

# Syktvkar: the (Komi) capital of the Komi Republic. Analysis of lived experiences of urban Komi people

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*Urban areas are often perceived as non-compliant with Indigenous peoples' livelihoods and therefore seen as threatening for sustaining Indigenous identities. At the same time, the global urban Indigenous population keeps growing, in some areas already surpassing the rural one. In this setting, the concept of indigeneity and particularly territoriality as its vital component should be addressed critically.*

*In this contribution I aim to investigate how Komi residents of the capital city perceive themselves in urban space and what meanings they attribute to being a Komi urban resident. I do it by referring to their personal and autobiographical stories told to me during my fieldwork performed in Syktvkar from October 2021 to February 2022.*

*I argue that urban Komi employ two major strategies in sustaining their identities in the city. Some of them continue perceiving themselves as products of rurality and therefore maintain their Kominess by continuously returning to the rural areas and searching for rural elements in the city. Others maintain and develop their Komi identity by exploring new possibilities the city may offer and, when doing so, they contrapose rurality to modernity and innovation. In either way, urban Komi residents are regarded, particularly by their rural counterparts, as multifaceted actors combining rural and urban implications of themselves. Being at large connected with their rural counterparts, resilience and actual decision-making power of urban Komi community is therefore closely related to the prosperity of all Komi people.*

## Introduction

The present contribution is largely based on Indigenous Studies scholarship and therefore follows the consequent academic tradition. Undoubtedly, one may highlight that the Komi people lack official recognition as one of Russia's Indigenous small-numbered peoples. Nonetheless, it is important to outline the ultimately excluding and limiting character of this artificial categorization. The Russian Federal Law No. 82 describes "indigenous small-numbered peoples" as those "living in the territories of traditional settlement of their ancestors, preserving their traditional way of life, economic activity and crafts, numbering less than 50 thousand people in the Russian Federation and recognizing themselves as independent ethnic communities". There are several problematic

aspects engrained in that definition, among which the numerical parameter is frequently considered as the most confining (Donahoe et al., 2008). As Donahoe et al. (2008: 995) describe, among more than 200 ethnic groups inhabiting Russia, of which around 130 can be potentially named as Indigenous, “according to definitions based on autochthony, rights of prior occupation, and a history of disenfranchisement vis-a-vis the dominant population”. Currently, only 47 groups are officially recognized as such.

The limitations of Russian legislation on Indigenous peoples are continuously confronted by non-recognized peoples, for example, in their utilization of legal vocabulary designed for Indigenous matters. For instance, UNDRIP (United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples), the resolution seminal for the Indigenous world, is translated to the languages of 5 ethnic groups residing in Russia, namely Karelians, Livvi-Karelians, Komi, Nanai, and Veps. Only the latter two peoples possess the official Indigenous status.

Indigeneity, which is simultaneously an ontological, political, and legal phenomenon, can therefore be understood, analyzed, and applied differently. Furthermore, one may indeed argue that conceptualization and historical framework of indigeneity in Russia differs significantly from the application of the concept in, for example, North or South America. Nevertheless, it appears that recognized and non-recognized Indigenous peoples in Russia, particularly, in their political and economic claims tend to follow the common narrative of the international pan-Indigenous movement, which among other things incorporates historical experiences of oppression and autochthony.

Lacking the official Indigenous status, Komi people possess the status of titular peoples of the Komi Republic. Such status is encapsulated in the Article 3 of the Komi Republic’s Constitution, which defines that the Republic’s formation, its political and legal statuses are directly linked to the dwelling of the Komi people on its territory (Fedina, 2022). Furthermore, the Komi people self-identify as native people and employ this category in their political actions and activism. On the international level, such actions are exemplified by, for example, occasional participation of Komi representatives in sessions of EMRIP (Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples) or former membership of the Komi people in UNPO (Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization). While the efficacy of the latter act has been debated even by the Komi people who oversaw it (Alexey Konyukhov, personal communication, April 2022), its symbolic meaning is hardly contested. On the local level, the notion of indigeneity is directly used by, for example, the Izhma Komi people, the northernmost Komi group, in their statements addressing natural resources extractive activities conducted by Lukoil in their homeland, the Izhemsky district:

We, the Izhma Komi, are the indigenous people and these are our lands. We no longer want to put up with the predatory exploitation of our mineral resources and environmental irresponsibility of Lukoil Komi. We must be an equal partner in conduction of any industrial projects on our lands (7x7 Horizontal Russia 2014).

It is widely accepted that cities generally tend to possess fewer resources than rural areas for the sustenance of Indigenous livelihoods that include language, cultural and spiritual practices, and connections to extended family (Shell-Weiss & Bardwell, 2017: 101). However, it is as well important to outline that indigeneity is, by no means, a static construct, but a subject to constant transformation, not only in the urban areas, but in the rural ones as well. Indigenous urban residence and mobility to cities is not a novel phenomenon. Nonetheless, it is the enhancement of

such movements that has led to increasing physical, political, and academic visibility of urban Indigenous communities (McSweeney & Jokisch, 2015: 14).

