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Shrinking Cities of the Russian Arctic: Public Discourse of Vorkuta Residents on the Place Identity and the Reasons for Population Outflow

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Abstract. The aim of the article is to identify the most significant causes of population decline in the regions of the Russian Arctic. The object of this study is the urban communities of Vorkuta, represented in social networks. The concept of the declining city, which has received various interpretations both in foreign and domestic scientific literature, and the concept of place identity have been chosen as the theoretical framework for comprehending the problem. The paper presents theoretical approaches to the definition of a shrinking city and provides a justification for the use of the concept of place identity. Shrinking cities are understood as the cumulative result of economic and demographic factors that cause population decline in the form of natural decline and migration outflow. The methodological basis of the work was the method of qualitative text analysis. The narrative analysis method was chosen as the main method of analyzing qualitative data. At the empirical level, a more detailed analysis of the subjective perception of the urban environment and the reasons for the population outflow from Vorkuta, reflected in the public discourse of the participants of the city's online community in the VKontakte social network, was carried out. The initial analysis base included community posts and comments for 2022 (a total of 9032 posts and 191733 comments), the target sample was 64 posts and 366 comments to them. Using open and axial coding techniques, the dominant subdiscourses in the perception of place identity and a group of urban development problems that cause the outflow of population from the city were meaningfully identified. Quantitative analysis of the number of comments (under posts) and likes (under comments) made it possible to identify the most significant and persistent problems, which are certainly of increased interest to representatives of municipal and regional authorities.

Keywords: *shrinking cities, place identity, Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation (AZRF), public discourse, online community*

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Introduction

Vorkuta as an urban settlement in all periods of its existence has been completely dependent on the state support, without which the creation and preservation of urban infrastructure was impossible. From the very beginning, it was an artificially created settlement that appeared as a result of the policy of Soviet industrialization, based on a centrally planned economy with its repressive nature. The changing socio-economic conditions at the end of the 20th century led to a decreasing role of state influence and an increasing role of business structures, which launched mechanisms of intensive decline and returned the state's attention in the form of a policy of controlled compression. Vorkuta is also an example of a city in which the original ethnic population turned out to be a minority compared to the unrooted, socially diverse majority, aimed at temporary stay, but managed to create a unique environment with a special local identity of non-northern northerners [1, Razumova I.A.]. Vorkuta is a city in which visitors and shift workers were the main social resource for the reproduction of urban potential and culture.

The history of Vorkuta begins in the 1920s and has its own specific background, unlike other northern cities, such as Murmansk, although it has a similar history to other cities in the Murmansk Oblast, such as Apatity, Olenegorsk, and Monchegorsk. Vorkuta emerged as a settlement, for the construction and resource production of which a special contingent was brought, consisting of prisoners, including political prisoners, and special settlers who were deported from various areas for social (for example, dispossessed kulaks) or ethnic (Caucasians, Germans, Koreans, etc.) reasons.

Researchers Shabaev Yu.P. and colleagues in their works note three historical stages of the city's existence, within which Vorkuta changed its architectural appearance, the composition of the population, which was reflected in the peculiarities of the perception of urban space by its residents [2, Shabaev Yu.P. et al.]. The first stage is Vorkutlag (1920s–1930s) — a correctional labor camp in the GULAG system of the Komi Autonomous Oblast, the purpose of which was to build and provide industrial facilities related to coal mining and railroad construction. Architecturally, the settlement was a roadless territory of “zones” with mud huts, barracks and the corresponding barrack lifestyle. The social composition of the population consisted of prisoners, special settlers and an ethnic minority. Researchers point to the peculiarities of the established system of relations in the settlements, which was distinguished by strict prohibitions on interactions between locals and visitors and the construction of cultural distances between them.

The second stage of Vorkuta is a city of miners (the settlement received city status back in 1943), which began its transformation in the 1950s; its appearance is associated with the announcement of the general amnesty of 1954, which fundamentally changed both the social composition of the population and its architectural appearance. Since the beginning of the 1950s, the first brick houses and wide avenues have appeared in the city. After the amnesty was declared, many prisoners left the camps and were replaced by hired specialists. Financial incentives in the form of polar allowances, early retirement, preferential leave and improved provision acted as fac-

tors in attracting a large number of professional personnel to the city, consisting of engineers, geologists, managers and the elite of the Soviet working class — miners and metallurgists, who moved in whole teams and families from different regions of the country. The social composition of the population during these years is a complex structure, combining various groups consisting of current (some of whom would be rehabilitated after the 1970s) and former (those who remained in the city due to various circumstances) prisoners, newly arrived specialists who came to Vorkuta by assignment or independently, and an ethnic minority. During the same period, mass housing construction began, new enterprises related to the social infrastructure appeared, and the city's supplies improved. The authors of the research note that the cultural environment and people's fates turned out to be very similar, despite the diverse social capital of the residents due to different levels of education, professional affiliation, different beliefs, etc. "It was precisely belonging to a common cause, social and professional solidarity that became the basis for the formation of Vorkuta identity in the following years" [2, Shabaev Yu.P. et al., p. 83].

