lived in the city for more than 15 years look at Izhevsk more through the prism of industrial or gunsmith activities. Young people more often define the city referring to its status of the regional capital: the older the respondent, the lower is the likelihood that they will mention the capital status of Izhevsk. The status of Izhevsk as a weapon manufacturer is most significant for people aged 30 to 50, while the industrial status of Izhevsk is more often mentioned by young people under 25 and people over 70. The less well-to-do residents of Izhevsk tend to denote the multi-ethnic nature of the city. For wealthier residents, the most significant is the gunsmith status of Izhevsk and – to a lesser extent – its industrial status.

Speaking about the personalities who could represent the city, the experts tried to offer an alternative to the already established “iconic” personalities of M. T. Kalashnikov and P. I. Tchaikovsky. When invited to list well-known Izhevsk residents, it was easier for the experts to name professionals and/or highly ranked people, such as gunsmiths, engineers, manufacturers of old Izhevsk, generals of the Izhevsk plant, directors of Soviet factories,

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<sup>7</sup> Hereinafter, no data is available due to the modification of the 2009 survey questionnaire

mayors of Izhevsk in recent years, professors and teachers of higher educational institutions, representatives of the Udmurt intelligentsia, musicians, and athletes. In three interviews, experts emphasized the great importance of the folklore band “Buranovskie Babushki” for the image of Udmurtia. They saw the members of the band as a collective image of an Udmurt woman. Another collective image was the “*founding fathers*” (male, 49, head of a design agency), which meant the first architects and mayors of the Izhevsk plant. It turned out to be somewhat more difficult for experts to list specific historical or modern characters. Nevertheless, the interview materials featured prominent people from various fields of activity.

According to a survey of the townspeople, the dominance of the weapons-related, industrial and governmental definitions of Izhevsk is also reflected in the choice of people who are able to represent the city on the national level or in the whole world. The first two positions in the ranking have not changed over the past 10 years: the most significant personalities for the townspeople are still small arms designer M. Kalashnikov and skier G. Kulakova. The third place (one position up from 2009) was taken by the composer P. Tchaikovsky, while the founder of the city A. Deryabin became a less significant figure for a large share of respondents. It should be noted that the less a person has lived in Izhevsk, the higher the likelihood of getting an answer from them about the significance of M. Kalashnikov and P. Tchaikovsky. Native residents of Izhevsk more often than others name alternatives to the top positions of the rating, e.g., historical characters of the 18th – 19th centuries (S. Dudin, A. Deryabin, P. Shuvalov). The wealthier city residents more often suggest alternatives to the first two positions in the rating.

In general, based on the analysis of the townspeople’s preferences, we can conclude that it is impossible to form a single integral set of urban symbols that would find unequivocal support among the majority of Izhevsk residents. Despite the fact that the survey clearly traces the dominant symbols that can be represented by names, images or urban objects, there is no clear logic of their conjugation or unification in the mass consciousness. On the contrary, the respondents’ answers quite often combine seemingly contradictory or mutually exclusive symbols. This allows assuming that the existing narratives, despite their formal reproducibility, are poorly developed and rooted in the minds of an ordinary city resident. In such a situation, quite successful changes can be made to the symbolic space of the city.

## Local identity and urban citizenship

The issue of the residents' attitude to the city turned out to be one of the most controversial in expert interviews. Many informants believed that the attitude of residents towards the city was changing for the better. Informants working in the cultural institutions noted a positive change in the form of steadily increasing interest in museum exhibitions and displays. History lectures and city walking tours have become popular. An interest in local history is being formed, which is expressed in the collection of information about old Izhevsk. In this case, we are talking about groups in social media, where participants share personal and family stories, as well as photographs of old Izhevsk.