Syktyvkar, the capital of the Komi Republic, is historically and numerically referred to as the most Komi city. In this contribution I aim to investigate how Komi residents of the capital city perceive themselves in urban space and what meanings they attribute to being a Komi urban resident. I do it by referring to their personal stories told to me during my fieldwork performed in Syktyvkar in October 2021-February 2022.

## Methodology and positionality

The data presented in this article was produced during ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Syktyvkar, the Komi Republic, Russia from October 2021 to February 2022.

I conducted 6 groups and 29 individual interviews, encompassing 67 people in total. All participants are adults from 18 to 70 years old, who self-identify as Komi and/or Izhma Komi. Most of them (53 people) were females. The participants represent various fields and professions: they are, for example, students, university and school lecturers, culture workers, public figures, private sector employees, and retirees. For most of the participants, Komi language, culture, or politics constitute a substantial part of their professional lives. Approximately half of individual participants are current or former members of different Komi organizations such as the Syktyvkar branch of *Komi Voityr*, the representative organization of all Komi people, and districts' *zemljachestva*, the associations that unite people originating from a particular district.

Some fieldwork participants are born urbanites, who have been living in the city constantly since their birth. Nonetheless, most of the participants are first-generation internal migrants, who relocated to Syktyvkar from rural districts of the Komi Republic mostly due to studies or work. The participants represent 7 of 12 districts of the Komi Republic: Izhemsky, Kortkerossky, Syktyvdinsky, Sysolsky, Udorsky, Ust-Vymsky, and Ust-Kulomsky. Most of these districts are Komi dominated: 75.8% of Ust-Kulomsky district's, 66.4% of Kortkerossky district's, 63.9% of Sysolsky district's, and 62% of Izhemsky district's populations are Komi. Additionally, 45.6% of Syktyvdinsky district's, 39.3% of Udorsky district's, and 25.4% of Ust-Vymsky district's populations are Komi.

The duration of country-born participants' residence in Syktyvkar varies from several months to more than 50 years. The first instance is typical for the first-year Bachelor students who has recently relocated to the city, and the latter – for the older research participants who moved to the capital after graduating from rural secondary schools to continue their education in professional colleges and the pedagogical institute<sup>1</sup> in Syktyvkar.

The group interviews included 3 to 11 people. 4 out of 6 group interviews were conducted with the students enrolled in the Bachelor's programmes "Pedagogical education: Native language (Komi) and literature and Russian language and literature" and "Pedagogical education: Native Language and literature and Foreign language (English)".

I am a native Russian speaker with good understanding of the Komi language but limited speaking abilities. The main language of the interviews was Russian. At the same time, several participants opted for the Komi language as the medium of the dialogues and were speaking in Komi throughout the interviews, while I was responding in Russian. According to my observations, such

mode of interviewing did not cause substantial issues, as all research participants are bilingual, however, one participant asked me at the end of the interview, when will I start speaking Komi too. It was as well common for most of the participants to perform occasional switches to the Komi language, particularly when telling autobiographical stories or talking about rurality-related phenomena.

When searching for people for the interviews, in the initial stage of the fieldwork I primarily used my mother's connections. My mother is a Komi linguist, the current head of Syktyvkar branch of *Komi Voityr*, and a public figure well-known and respected among urban Komi residents; she self-identifies as Izhma Komi and is a native speaker of the Izhma Komi dialect. Later, when my own network grew, I was employing a snowball approach to recruit new participants.

Apart from conducting interviews, I attended several events, like literary evenings, concerts, church services<sup>2</sup>, the public organization's meetings. All events were performed in the Komi language and were meant to unite urban Komi residents. I kept my observations on these events as fieldwork diary notes.

All participants gave their permission to use the interviews' data and refer to it by their real names. Nevertheless, I have decided to opt for anonymization of all participants, unless they express their opinions as public figures. I would not regard data presented here as highly sensitive in other circumstances, but in the continuously restrictive settings of contemporary war-time Russia any non-aligned views may lead to administrative or even criminal persecution. Having safety of my research participants as one of the vital premises of my research, I therefore have to sacrifice personification of their stories for their security.

### **What is a city?**

There is no universal definition of what constitutes a city. UN Human Settlement Programme's guide attributes such ambiguity to "the uniqueness of urban form, the fragmented and interstitial fabric of cities, the spatial and functional blur between urban and rural areas, as well as complex growth trends that generate diverse patterns and conditions" (UN-Habitat, 2022). Each state defines cities and urban areas differently. In the case of Russia, the state does not impose the universal definition and instead the regions define a city individually. Rooted in the drastic variations in population density in Russia, such approach is justifiable.