The third stage of Vorkuta is the period of urban development after 1989. The restructuring of the economy led to the closure or privatization of city-forming enterprises, which directly affected the reduction of employment, a decrease in wages, and, together with the reduction of subsidies and the high cost of living, led to "stress migration" [3, Averkieva K., Efremova V.]. The population of Vorkuta decreased from 219 thousand people (the maximum recorded in 1992) to 48.3 thousand people in 2023. These consequences also affected the most conservative component of the urban environment — urban housing, which, unable to keep up with the intensity of economic, social and political changes, led to the growth of "porosity" of the urban area [4, Amato R.], in which the balance between densely populated and empty areas was clearly changing [5, Gunko M. et al.]. The "golden age" of the second Vorkuta ends with a change in the dominants in the local identity: the perception of "metropolitanity" is replaced by a feeling of "peripherality" of a ghost town.

Currently, Vorkuta is one of the fastest shrinking cities. According to the results of the 2020 All-Russian Population Census, the population as of October 1, 2021 was 56,985 people, which is 19.2% less than in the 2010 Census and 32.9% less than recorded in the 2002 Census (see Fig. 1).

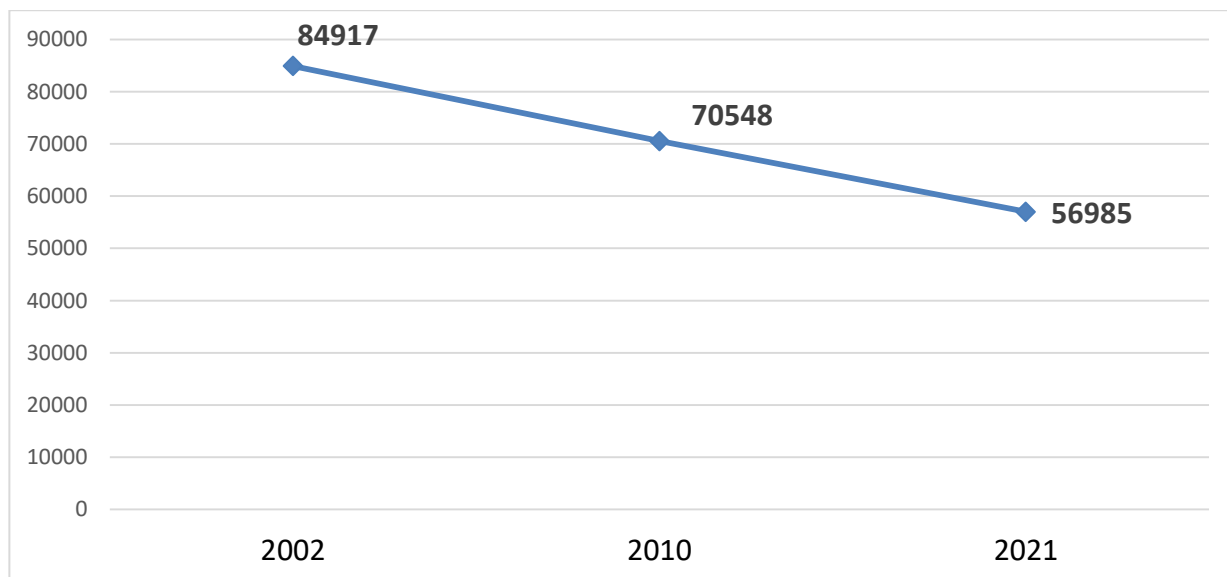


Fig. 1. Population of Vorkuta according to the results of 2002, 2010, 2020 Censuses (persons) ¹.

Since 2017, Vorkuta has been implementing a controlled compression program, its goal is to adapt the city to the negative effects of population outflow — people are resettled from half-empty houses and remote areas to comfortable housing in order to disconnect buildings from utility networks and save on maintenance costs [6, Gunko M.S. et al.]. Resettlement from Vorkuta (as well as from other Arctic regions) has been supported at the state level since the 2000s, which was also a factor of population outflow.

Vorkuta is one of the most popular cases in the research of sociologists and urbanists. Speaking about the scientific background on the subject of the study, it should be noted that the features of the perception of the urban environment were most often considered in the context of research on local identity. Special attention should be paid to the works of Shabaev Yu.P. in co-authorship with his colleagues, who have been studying the features of the formation of urban community and cultural environment of Vorkuta for many years, primarily from the historical and anthropological points of view [2; 7; 8, Shabaev Yu.P. et al.]. The authors used methods of analyzing archival documents, museum materials, memoirs, described the history of the city through the eyes of an ordinary person; the work in which mental maps of the First and Second Vorkuta were compiled based on the drawings of prisoners is of interest. A serious sociological contribution to the study of local identity, features of social perception, and life attitudes of the youth of Vorkuta are the works under the supervision of Omelchenko E.L. [9, Omelchenko E.L.; 10, Litvinova S.A. et al.]. Work on the study of the local identity of Vorkuta residents continues by Syktyvkar scientists, for example, Tkachenko M.R., who, using survey methods, identified the transformation of the urban identity of Vorkuta residents at the present stage, the features of its professional component and came to the conclusion about the crisis of social identity. According to the researcher, at-

¹ Number, location, age and gender composition of the population. Results of the 2010 All-Russian Population Census. Komi Republic. Syktyvkar, Komistat, Vol. 1, 2012. p. 13; Results of the 2020 All-Russian Population Census (as of October 1, 2021). Territorial body of the Federal State Statistics Service for the Komi Republic. URL: <http://www.perepis2002.ru/index.html?id=13> <https://11.rosstat.gov.ru/vpn2020> (accessed 22 March 2024).

tempts to form a positive identity, such as city branding and city symbols, are proving ineffective: in one case — due to the inconsistency with socio-economic realities, in another — due to misunderstanding by the residents, in the third — due to incorrect management [11; 12, Tkachenko M.R.].