As a result, a kind of "demand for history" is formed on the part of townspeople. This statement is supported by the spread of the passion for compiling family genealogies. Another factor in the residents' increased activity – significant for the informants – was the growing responsibility for the state of urban spaces. Informants noticed that the townspeople better maintain cleanliness, and there are fewer cases of vandalism. The townspeople now practice regular volunteer initiatives for garbage collection and environmental events. The participants in the study named social media as the catalyst for the growing activity of city dwellers. The ability to quickly exchange information, mobilize those who are interested in certain initiatives, leads to growing awareness of the potential for collective action. Most often, townspeople are ready to take initiative in matters that require one-time actions, or in solving those problems that are related to their way of life.

Other informants were of the opinion that there were no significant changes in the activity of Izhevsk residents. Those survey participants pointed out that townspeople showing initiative make up a stable group of "social activists". In the interview materials, four explanatory models of the low activity of the townspeople were defined. The first model did not have an obvious professional identity, but it sounded among those who interact with the "common people". They pointed to a low degree of public engagement and explained this by the inertness of Izhevsk residents ("*they are not interested in their history*" (male, 45, tour guide)), lack of emotional "*attachment to the city*" (male, 58, journalist, artist). The second explanatory model, typical for those who work with citizens in the framework of projects for the development of public spaces, appealed to the socio-political situation in the city, which blocks the initiative of ordinary citizens. Informants characterized the position of municipal and regional authorities as "*closed*", blind to initiatives coming "*from below*" (male, 57, school director, activist). The third explanatory model is about the limited resources of the population and it supports the above position:

*“Anyway, the economic situation, the level of income is not so high among the population to be satisfied with the comfort of their inner world. To do that, you need to spend almost all your resources, your time, your available money, and there is almost nothing left to spend on the outside world”* (male, 34, employee of the center for the development of the urban environment).

Within the framework of the fourth explanatory model typical for the entrepreneurs, when interpreting the facts of residents’ inertia, the rhetoric of the *“mentality of a subsidized region dependent on state funding”* (male, 46, an IT entrepreneur) dominated.

An important manifestation of the citizens’ position is their willingness to support certain institutions by direct monthly transferring of funds to them. Hypothetical financial support is more of an indicator of an institution’s level of “importance” for a person than a direct indicator of the intention or ability to transfer money. About 53% of the respondents are ready to provide financial assistance and support to institutions on a monthly basis. For details on the rating of personal financial support, see Table 2.

Generally speaking, when answering the question about personal support, one can identify a certain set of socio-demographic characteristics for certain institutions, but it is not statistically significant. The pronounced features are as follows: the higher the financial wealth of the respondent, the greater the number of organizations and institutions they are ready to support; respondents with higher education are more willing to support theaters and museums. Women are generally more likely to choose a large number of institutions, while men are twice as likely to find it difficult to answer. For women, the following institutions are more significant: the Zoo, the National Theater of the Udmurt Republic, the Tchaikovsky Museum. More significant for men are Architectural and Ethnographic Museum Ludorvay and the Izhstal Ice Rink. Residents over 60 are more likely to find it difficult to answer the question of personal support or choose the Kalashnikov Museum, the Museum of Fine Arts, and the Russian Drama Theater. For respondents aged 40 to 60, the Tchaikovsky Museum, the Opera and Ballet Theater, and the Kalashnikov Museum are more significant. The youth rating is the closest to the general rating for Izhevsk.

**Table 2. Distribution of respondents’ answers to the question “What institutions are you willing to support personally by making monthly donations?”**  
(% of respondents to the question, one respondent could indicate several institutions)

State Zoo of Udmurtia	27.5
State National Theater of the Udmurt Republic	22.2
Architectural and Ethnographic Museum Ludorvay	14.5
Museum Estate of P. I. Tchaikovsky	13.5

State Opera and Ballet Theater of the Udmurt Republic	11.9
The Kalashnikov Museum and Exhibition Complex of Small Arms	11.9
Izhevsk Museum	11.2
Udmurt Republic Museum of Fine Arts	11.0
State Russian Drama Theater of Udmurtia	10.9
Izhstal Ice Rink	8.7