The common characteristics that distinguish cities from other human settlements in Russia are size (in majority of the regions, a city is a settlement with over 12 thousand inhabitants), presence of developed infrastructure, and a settlement's role as an administrative, cultural, and/or industrial center. At the same time, the status of a city in Russian is rather an administrative construct than an adequate representation of the corresponding level of urbanization, since, by some estimates, up to a third of Russia's cities still bear profoundly rural characteristics (Kommersant, 2015).

The Komi Republic's law on administrative and territorial structure of the Komi Republic No. 13-RZ includes the following types of urban areas: cities of republican significance, cities of district significance, and urban-type settlements. The law does not provide clear definitions for any of these categories. There are 8 cities of republican significance and 2 cities of district significance in the Komi Republic. Syktyvkar, the geographical locus of this paper, is the biggest city possessing the status of the regional capital.

## Indigeneity and Indigenous identity in urban areas

I argue that cities should not be contraposed to the Indigenous world. Ascribing non-urban spaces as authentic and urban as non-authentic, and consequently questioning authenticity of urban dwelling Indigenous peoples are specifically problematic approaches in times when Indigenous populations are becoming increasingly urbanized (Andersen & Peters, 2013: 1). Non-authenticity of urban areas may, in this framework, allegedly imply impossibility of indigeneity to be sustained in urban areas and consequent impossibility for such areas to become inclusive and safe spaces (Howard-Wagner, 2021: 13). The discourse of non-authenticity of urban areas is highly problematic also in that sense, as it facilitates the development of invisibility of Indigenous populations in the cities (ibid.). The related narrative of non-authenticity of urban dwelling Indigenous peoples is as well questionable, as the prerequisite of authenticity that is imposed on Indigenous peoples replicates the centuries-long dominance of settler colonial states and societies (Ravindran, 2015: 326).

At the same, while it is indeed common to ascribe the creation of the narrative of non-authenticity to the dominant political systems, I support Ravindran's argument (2015: 326) that this narrative is further sustained and reproduced by some parts of Indigenous populations themselves. Hereof, the idea of authenticity, and associated narrative of purity may become misleading in that sense that they distract Indigenous populations from the political struggle and disintegrate their unity (ibid., 330). Simultaneously, the narrative of authenticity, imposed by state practices and reinforced by communities, is disputable in that regard as it reproduces the understanding of identity as something unchangeable, to paraphrase Harris et al. (2013: 5), something that is in the process of 'being' rather than 'becoming'.

One of the pillars of Indigenous identity and pan-indigeneity is connection to and relations with the land and particular territory. As Weaver (2012: 475) suggests, "cultural identity is ultimately connected with and defined by traditional territories. Indigenous cultural and spiritual practices are inextricably linked to the land." Relocation to the place, which is not perceived as originally Indigenous may thus question the cohesion of the Indigenous identity. However, such logic is disputed by Indigenous populations themselves. As was shared by a Metis female in Monchalin et al.'s article on urban Metis women in Toronto: "It's not like I'm more Indigenous there [on the land] and I'm less Indigenous here [in the city]. Right? I am the same person no matter where I am" (Monchalin et al., 2020: 328). Resilience of the urban Indigenous communities and sustenance of the core Indigenous values, even under conditions of the widespread language loss and lack of infrastructural opportunities for sustaining Indigenous practices, are often seen as attributive to those communities (Weaver, 2012: 476).

Furthermore, common sense suggests that the very fact of relocation to another place does not annihilate original ethnic and/or Indigenous identities: a Finn does not stop being a Finn when relocating to New York. Indigenous peoples stay Indigenous regardless the place they end up living in. What is contested in this regard are the political and legal implications of indigeneity (Alexiades & Peluso, 2015: 8; McSweeney & Jokisch, 2015: 25). From one perspective, as McSweeney & Jokisch (2015: 16) outline, the challenge is attributed to the difficulty to "reconcile the fact of "multisited" indigeneity with the fact that territoriality remains a core project of global indigeneity". From the other, as Berg-Nordlie (2018: 50) observes, "states' indigenous policy is often shaped to target rural populations, while urban authorities lack or struggle to develop indigenous policy of

their own”. Thus, relocating to the city, Indigenous residents risk being disenfranchised of vital rights they might have possessed in the rural settlements and reservations.

Such observations are as well relevant in the case of the Russian Federation, where the federal legislation defines the list of the territories of traditional residence of the Indigenous small-numbered peoples (Decree of the Government of the Russian Federation of May 8, 2009, No. 631-r). The list primarily consists of rural areas, nonetheless, several urban areas, including cities and urban districts, are incorporated as well. However, while such cities as Anadyr and Salekhard with substantial<sup>3</sup> Indigenous populations are represented, other vital, and sometimes bigger, Indigenous centers, such as Yakutsk, Khanty-Mansiysk, Naryan-Mar, and Petrozavodsk, are excluded, and, therefore, in these cities the policies aiming at Indigenous populations are defined solely by the regional and local administrations, if regulated at all.