Theoretical and methodological framework of the study

Proceeding to the description of the fundamental basis of this work, we will focus on two components of its concept: shrinking city and place identity.

In the scientific literature devoted to the problem of shrinking cities, three main theoretical approaches can be distinguished, which were formed in a temporal sequence one after another. The dynamics of growth and decline are reflected in the theory of the life cycle of cities, in which periods of demographic boom alternating with population decline are interpreted as a natural cycle of urban development [13, Van den Berg L.; 14, Berry B.J.]. Later studies questioned this point of view and led to the formation of the concept of shrinkage and the hypothesis of a continuous (irreversible) process of decline associated with such driving forces as economic transformations, demographic changes, suburbanization, as well as political and environmental transformations [15, Champion A.G.].

The second approach (the concept of shrinking as urban decline) has accumulated considerable experience in urban research, which reflects (1) the causes of urban shrinking and urban decline [16, Reckien D., Martinez-Fernandez C.; 17, Wiechmann T., Pallagst K.M.]; (2) descriptions and classifications of trajectories of urban shrinking [18, Mykhnenko V., Turok I.; 19, Beauregard R.A.]; and (3) proposals for planning measures [20, Schilling J., Mallach A.; 21, Allam Z., Newman P.].

Three dominant theories can be identified in the scientific literature, which predominantly prevail in substantiating the causes of shrinking. One of the most popular theories is economic. Discussing the key determinants of urban decline, the authors consider economic problems to be of primary importance. For example, in David Harvey's theory, the "pendulum movement" of investment, its withdrawal and reinvestment are the causes of the spatial segregation of cities during capitalist urbanization: while some places successfully attract investment, others fail to do so and suffer from abandonment, their attractiveness and, ultimately, population decline. Moreover, since capital invested in a particular spatial environment quickly depreciates, current investments today may become an obstacle to further accumulation tomorrow, so that urban spaces are constantly remodeled through a new round of spatial changes [22; 23, Harvey D.]. In the domestic scientific literature, the uneven distribution of investment in the regions and cities of Russia is considered in the works of N. Zubarevich [24; 25].

Theories of the territorial division of labor explain inequality through the prism that urbanization is based on different geographic concentrations of specific enterprises, industries and labor force [26, Massey D.B.; 27, Scott A.J.]. The literature on the territorial division of labor emphasizes

the cyclical and cumulative processes of agglomeration of urban and regional development [28, Dunder M.; 29, Meerovich M.G.]. According to this theory, urban population concentration depends on the actual forms of production and strategic decisions made mainly by transnational corporations as they adapt to economic and technological changes.

Demographic theories explain shrinkage through a reduction in the urban population, focusing mainly on the consequences of declining fertility and increasing life expectancy. Against the backdrop of the second demographic transition [30, Lesthaeghe R., Van de Kaa D.], it is argued that the persistence of fertility rates below the replacement level in most countries of Europe and North America leads to a long-term decline in population. As a result, population growth in European cities has slowed significantly over the past thirty years [20, Mykhnenko V., Turok I.], and is likely to continue over the next twenty-five years. The most frequently expected results include an increase in the average age of the population, a decrease in the working-age population, and a change in the migration structure, which make further population loss a realistic prospect for a growing number of cities. It should be noted that this theoretical approach is one of the most widespread in the domestic literature. For example, Gunko M.S., Antonov E.V. et al. analyze demographic factors as some of the most important in the settlement system [6; 31].

Less developed causes of shrinkage in the theories are environmental and political factors [32, Haase A. et al.]. These factors are practically not covered in the domestic segment of scientific literature.

As for the description and classification of urban shrinkage, cause-effect explanations are often combined in works with proposed classifications and typologies [19, Wiechmann T., Pallagst K.M.; 20, Mykhnenko V., Turok I.; 21, Beauregard R.A.].

Summarizing, it can be stated that all theories consider shrinkage as a general phenomenon that is deeply rooted in the nature of the urbanization of capitalist society or in the demographic transformation itself, but they do not represent a general discussion.

The third approach can be called integrative or, as it is termed by the authors themselves, “pluralistic”, which includes many explanatory factors in the analysis of shrinkage [32, Haase A. et al.]. Haase A. and colleagues developed a middle-range theory, in which they propose a model consisting of the following characteristics: shrinkage factors, impact factors, and responses. The authors refer to this model as empirically universal for analyzing the shrinkage of specific cities in order to avoid a reductionist approach when using any one theory, especially in comparativist studies.

At the same time, we can state that a characteristic feature of shrinking cities is a steady loss of population, while most often the research focus is on demographic problems and the structural crisis faced by shrinking cities [32, Haase A. et al.; 33, Haase A. et al.; 34, Bernt M.; 35, Hollander J.B.].