The question about material support was supplemented by an open question about what specific amount the respondent was willing to transfer to each of the indicated institutions on a monthly basis. This question was not mandatory; as a result, 466 respondents answered it, which is 46.6% of the total number of respondents. The respondents provided a significant range of amounts they were willing to donate to support institutions that are significant for them. Taking into account the normalization of the respondents' answers, the minimum value obtained was 5 rubles, and the maximum value was 5,000 rubles. The average value of one donation is 294 rubles, the median value is 100 rubles, the most popular answer among respondents is 100 rubles, while only 25% of respondents are ready to donate 400 rubles or more, and another 25% of respondents are ready to donate 100 rubles and less<sup>8</sup>.

In general, we can say that there is an unrealized opportunity to attract citizens to finance some cultural and recreational institutions. However, financially, this opportunity cannot provide a significant flow of funds. Nevertheless, the informants who participated in the expert survey emphasized the need to support even episodic manifestations of the citizens' activity, because only a few of them respond to initiatives from cultural institutions or social movements.

One of the few successful examples of patronage in the field of culture in Izhevsk is the support of the amateur theater "Les Partisans". Having not received financial support from the Ministry of Culture, the amateur theater began to take an active part in grant programs. It was within the framework of theatrical activities that crowdfunding mechanisms were triggered, including ticket sales, direct fundraising, and forms of work that involved paying for acting classes for aspiring actors. The theater also relied on sponsorship through cooperation with development companies and merchants. When the theater was given a space in a complex of historical buildings, the funds for the renovation of the auditorium were found relatively easily:

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<sup>8</sup> At the beginning of 2021, the indicator of the average monthly accrued wages of employees of organizations amounted to 36,196 rubles or about 400 euros (as of 04.04.2021, the Russian ruble / euro exchange rate was about 90 rubles to 1 euro) [online]. [cit. 2020-07-04]. Available on: <https://udmstat.gks.ru/>

*“It was just a barn, there was nothing, there was no floor. We spoke to our members of the audience, said that according to our calculations we needed 140 thousand rubles to make the floor but we had no money. And in two weeks, instead of 140 thousand, we raised 250. Help came from both common members of the audience and businessmen who paid for construction materials. This is how we realized that people needed us” (male, 42, director of an amateur theater).*

At the same time, the materials of the interviews make it obvious that the development of mechanisms of patronage and sponsorship is hindered by the lack of efficient social institutions. The personal friendship between the sponsor and the beneficiary is critical in patronage practices.

## **Results**

Studies of the problem of Izhevsk residents' local identity show that the image of the city remains eclectic. Under the influence of the media, several stereotypical images have been formed and are steadily reproduced. According to data, it is possible to identify three ways of public presentation of Izhevsk. The first pattern is associated with the personality of M. T. Kalashnikov supplemented with the military markers of “city of gunsmiths”, “capital of small arms”. The second pattern relates to the fact that other famous persons such as musicians and sportsmen were mentioned. Informants also combine military symbolism with either the products of factories, which are popular since Soviet times (motorcycles and cars), or ethnic Udmurt culture (Finno-Ugric peoples). The last pattern of Izhevsk description was familiar for young people who worked in arts and music institutions. This position could be defined as “antimilitarism”. Young informants associate the city with electronic music, IT-engineering, and cultural industries.

Experts note an increase in the number of active citizens, young people in particular. At the same time, residents are more often involved in urban improvement projects and – to a lesser extent – they are interested in crowdfunding and fundraising for cultural institutions. Izhevsk residents also approve maintaining budgetary funding for a fairly large number of existing cultural industry establishments. But a rather large share of the respondents surveyed is ready to participate in financial support of the institutions that are most valuable to them. Further, more systematic work is required to build a local identity, which would be based more on private initiatives and social activism.

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