While connection to the land and ancestral territories is referred to as one of the fundamental elements of global pan-indigenous identity, it may become challenging exactly for those Indigenous peoples who are either born urbanites or second-, third-, or fourth-generation urbanites, who do not possess required ties to what is understood as an ancestral territory. For such people, Indigenous identity may be constructed based on other premises, such as kinship or connection to the community.

During continuous and sometimes misleading and embedded in essentialism debates over the (non)authenticity of urban Indigenous residents’ identities and (non)authenticity of cities as homes for Indigenous peoples, several crucial observations are left neglected. First, cities are not recent elements in Indigenous worlds: even in pre-Columbian era Indigenous urbanity was vibrant in Amazonia, although, such urbanity may not align with the Western understanding of cities (Alexiades & Peluso, 2015: 2; McSweeney & Jokisch, 2015: 14). Even nowadays, a substantial share of urban Indigenous peoples lives in the cities that are built on the traditional Indigenous territories. Secondly, Indigenous identities, rural or urban, are themselves flexible entities that among other things are defined by the existing social, political and historical frameworks (Harris et al., 2013: 7). As Harris (2013: 13) suggests, “identities are formative and constitutive, not merely reflexive, they emerge from particular historical moments, experiences, relations, position with social order, and from both the opportunities and constraints that govern our realities”.

Relocating to cities, Indigenous residents encounter other ethnicities and social groups present in the urban space. As Andersen & Peters (2013: 6) advocate, Indigenous residents in these new settings “never merely mimic those of pre-existing non-Indigenous communities but, rather, “attach” themselves to these locales in ways powerfully embedded in their own traditions and histories while still producing novel and enduring social relations specific to the urban contexts in which they live”. Ultimately co-influenced by non-Indigenous urbanites and urban settings, Indigenous urbanites develop new sets of their own identities by adding new layers to the existing ones. Such settings, therefore, dispute the understanding of Indigenous identities as something exclusive and extrusive, to acquire which one must supposedly demise “all other identity markers” (Harris, 2013: 22). Indeed, Indigenous urbanites challenge the idea that innovations relevant to Indigenous communities may only materialize within the frameworks of those communities, and instead make such communities more permissible for inclusion of outsiders.

Cities are the places where different understandings of Indigenous identities interwind. Undoubtedly, there are those Indigenous residents who sustain ties with ancestral territories by

continuously returning to such places, and for whom territoriality keeps being a vital component of their own identities. Nonetheless, there are those Indigenous residents who for a variety of reasons neglected or were deprived of the possibility to return to or to stay connected with their ancestral lands. For such people, other markers signify their indigeneity. In either case, depriving the cities of their role as the places of emergence of new meanings and connections, as well as important battlegrounds of political resistance and struggle of Indigenous peoples appears to be both counterintuitive and counterproductive.

### **Ethnic development of the Komi Republic's capital**

According to the All-Russian Census 2010<sup>4</sup>, the Komi Republic is home to 901,000 people, 202,000 (22.4%) of whom self-identify as Komi, the Izhma Komi people included. The Izhma Komi are the only Komi subgroup that is recognized in the official Census alongside the “bigger” Komi people – people may register using either Russian endonyms ‘izhemtsy’ and ‘komi-izhemtsy’ or Komi ethnonym ‘izvatas.’ The administrative capital and the oldest and biggest city of the Republic is Syktyvkar. Approximately 250,000 people reside in Syktyvkar, 62,000 (24.73%) of which are Komi.

Syktyvkar was frequently called the most Komi city by the interviewees. Such opinions were particularly expressed when discussing differences between Syktyvkar and Ukhta, the second biggest city and the industrial capital of the Komi Republic. Ukhta has one of the lowest shares of the Komi population among the Republic's cities (7.48% of all city population self-identifies as Komi). Calling Syktyvkar a Komi city, participants primarily addressed the biggest, among the other Republic's cities, share of Komi population in the city population composition and the city's particular location. Syktyvkar is surrounded by districts with substantial shares of Komi population, who either migrate to the city or visit it occasionally due to various reasons, most typically being for doctor visits.

The Komi residents of Syktyvkar are either born urbanites or internal migrants relocated to the city from other districts of the Republic. Most of these newcomers are former residents of the nearby southern and central districts, particularly, Ust-Kulomsky and Sysolsky districts. The same districts were the main sources of urban migration in previous centuries as well (Rogachev, 2010: 19).