Following the integrative approach, in this paper, we will understand a shrinking city as the combined effect of economic and demographic factors that have affected the settlement system

[36, Rink D. et al.]. An indicator of a shrinking city is a reduction in population (both as a result of natural decline and migration processes).

The next concept we focus on in the paper is place identity. We note that the existing body of work on studying the perception of a city as a living environment is based on the concept of “local identity” as part of social identity. We use the concept of “place identity”, understanding it as a feature of a person rather than a place. This is a person’s self-identification in terms of place, those dimensions of a person’s identity that are formed in connection with his physical environment [37, Proshansky H., et al.]. Within this understanding, the city as a place is a means of distinguishing oneself from others, maintaining a sense of continuity, building a positive self-esteem and creating a sense of one’s own uniqueness [38, Twigger-Ross C.L., Uzzell D.].

The scientific novelty of our research approach is the use of digital footprints of city residents, which they voluntarily leave online. We are specifically interested in how residents transmit the identity of a place through public discourse and interpret environmental problems that lead to intensive decline, and what pros and cons of life in the city they discuss with each other.

The methodology of analyzing the subjective perception of residents is based on identifying problematic conceptualizations of the state of urban life reflected in the public discourse of online communication. The approach to analyzing qualitative data, which involves the process of collecting, structuring and interpreting qualitative data, was used as a methodological basis in the study. The narrative analysis was chosen as the main method for analyzing qualitative data. Narrative analysis focuses on the messages people leave (in our case, on social networks) and the language they use to comprehend them [39, Lewins & Silver]. We see the following advantages in this approach:

- freely expressed format of opinions and experiences of living through natural language;
- absence of the interviewer effect, which is characteristic of survey methods. It is also necessary to note the limitations of this approach, primarily due to the inability to maintain representativeness.

Anyway, given the level of digitalization penetration into the everyday life of city residents, we can assume that communication in social networks and messengers is a common practice in cities with harsh climatic conditions.

As we noted earlier, the subjective perception of urban development problems is manifested in the discourse of communities through interpretations, assessments, descriptions of personal experience that residents represent in the process of discussions. They can be considered as qualitative characteristics of the subjective image of the city and the experience of living in it, as they reflect the attitudes, preferences, phobias towards the city and city/regional government that are characteristic of the community, as well as reflect the local language formed by the community to describe the surrounding context. In this paper, using empirical material from a digital urban community, we will demonstrate the formation of qualitative characteristics of urban development in public discourse with a focus on the subjective perception of “pain points” by city

residents that influence or explain migration attitudes and intentions. The number and intensity of references to various problems, duration of their discussion, support of specific messages by the number of “likes” can also be considered as quantitative characteristics of the discourse on urban development problems [40, Nenko A.E., Nedoseka E.V.].

Characteristics of the empirical base of the research

As empirical material, this article examines text messages reflecting the public discourse of the online community of the city of Vorkuta, active at the time of writing this paper. In the process of selecting an online community for analysis, groups in the social network “VKontakte” were considered. The community selection criteria were as follows:

- urban community, thematically dedicated to Vorkuta, its history, problems and events;
- high popularity of the community in the information field (determined by the search query method in the VKontakte search aggregator);
- constant high intensity of communication within the community (at least two posts per day over the past year);
- discussion of city problems on the community wall;
- history of the community (at least 5 years);
- positioning of the community as local (urban) [40, Nenko A.E., Nedoseka E.V.].

Thus, a search query for the keyword “Vorkuta” in the social network “VKontakte” provides 2,829 communities containing this word in their names. The group Podslushano Vorkuta [Overheard in Vorkuta], formed in 2017, has 50.9 thousand subscribers, which makes this community the most popular among other communities in the presented social network (see Table 1).

Table 1

Rating of communities dedicated to the city of Vorkuta in the social network “VKontakte”

Name of community	Type of community	Subscribers, thousand people ²
Podslushano Vorkuta [Overheard Vorkuta]	City’s community	50.9
Hello, Vorkuta!	City’s community	48.9
Moya Vorkuta [My Vorkuta]	Internet media	36.9
Vorkuta 24 Novosti PRYAMOY EFIR [Vorkuta 24 News LIVE]	City’s community	16.6
Tipichnaya Vorkuta [Typical Vorkuta]	City’s community	22.5
Vorkuta Poymet [Vorkuta Will Understand]	City’s community	14.0

Users with active accounts (not blocked or deleted) — 91.1% of the total number of subscribers. Users with available age information are 52.5% of the total number of users and 51.8% of active ones. The most numerous categories of users are 31–40 years old (28.9%), 21–30 years old (23.7%) and 41–50 years old (16.3%). Almost all community users are identified by gender (over 99%), of which 44.4% are men, 55.6% are women.

² As of 15 March 2024.

The collection of discussion data in the online community was automated using the Python 3.8.10 programming language. The data collected included text notes — posts and comments — on the community “wall”. As a result of parsing, records for 2022 were uploaded to the database: the total number of posts is 9,032 units, the total number of comments is 191,733 units.

Next, the posts were sorted in descending order of the number of comments, and the minimum threshold for their “popularity” was determined at 100 comments. As a result, 344 posts made up the total sample for the primary analysis using the open coding technique with the names of discussion topics (28 topics in total).