The geography of the contemporary resettlers' homelands is more diverse than it used to be. It is visible, for example, in the presence of the districts' *zemljachestva*, associations that consolidate natives of the specific districts. To my knowledge, there are 9 formally established *zemljachestva* currently operating in Syktyvkar; it is worth mentioning that there are 12 districts in the Komi Republic. The legal form, the organizational principles, as well as the scope of the *zemljachestva*'s activities vary sufficiently; however, it is usual for *zemljachestvo* to possess formal or informal ties with district's administrations, acting in some instances as “embassies” of districts in the capital city (V. C., personal communication, December 2021). The main functions of *zemljachestva* are to unite representatives of the particular district, to assist them in various matters, to cooperate with their home districts, and to represent the particular district in the city by organizing different, mostly cultural, events. Unifying potential of *zemljachestva* is, however, dependent on two major factors: 1) engagement and enthusiasm of their heads and the most active members, who, in most cases, are not paid for their community service, and 2) availability of a premise for regular meetings. Not surprisingly, two of the most active *zemljachestva*, *Izvatasa* (Izhemsky district) and *Yemdinsa* (Ust-

Vymsky district) combine both of these factors. Yet currently Izvatas does not possess its own facility and has to book the premises at the House of Friendship of Peoples. It, however, used to own the locally famous *Izva kerka*, a two-story wooden house located in the historical quarter of Syktyvkar, which was burned in 2016, restored later, and still had to cease its operation due to complaints of residents of neighboring apartment building (V.C., personal communication, 2021).

Syktyvkar gained status as city in 1780 and until the 1960s it was developing as the Komi-dominated city (Rogachev, 2010: 19-20). It used to be one of the rare cities in the European North of Russia, where the dominant population was non-Russian (ibid., 20). It is interesting that until the All-Soviet Census 1959, the share of the Komi population in Syktyvkar was generally lower than in the entire region. However, from the Census 1959 on up until now, the percentage of the Komi population in Syktyvkar is consistently higher than the regional one, however, the differences are steadily disappearing. In 1959, Komi constituted 30.4% of the entire population of Komi ASSR and 50.3% of the Syktyvkar residents, in 2010 the proportion was 22.4% and 25.9% respectively.

According to the Census data, the influx of prisoners sent to Gulag camps, widespread on the territory of the Komi ASSR, and people sent to forced settlements in the 1930s and the 1940s has not initially affected Syktyvkar's ethnic composition to the same extent as the regional one. However, starting from the 1960s, the sizable decrease in the share of the Komi population in Syktyvkar has been traced, which might be contributed to the settlement of former Gulag prisoners, as well as the influx of the professionals sent from other regions for the industrial development of the North, who settled in the capital city.

Syktyvkar is the cultural, educational, and political center of both the Komi Republic and the Komi world. The key Komi cultural institutions are located in Syktyvkar, among them are the Komi Cultural Center and the National Drama Theater, which performances are conducted in Komi. The Syktyvkar State University is the only higher education institution that provides training for future Komi language and literature teachers. Furthermore, Syktyvkar hosts the Komi Science Center, the regional center of academic research. In Syktyvkar, the public movement *Komi Voityr* was established; the capital hosts the movement's presidium. The centrality of Syktyvkar for Komi political activists supports the overall importance of cities as decision-making places; as McSweeney & Jokisch (2015: 22) observe, "it is in cities that indigenous leaders meet each other, compare experiences, and strategize around shared goals, including territorial ambitions and plans". Syktyvkar, however, is not only the place, where Komi leadership convenes, but also the place, where various Komi forces collide.

### **Complex nature of urban Komi**

We may argue that the composition of the urban Komi population is much more complex than it is usually believed to be. Komi people of Syktyvkar is not an undivided construct but rather a convoluted network of various groups.

There are 8 cities in the Komi Republic. These cities host 47.15% of all Komi people residing in the Republic (Table 1). While Syktyvkar is indeed the city with the highest number of Komi dwellers (62 040, 24.7% of city total population), the share of Komi population in other cities is quite low – 13.86% in Usinsk, 12.47% in Pechora, 10.4% in Inta, 10% in Vuktyl, 8.57% in Sosnogorsk, 7.48% in Ukhta, and 1.46% in Vorkuta (Table 2). Syktyvkar is simultaneously a city with the highest number of Komi dwellers and the highest share of Komi population. Furthermore,

it is a home for the majority of urban Komi – the city hosts 65% of all urban Komi people in the Komi Republic (Table 3).

**Table 1.** *Urban and rural population of the Komi Republic*

	Total population (All-Russian Census 2010)		People who self-identify as Komi	
	absolute number	share	absolute number	share
Urban	669 851	74.33%	95 400	47.15%
Rural	231 338	25.67%	106 948	52.85%
<b>Total</b>	901 189	100%	202 348	100% (22.45% of total population)

**Table 2.** *Urban population of the Komi Republic*

City	Total population (All-Russian Census 2010)	People who self-identify as Komi	Share of the Komi population
Syktyvkar	250 874	62 040	24.73%
Ukhta	121 701	9 100	7.48%
Vorkuta	95 854	1 401	1.46%
Pechora	57 364	7 155	12.47%
Usink	47 229	6 548	13.86%
Sosnogorsk	46 775	4 007	8.57%
Inta	35 181	3 660	10.4%
Vuktyl	14 873	1 489	10%
<b>Total</b>	669 851	95 400	14.24%

**Table 3.** *Urban Komi population of the Komi Republic*

City	People who self-identify as Komi	Share in total urban Komi population
Syktyvkar	62 040	65.03%
Ukhta	9 100	9.53%
Vorkuta	1 401	1.47%
Pechora	7 155	7.5%
Usink	6 548	6.86%
Sosnogorsk	4 007	4.2%
Inta	3 660	3.84%
Vuktyl	1 489	1.57%
<b>Total</b>	95 400	100%

As was mentioned earlier, the Syktyvkar Komi are both born urbanites and resettlers from the districts. While there is a unified literary Komi language, simultaneously there are 10 Komi dialects existing, the geographical dispersion of which is vaguely congruent with the administrative map of the Komi Republic (Bunchuk et al., 2018: 5). Whilst it is accepted that Komi people can understand each other without significant issues, anecdotal stories caused by misunderstandings grounded in the differences in dialectal vocabularies are quite widespread. Culturally, there are also a few variations existing between the districts, which nevertheless, do not disintegrate the overall unity of Komi people. The Izhma Komi group in that regard may be regarded as rather exceptional, due to historical engagement in reindeer herding, interethnic contacts with the Nenets people, as well as relative geographical detachment, which led to overall specificity and detachment of this subgroup (Sikora & Fedina, 2021).

At the same time, despite existing cultural, as well as linguistic differences between the districts, their role in the city is debatable. While people indeed tend to take pride in their homelands and manifest it in numerous ways, as well as produce stereotypes of populations of other districts, it is impossible to claim that the complexity of the urban Komi population can be contributed only to the geographical factor. In rural areas, on the contrary, local-based identities are much stronger and thus the division is more acute as well: as, for example, was shared by one of the participants in her recollection of her father, originated from the Ust-Vymsky district, visiting the relatives of his Izhma Komi wife:

My dad, when he first arrived [to the Izhemsky district], he was in shock. The houses were all painted. They were covered with clapboard. Everyone lives so neatly, grandmothers wear national costumes, every grandmother wears *babayur* [a traditional Izhma Komi headdress]. And everything is so beautiful there, silk shawls and *sarafans*. Well, dad was very surprised. And my mother told him, "Now you see how one should live" (O. B., personal communication, November 2021).

It is as well more common for the urban Komi to appeal to Komi-Russian dichotomy than to interdistrict differences and to portray all Komi-speaking people as "our own people." Exceptional is, in this case, the stance occupied by some resettlers from the Izhemsky district (N. K., personal communication, December 2021; A. T., personal communication, January 2022). The Izhma Komi identity appears to be the most resilient local Komi identity in Syktyvkar. While indeed other Komi residents express their connection with their homelands as well, it is the Izhma Komi people, who were specifically proclaiming in the beginning of our conversations that they self-identified exactly as Izhma Komi, and not as pan-Komi. The perseverance of the Izhma Komi identity is also acknowledged by representatives of other Komi dialectical groups.

Polarization that is much more visible than the geographical is the one caused by linguistic attitudes and consequent distinctive understandings of the role of the Komi language in the construction of the Komi identity. The most polar attitudes are expressed by Komi-speaking Komi professionally engaged in linguistics, culture, education, and activism and Russian-speaking Komi. The former abnegate the possibility of Komi identity development without sustenance of the language, while the latter criticize so-called purists for their non-inclusive approach. Between these two extremes lies the less visible majority, who for assorted reasons do not manifest their stance and choose either to speak the language with relatives and Komi-speaking colleagues or to not use the language at all.

Another aspect that divides the urban Komi, particularly its most active part, which consists of activists, public figures, and intelligentsia, is political affiliation. While there are various actors with intermingled interests, the most visible separation can be traced in the attitudes expressed towards and relationship maintained with the regional authorities. Two extremes of that are portrayed by the marginal national(istic) movement *Doryam asnymos* (in English: (We) Protect ourselves) and official public movement *Komi Voityr*. *Doryam asnymos* used to be an organized political party and movement particularly active in the 1990s, whose most well-known but unrealized initiative was the establishment of a two-chamber parliament with mandatory representation of the Komi people. The movement halted its activities in the 2000s but reemerged at the end of the 2010s with new leadership, which, however, was committed to similar goals as the old one. The movement was particularly active in ecological rallies over the landfill construction in Shiyes, however, in recent years became disintegrated due to, among other things, its members' irreconcilable stances over Covid-19, which also led to the change of the movement's leadership (Nikolay Udoratin, personal communication, January 2022). As for *Komi Voityr*, the leading Komi movement with more than 30 years of operation, in recent years was widely criticized<sup>5</sup> for becoming a puppet of the regional Ministry of National Policies and unfulfilling its obligations to speak for the Komi people.

Understanding the complexity of the Komi urban population is important for the critical analysis of the decisions and statements being executed in the name of all Komi people. At the same time, despite the existence of all apparent differences, the multifaceted urban Komi population, whether willingly or not, acts as the unified antipode of the stereotypical image of a Komi person as “an old granny or a rural resident wearing *valenki* and padded jacket” (V. C., 2021, personal communication).