For further in-depth analysis, the topics most relevant to the problems of this study were selected (64 posts in total), namely: “pros and cons of life in Vorkuta”, “bloggers”, “moving to Vorkuta”, “farewell to Vorkuta”, “memories”, “tourism”, “returning to Vorkuta”. These topics contain posts and comments with the most vivid manifestations of the public discourse of city residents about the identity of the place and the problems of the city, acting as subjectively perceived reasons for the outflow of population.

A total of 11,649 comments were downloaded from the selected 64 posts, which were first sorted and selected by the number of likes (at least 10) as indicators of support from community members (384 units in total). Then, uninformative and irrelevant to the objectives of the study judgments (including prepositions, interjections, punctuation marks, various symbols, etc.) were excluded from this array of comments. The final array amounted to 366 comments and 64 posts, which formed the target sample for a more in-depth analysis.

The main procedures for such analysis were carried out using open and axial coding techniques. As a result of open coding of all posts and comments of the target sample, the main categories were identified (the procedure was carried out until new categories ceased to appear). Axial coding was carried out by selecting relevant messages by keywords from a larger sample — from all 344 posts and the corresponding 59,021 comments. To illustrate the identified categories, we selected dominant opinions (in particular, the most supported comments), as well as those that most fully reveal the meaning of a particular category.

Research results

As a result of processing the posts and comments, the first thing we paid attention to in terms of popularity and public resonance were the messages that represent the place identity of Vorkuta residents. In particular, we identified two sub-discourses that meaningfully reveal the identity of place in public discourse:

The first sub-discourse is conceptualized as “boundaries and distance”. Posts and comments thematically related to the advantages and disadvantages of the city often provoke discussions that involve a variety of participants: local residents and residents of nearby settlements, migrants who left and arrived in it, tourists (including bloggers, journalists and their subscribers). The coexistence of these groups in the public space leads to a clash of conflicting discourses. The

“non-local” discourse is represented by a wide range of topics: from searching for an apartment to buy to comments in the spirit of “in Vorkuta, you cannot live, but survive”. Along with searching for information about the nuances of moving to the city and admiring the nature of Vorkuta, potential residents of the city and tourists note the impossibility of a full life in the conditions of a “dying city” and the unwillingness of its residents to admit the lack of prospects, point to a feeling of pity caused by the city and its residents. This image of Vorkuta does not correspond to the ideas of local residents about it.

The greatest indignation is caused by the materials of bloggers and journalists who post videos dedicated to Vorkuta in the community. Reproduction of stereotypes about the city’s population, distortion and speculation on its history, production of a feeling of pity for the city and its residents, ignoring the positive aspects of city life are the main reasons for the wary attitude of local residents towards potential residents, tourists, especially bloggers and journalists.

“What nonsense??? Again these sub-bloggers are filming all sorts of nonsense about Vorkuta!” (188 likes).

“People are tired of those who come to their city for content, either ridiculing it and its residents, or pushing pity that is across the throat and not really needed by anyone?” (24 likes).

Probably, the negative image of Vorkuta, reproduced in the public (and the media in general), encourages local residents to create boundaries and build distance. This is expressed in the attitude towards “non-locals”, as well as in ideas about other regions of Russia.

The community subscribers who present themselves as locals do not hide their hostility towards non-locals who present the city in a negative light. The undesirability of their presence in the city is emphasized.

“Take him out to the tundra and forget about him” (44 likes).

*“If you don’t like my city, don’t *** (note: there is no need) come here” (33 likes).*

“Why are you all coming here????” (20 likes).

Maximum distance is noted in relation to bloggers: this topic is one of the most popular among the selected posts (14 posts, 2521 comments).

Negative assessments, including humiliation and insults, prevail in the attitude towards bloggers sharing their impressions of Vorkuta:

“... well, what was required to be proven. He did dirt in another city, and the reaction of the citizens was surprising ... we have not seen such idiots before, no monkey has ever come to us to do dirt on))) if he wanted hype, he would have taken a dump right on the square, there would have been hype, and a scandal, and he would have received fame in the emergency center...” (110 likes).

At the same time, there is an alternative position, which is expressed in the recognition of the objective problems of the city, exposed by visiting bloggers:

“It’s hard to understand you guys. You whine about how bad everything is here, that no one cares about our city, and then as soon as someone comes to Vorkuta who could highlight Vorkuta’s

problems to the whole country, you start foaming at the mouth and yelling some nonsense. Ugh, what an abomination, a disgrace. I am ashamed of my city residents” (75 likes).

In general, the distance helps to strengthen the borders and unite the local community, with the identification of a special group of “real Vorkuta residents”:

“Vorkuta is described badly by strangers, those who came, stayed a little bit and then started to criticize. But real Vorkuta residents will never say anything bad about their city” (57 likes).

The construction of borders is expressed in perceptions of other regions of Russia. Thus, the narratives of local residents highlight descriptions of Moscow, to which negative characteristics are attributed along with positive ones. On the one hand, dislike of the city is expressed in ironic remarks about Moscow residents — “Maaascow’s guests”, “Sharikov-Mascwachi”. On the other hand, the authors of posts and comments on this topic refer to the “objective” problems of the city: difficult transport communications, environmental conditions, labor migration and its consequences, difficulties with renting and buying real estate.

“The “smart” girl from Moscow does not want to talk about the terrible places of Moscow, how people live in communal apartments or houses built in 1905 or 1907, without baths and hot water” (75 likes).

“I don’t understand how you can live in Moscow and similar cities where you can’t breathe, most of your life is spent in metro, it takes at least an hour to get to work, there are constant traffic jams and crazy amounts of money are spent on transport alone. But in Vorkuta, life is peaceful and calm. And yes, the city is beautiful. Other cities are also full of dilapidated houses, shabby buildings, etc.” (59 likes).

Another important feature of the perception of Vorkuta, noted by community members, is the distinction between Vorkuta and nearby villages, which, according to local residents, should not be considered as part of the city. It is curious that the abandoned villages shown by tourists, as a rule, correspond to the ideas of Vorkuta residents about the housing situation in Russia.

“Why do bloggers write “city” but film villages? You can write about Moscow by filming abandoned villages near Moscow” (41 likes).

“Half of Mother Russia lives in such cities and towns, and people live and enjoy life” (21 likes).

In addition to Moscow, the southern regions stand out on the map of Russia in the perception of Vorkuta residents, as being contrasted with the “North” and acting as suitable for migration.

“... for them, Vorkuta is beloved and good only when they are somewhere at sea” (20 likes).

“The third year I live in Rostov region, and people are normal!!! It all depends on yourself, what kind of person you are, such attitude to you, I am not drawn to Vorkuta, although I have lived 41 years,..THE SOUTH IS BETTER, there is even enough snow” (14 likes).

Vorkuta is also compared with northern cities — Salekhard, Norilsk, Murmansk. Most often, these are very emotional discussions, where most of the comments are about the crisis situation in Vorkuta.

“Guys, don't make me laugh, the other day I was in Salekhard and Labytnangi, the same Arctic cities! But they are really building there!!!...” (26 likes).

“...they recently closed the last cinema, for example, there is nothing to do, nowhere to go, nothing to see (in comparison with Norilsk or Murmansk, for example)” (7 likes).

Less common are single (without support by likes) comments about the equally dire state of all the cities of the North.

“...Visit Murmansk, Norilsk, Pechora, Inta, Ukhta, Yakutsk, Magadan... All of them are no different from Vorkuta” (0 likes).

The North is of great importance in the identity structure of current and former residents of Vorkuta. As Vorkuta residents understand it, to be a northerner means, on the one hand, to be involved in the northern nature: tundra, deer, white nights and frosts, on the other hand, northerners share a common socio-economic fate due to the special status of residents of the North, expressed in the northern coefficient. However, despite the feeling of belonging to the northerners, Vorkuta residents often emphasize the uniqueness of the city. Thus, Vorkuta is called the “capital of the world”, and Vorkuta residents — an ethnic group.

“There is such a nationality — Vorkutian. Those who have lived here for many years will understand. Vorkuta is a city with its own history and mentality. There are special people here and its own unusual atmosphere” (83 likes).

The second sub-discourse is conceptualized as “We and They”, it is connected with the first sub-discourse and describes the composition of the distanced groups and their qualitative characteristics. Thus, “foreign” elements are distinguished within the community of local residents: for example, “newcomers” and “youth”, considered as the cause of the problems faced by the residents of Vorkuta. It should be noted that “people” is one of the central categories through which the identity of the Vorkuta residents is conceptualized. Local residents and migrants who left the city note the responsiveness, kindness, honesty and straightforwardness of the Vorkuta residents, which are also characteristic of other northerners. The urban community is described as a “big family”. At the same time, “people” are often presented as the main or only advantage of Vorkuta, which, thanks to “people”, is a “calm” city. “Native Vorkuta residents”, according to local residents, belong to those very “people”, therefore there is a need to single out a group responsible for “everything bad”. One of these groups is the newcomers, belonging to which is determined by the duration of stay in Vorkuta.

“native Vorkuta residents (who were born here), or have lived here for a long time — responsive and friendly!!!!” (35 likes).

“People, people are all good. All that is bad is from a large number of strangers...” (11 likes).

"The northerners, the real ones, who arrived in the 50s, are kind, generous, responsive, there are probably about 20–30% of them left, and the rest of those who call our city a garbage dump are "newcomers" for northern benefits" (10 likes).

Another group that is blamed for the city's problems is "youth". According to some residents, young people are the bearers of practices that threaten the safety of the city, and also demonstrate an unwillingness to defend its interests.

"Disrespected teenagers. Maybe it's time to stop having your parties in Cascade and at the hotel? You are interfering with us, normal people, while we work and relax. Gather in other places, outside or in the stairwell. When we were kids, we didn't disturb adults because we could get a slap on the wrist. You've completely lost your fear. I think the adequate population will support me, something needs to be done about this" (182 likes).

"And what is interesting, justify and defend its young people! Yes, the older generation doesn't accept such jokes, either about their city or about the citizens. Oh, what's the big deal, the guy was joking, and you're all so stupid, you don't understand jokes, etc. No, we understand jokes, but not this nonsense that he was talking, such jokes are impossible to accept. The youth has generally become unprincipled now, their city has been humiliated, so to speak, and they rejoice at how cool this Kulakov is, how funny his joke was." (18 likes).