### **Strategies for sustaining identity**

As for the identity choices and sustenance, individual stories and choices of the urban Komi residents may indeed vary, however, in this contribution I attempt to present the major categories I came across when talking to my interlocutors and implementing fieldwork in Syktyvkar. The limitation of this contribution lays in the fact that while conducting interviews, I was able to have conversations principally with people who are considerably engaged in Komi-related spheres. People, whose professional lives are not associated with the Komi language, culture, or politics, represent a small part of my interlocutors and, therefore, the reader should be aware that the present analysis primarily reflects those Komi, who manifest their ethnicity and native language publicly.

Overall, there appear to be two dominant approaches to understanding the factors that assist the continuity of the Komi identity in the city. One group is sustaining *Kominess* by regularly returning to the rural places. For such people, relocation to the city is not a one-way process, as it does not halt the continuous movements between rural and urban areas. Due to continuous comebacks, these urban Komi people act as “bridges” that connect two types of settlements and associated worldviews.

For these residents, finding something in the city that helps them to be reminded of and connected with their rural motherlands is integral. For example, as one of my interlocutors shared in her monologue about her job in the city museum:

But here [in Syktyvkar], it turns out that my profession perfectly connects, well, something natural in me and my everyday life. And it turns out that I broadcast both the language and the culture of those who are six hundred kilometers away from me. And it turns out that even at work, well, my territory is next to me. And it seems to me that it is in the city, where I still live, and even somehow already feel that Syktyvkar is also my territory. It seems to me that it was the specificity of my work that contributed to this (N. K., personal communication, December 2021).

Significance of connection with non-urban areas is not exclusively limited to those urban Komi, who believe rurality is a critical component of Komi identity. For example, nature, the lack of which in the city was recalled numerous times by the participants and which is sometimes addressed as synonymous to rurality, is one of the most reflected components of the Komi world. Being in the city, some interlocutors attempt to find the rural and natural elements in it. One of the most spectacular observations was shared by the same museum employee:

I remember vividly my feelings when I arrived [to Syktyvkar] after finishing school. I was seventeen years old, and I had a real breakdown. How here in the city I, that same [participant's name], who could somehow anticipate tomorrow's weather, who always checked the direction of the wind according to the river's flow, how could I live in the urban space? <...> I had to get on the bus and go to the city districts where we had rural buildings <...>. I went there on Saturdays<sup>6</sup>, usually someone a bit crazy like me joined me, and we went around sniffing this bathhouse smell, the smell of stoves and all that. That is, I reassured myself with this, with some kind of participation in village life. In my studentship, it was necessary. It seems to me that now I also have such oddities. Because, like it or not, you still arrange some kind of excursion for yourself, maybe you don't understand it anymore, as you understood then. Then I really understood it and went there on purpose, but now it happens somehow automatically. You feel that for a long time you have not felt something like this, something natural, and you arrange it. And then you start to think, it turns out it still lives in you (N. K., personal communication, December 2021).

Another frequently related element, which was shared by the proponents of ultimately rural character of the Komi identity, was the feeling of unfreedom, which they associate with the city. As was shared by my own relative in discussion with me and my mother:

My mother: Listen, you said when we lived in the village, we were free.

My relative: Yes, free, free.

My mother: And when you move to the city, do you become unfree?

My relative: As if you are crowded. Put in frames. Frames, frames, frames. Well, when I lived in the village, I could run around, no one crowds you, my mother never touched us with her hand [meaning, she never physically abused us]. Nobody touched us. We did what we wanted... Well, nature for me is a feeling of freedom (A. P., personal communication, October 2021).

For most of the interlocutors whom I identify as belonging to those Komi who label rurality as the vital component of Komi identity, urban Komi identity is virtually non-existent. Even talking about

themselves, they tend to regard themselves as rural Komi who happened to live in the city, but not as *kearsa Komi*, a city Komi. Such opinions are expressed by both recent resettlers and long-time city dwellers.

The second major group, which defines what an urban Komi is, contraposes rurality to innovation. They primarily identify themselves with the city and perceive the city as a place of different opportunities. These people are usually much more open and inclusive in their views. These people as well have more critical stances on such allegedly traditional aspects of Komi culture as a folk costume or folk songs:

If we talk about culture, there are all sorts of these folk dresses. These costumes annoy me very much. I'm saying, it's a pity none of the textile workers can make normal costumes here. Not a folk dress, but a normal Komi stylized skirt. So, culture can be made urban. But apparently, there is no such task set (N.V., personal communication, December 2021).

Maria Fedina: *Vasiley* was yesterday too. It is, in fact, considered to be a festival of modern Komi music.

V.D.: Yes, I saw photos, grandmothers in *kokoshniks*. No, I'm not against grandmothers, I'm not against *kokoshniks*. But it's so outdated. Maybe they can change the name of the festival, I don't know (V.C., personal communication, January 2022).

Additionally, it is common for such people to regard the Komi people not in their solitude, but as connected to the Finno-Ugric world (S. B., personal communication, December 2021).