In user discussions dedicated to the outflow of population, four categories of reasons for the decline of the city are distinguished: infrastructural, commercial, social and climatic. The first include the closure of kindergartens and schools, low quality of medical services, reduction in the number of jobs, emergency state of housing infrastructure, increased tariffs for the use of utilities, unsatisfactory condition of road infrastructure, regional and city management system that is not conducive to development.

The closure of kindergartens and schools is considered by users as a marker of the city's decline and provokes nostalgic feelings. For example, the post that collected the largest number of comments (1303) is devoted to the discussion of schools in Vorkuta and nearby villages where community members studied. According to the table proposed by the author of the post, most of them are closed: 15 institutions out of 47 are still operating. In the users' opinion, such statistics indicates the lack of prospects for the development of the city.

"Wonderful table. Reflects the policy of our state and the state of the city" (12 likes).

Low quality of medical services is another reason for the population outflow. Community members note, firstly, the consequences of the healthcare system optimization (without specifying what they are expressed in), and secondly, the lack of qualified specialists.

"Soon we will "go" to Syktyvkar for an appointment, with this modernization of doctors" (26 likes).

The reduction in the number of jobs associated with the closure of mines is another "marker" of the city's shrinkage.

*"there is nothing good in Vorkuta, all the factories are closed, the villages are closing, in the 3rd district there is no kindergarten, no school, no pharmacy, the apartments are cheap, outside it is *** (note: impossible) to get, in short, a complete *** (note: everything is bad)" (24 likes).*

"We were lucky, we did not see such an attitude towards the city, mining villages, even mines! Vorkuta in my memory is the same as in the USSR!!! People lived in villages, were happy, loved, children ran around, schools and music schools worked, children were sent on vacation to the south, education was at a high level, the Palace of Pioneers was in full swing, the loud laughter of children made everyone happy... And then these came... and everything ended ... " (35 likes).

It should be noted that in the perception of city residents (especially the older generation, whose labor activity fell on the "golden age"), there is nostalgia for the Soviet period, which is associated with development, financial and social well-being, which aggravates the perception of the current state of the city and causes anger and irritation at the federal policy towards the region and business.

"... Oh, if there were not the betrayal in power, then the selection would have achieved its result. The Soviets were for the people" (24 likes).

Users also express "indignation" regarding the emergency state of the housing infrastructure, pointing to the utopian nature of resettlement from emergency housing. Moving without state support within and outside Vorkuta is associated with financial difficulties: lack of savings and high utility bills, the payment of which does not depend on the fact of living in the city. For this reason, city residents who want to leave are faced with the need to renounce the right to ownership of real estate, sell it or rent it out.

"We "spat" on the housing queue, rented out a 5-room apartment to the city with its unaffordable rent, packed up the container and left" (23 likes).

"cheap housing is probably attractive. And to understand that not just for nothing people sell their flats for pennies and leave, apparently, is difficult for some people even with a higher education" (17 likes).

"God I am glad that I left Vorkuta, having lived there for 41 years, I rent out an apartment in the center for pennies, it's not even enough to pay for utilities..." (35 likes).

According to the authors of posts and comments, selling property as one of the ways to get rid of obligations in conditions of low demand leads to a decrease in the cost of real estate. This, in turn, acts as a factor stimulating the population to move to Vorkuta. This observation is reflected in the community's publication activity: 11 out of 344 posts are devoted to discussing the details of migration to Vorkuta: users intending to move or who have already moved to the city are interested in labor market offers, housing costs, and available goods and services. Thus, on the one hand, the state of the housing infrastructure and the size of utility bills provoke an outflow of the population, on the other hand, the reduced level of housing prices, the lack of savings, and living in municipal housing prevent this outflow.

It is also important to note the role of the state of the road infrastructure in the structure of the reasons for the city's shrinkage. Community members point to the automobile isolation of Vorkuta, which hinders intra- and interregional mobility, as well as the emergency condition of the road surface.

"One bad thing is that there is no road and there will never be one because it is not profitable for Russian Railways, and everything else is fine" (23 likes).

"In the center there are potholes on the roads that are already 20 years old ... just one courtyard part of Parkovaya, Donchuk, Yanovskogo streets says a lot....and this is a city....there is nothing to say about the villages at all" (35 likes).

Another reason for the population outflow is the regional and city management system that is not conducive to development. Users note the "indifference" of government agencies, their unwillingness to solve the city's problems. The authors of posts and comments expect the authorities to regulate housing and communal services tariffs, pricing, road conditions, and control over cleanliness in the city. In addition, the lack of support from the state in the form of a decent "northern coefficient" is noted. Community members associate the inaction of the administration with corruption and lack of adequate funding.

"Sergey was a deputy.. But for the entire term, he solved. Problems, of his own business.. I don't care, but you, the voters. You must understand. That for this.. Candidate, only his business is important... He doesn't need you!!!" (29 likes).

"... the authorities are inactive and continue to spend money from the already poor budget of Vorkuta" (17 likes).

"When Vorkuta was equated to the Arctic zone, the bonus should have increased, but the process dragged on for years and people began to forget about it, and here people are indignant that in Syk (note: Syktyvkar) they also pay northern bonuses, but forgot — the entire republican elite is there, they pushed it through" (19 likes).

The second category of reasons reflects the dissatisfaction of the group members with the offers available on the market for goods and services. Thus, the authors of posts and comments point out the unacceptably high prices for essential goods. In addition, users note the low quality of services provided and the lack of alternatives.