Lastly, it is important to reflect upon two other major components that are usually addressed as being fundamental in construction of the Komi identity, those being kinship and blood ties and the language. The understandings of the role of Komi language and language practices exercised by urban Komi residents differ significantly, and therefore are the subject of a separate contribution currently being prepared. Kinship and blood ties, on the other hand, are those elements, the significance of which is acknowledged by all my urban Komi interlocutors irrespectively of their attitude towards rurality and modernity. In the city, it is not only important to sustain kinship connections with blood relatives, but to create the pan-Komi urban community, inclusive of all Komi, as well. Importance of creating and sustaining an urban Indigenous community is recognized in the studies conducted with urban Indigenous residents elsewhere (see Monchalín et. al 2020 for the example of Toronto Indigenous community). The resilience of such communities is related to the vital role that belongs to the Indigenous organizations that “organize social spaces to enable practicing, preserving, transferring, and developing indigenous culture, language, identity, and community” (Berg-Nordlie, 2018: 49). In the case of Syktyvkar, such role belongs to the Komi Cultural Center and National Theater, which unify the urban Komi community and provide them with invaluable opportunities to publicly express themselves in their native language and to practice their culture.

## Conclusions

Urban Indigenous residents are often regarded as being the ones who create new meanings of indigeneity. At the same time, they are continuously criticized by being non-authentic enough or

non-compliant with the dominant perception of an Indigenous person. The case of the urban Komi residents showed that the Indigenous urban community is indeed a complex construct, as different people sustain their identity differently and attribute it to various elements. Relationship with and the role of rurality proves to be the distinctive factor that differentiates the Komi urban residents. While some of them regard the Komi identity as exclusively rural and thus perceive the city as an alien locality, where Kominess is allegedly suppressed, others view the city as the place of opportunities and new possibilities for the Komi world. There are indeed a few people who solely follow either of these narratives, rather each person settles oneself along this spectrum. Overall, we may still regard most of urban Komi residents, especially first-generation resettlers, as “multidimensional subjects” (Alexiades & Peluso, 2015: 7) combining rural and urban implications of themselves.

Despite the complexity of the relationship between Komi residents and the capital city, there are two vital observations that should not be neglected. First, Syktyvkar has been originally developing as a Komi-dominated city, and, therefore, I reckon that the interlocutors’ opinions of destructive nature of the city should be attributed to the aftermath of ethnic changes Syktyvkar underwent in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century rather than to the image of the city as an initially inadequate place for resilient residence of the Komi people. And secondly, as was shared by interlocutors, it is the city where innovations are emerging and later are acquired by rural settlements. Syktyvkar is the place of the Komi creativity, as well as decision-making processes directed at the Komi population. One may indeed argue that the city occupies this position due to the underdevelopment of rural settlements and, in some way, Syktyvkar contributes to the brain drain of the non-urban localities. At the same time, urban Komi at large are highly connected with their rural counterparts and therefore the resilience and actual decision-making power of the urban Komi community is indeed closely related to the prosperity of rural Komi people.

As was highlighted earlier, the present contribution is based on the personal stories of the most vocal urban Komi residents. I reckon that studies addressing the less visible part of the urban Komi residents, whose professional careers are not related in any way with Komi culture, language and politics are undoubtedly needed, and that therefore represents the future directions of the research on Komi urbanity.

## Notes

1. The Komi Republic’s pedagogical institute was founded in 1931 and was merged with the Syktyvkar State University, the region’s leading higher education body, in 2013. According to the elder participants of fieldwork and to Komi public figures, the pedagogical institute was the birthplace of new generation of Komi intelligentsia, which was particularly active in the 1980s-2000s.
2. Most of the Komi people self-identify as Orthodox, however, not all of them received formal baptism. At the same time, particularly in rural areas, pre-Orthodox beliefs are still sustained and intermingled with the Orthodox traditions. While in some rural localities church service and masses are organized in Komi, to my knowledge, none of the Orthodox churches in Syktyvkar offers this possibility. The only church, which service and masses

are organized in the Komi language, is the Komi church (in Komi: *Колми вичко*, Komi vichko), which belongs to the Protestant tradition.

3. There are around 2500 Indigenous residents inhabiting each of the cities. 19.1% of Anadyr's and 6% of Salekhard's populations are Indigenous.
4. Referring to the Russian or Soviet Censuses data, one should be advised to be particularly critical, as the official mechanisms of data collection and analysis are often flawed and non-transparent; still, Census data is one of the few types of official statistical data on ethnicities circulated in Russia.
5. Among those who have criticized the central leadership of the movement for apathy and lack of support for the Komi-related initiatives were the former heads of the movement and some of its oldest members, publicly addressed as the “elders” of the movement. In October 2021 prior the convene of the Executive Committee of *Komi Voityr* they published the open letter expressing their concerns.
6. In rural districts of the Komi Republic Saturdays are considered to be “bath days” (in Komi: *пывсян лун*, pyvsyan lun).

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