"Normal prices if you don't buy anything" (19 likes).

"Aha! And the prices are exorbitant! 15 thousand. For such "comfort" — they've completely lost their minds." (24 likes).

The next category of reasons mentioned by group members is an unfavorable social environment. Visitors, teenagers and "declassed elements" are the main sources of "threat": according to users, they are prone to disorderly behavior and criminal activity.

*"Everywhere is *** (note: bad) and trash, people are scums, drug addicts and alcoholics, half the city is abandoned, there is no work anywhere and if there is, the salary is minimal, all ****

(note: people, mainly teenagers) smoke and drink, we have drug addiction and drug dens in our city and the police are looking for and stopping alcoholics on the streets" (19 likes).

It should be noted that incidents are one of the popular topics for discussion in the community (about 20% of the analyzed posts are devoted to it). Incidents, as a rule, are of a "social" nature: users discuss murders and suicides, traffic accidents, thefts, fights, damage to property, behavior that contradicts normative expectations, facts of improper provision of services. In addition to distributing photos and videos confirming what happened, the community publishes posts aimed at restoring justice: for example, an appeal to the debtor with a request to repay the debt. This observation contradicts the discourse of a "calm" city, popular among the group members. The resolution of this contradiction, apparently, is associated with the identification of groups responsible for the violation of order.

The last category of reasons is harsh climatic conditions. As a rule, users point to long winters and sparse vegetation. This factor is often noted by users who left the city.

"Lived all my youth, left... I don't regret it... All winter darkness from two in the afternoon, like at night, freezing cold, snowstorms. You dress like a cabbage, only your nose sticks out... What second half, I'd rather hurry home to warmth, neither seeing people, nor showing myself." (25 likes).

"I'll tell you a secret. Nobody likes when it's cold, when it's dark for half the winter, when civilization is hundreds and thousands of kilometers away, and water is cut out of the river with chainsaws. There are no such people!" (97 likes).

Interestingly, in the narratives of community members who left Vorkuta, the reasons for the population outflow are articulated in a special way. In addition to the climate, the authors of the posts and comments highlight the lack of prospects and the depressiveness of the city.

"When I return to Vorkuta, there is always a feeling of depression and the meaninglessness of existence." (69 likes).

"I left 10 years ago, and I am glad — Vorkuta has no future." (46 likes).

"We left Vorkuta for Nizhny N., although I always said we would never leave Vorkuta... My husband was born in Vorkuta, we worked at the Severnaya mine all our lives... But after the accident at the mine, the village somehow became empty... That's where depression started... And we decided to leave in one fell swoop... We left everything as it was..." (20 likes).

At the same time, there are also nostalgic feelings, full of love for the small homeland:

"I lived in Vorkuta for 40 years, ... my favorite city, we left 4 years ago, as soon as we see photos or any information about Vorkuta, we cry, our throats are strangled, this is the city of our youth, dear to our hearts, but the cold has tortured us(((we left, we do not regret, but we remember the city with warmth and love!!!" (73 likes).

In general, all the categories of reasons for the population outflow presented in the analysis of messages form sub-discourses, in the center of which the so-called "tension points" are highlighted, expressed in the clash of different positions and views.

Conclusion

A shrinking city is a special phenomenon that can be defined as dying, thereby reflecting the alarmist and eschatological moods of the city's residents, as well as the evaluative view "from the outside" — primarily from visitors, tourists and guests. Such categorization may be centered on a comparison of the present with the past, and then a kind of romanticization of history occurs, expressed by nostalgia for the passing "golden age", which is firmly associated with the Soviet past. This is reflected in the discourse of the "real Vorkuta residents", who were at the origins of the city's formation, and the corresponding local identity based on the socio-professional community — "miners". The restructuring of the economy and, above all, the closure of the mines becomes a turning point, causing a crisis of local identity, loss of grounds for social solidarity, which, together with material factors, leads to an increase in the migration outflow of the population of Vorkuta.

In addition, comparisons with other cities can be made, primarily those located in the central and middle zones of Russia. A special place is occupied by comparisons with Moscow, which becomes the "promised land", the center of attraction for all resources, including human ones, and also a measure for ranking other cities. This discourse is inherent in the residents of other cities who visited Vorkuta, who certainly have something to compare with, but at the same time it can also be found among locals living in the city or having left it. Thus, the attention of bloggers to the city, who defined it as dying, generated a counter-attention of local residents both to the bloggers and to themselves, their place of residence, expressed through the sub-discourses of "borders and distance" and "we and they". The invasion of "outsiders" becomes a kind of trigger that launches the process of building symbolic boundaries and strengthening local self-awareness, up to local "ethnocentrism". The positive image of "real Vorkuta residents" becomes a stronghold of social solidarity, representing an example of city residents who remember the past and love the present Vorkuta.

At the same time, the question of the future of the shrinking city, its prospects in the context of implementing the policy of controlled shrinkage, remains quite open and uncertain. Analysis of subjective perception of life in the city, identification of problems debated in the public discourse of social networks reflects the parameters of social well-being of local residents. The central place in such debates is occupied by the infrastructure agenda and, above all, the housing issue, which requires attention from representatives of municipal and regional authorities.

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