Short- and long-term factors of Kuzbass resilience (based on expert interviews)

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Abstract. Resource regions and their resistance to stress require a separate study. The article develops the author's interpretation of the concept of stress resistance, identifies four main indicators of stress resistance - economic, social, political and psychological. The aim of the article was to identify indicators for assessing the stress resistance of a region, as well as the possibility of using this concept to analyze the current socio-economic and political situation in the context of the global crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic using the example of one of the resource regions - Kuzbass. The main research method was the expert interview method, which made it possible to find "common ground" in understanding the sustainability of the development of the region, as well as to see different facets of the manifestation of sustainable and unstable development on the example of Kuzbass, which are based on certain not only subjective, but also objective reasons, as well as to outline further facets of research. When analyzing crisis phenomena mainly in the economic sphere, the model of economic stress resistance by R. Martin, R. Sunley and others is used. The research was based on expert interviews among representatives of the scientific and expert communities of Kuzbass, representing the higher education system, regional media, business community, and non-profit organizations. During the study, 10 experts were interviewed. The study showed that the highest stress resistance is demonstrated by the sphere of medium and large business, there was practically no deterioration of the situation in the media sphere, education, healthcare (to a lesser extent sports and culture) managed to adapt to new conditions, but the “precariousness” and instability of the situation is most traced in the activities of the non-profit sector.

1. Introduction

The article aims to determine the main indicators of the socioeconomic and political resilience of a region during the global crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic to a first approximation. The study considers the case of Kemerovo Region –Kuzbass, a division of the Siberian Federal District. These resilience indicators have an impact not only on the stability of the region as a constituent entity of the Russian Federation, but also affect the public sentiment, which are not always positive [1-3]. The main subject of the research were the opinions of experts – political and social scientists, economists representing different areas of professional activity – business community, mass media, higher education system and non-profit organizations.

The article suggests the authors’ interpretation of the resilience concept and identifies four main indicators of resilience – economic, social, political and psychological ones. The study found that representatives of medium and large business and mass media are the respondents most satisfied with the current state of the region’s sustainability. Representatives of non-profit organizations do not see any
sustainability under the current conditions. It is concluded that further prospects for strengthening the stability of Kuzbass should be associated with the departure from the single-industry economy focused exclusively on the coal mining, and the development of civil society institutions.

2. Study relevance
Post-industrial society creates new challenges before political elites, academic community and civil society institutions. These challenges include crisis of traditional political institutions, namely political parties and public organizations, emergence of hybrid political regimes, economic crises etc., as well as the necessity to find a sustainable way of functioning for the public institutions in the context of global crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic in last few months [4-7]. It is necessary to mention that, contrary to other currently existing crises that have their own forms, characteristics and tolls to control them to some extent, the pandemic that Russian Federation and all other countries have faced since the beginning of 2020 caused shock among their citizens. It was not only due to their psychological, economic and sociopolitical unpreparedness, but also due to their realization that the problem is most likely the one that cannot be dealt with completely and that they will have to live with this.

The purpose of this article is to identify indicators of the region’s resilience and possibility to apply this concept to the analysis of current socioeconomic and political situation in context of global crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic based on the case of Kemerovo Region – Kuzbass, one of the regions of Siberian Federal District.

3. Study methodology and applied methods
Conducting this research, the authors applied a certain set of methodological approaches and methods, among which the expert interview was chosen as the major one, as it makes it possible to identify “points of contact” in understanding of sustainable development of the region, to see different manifestations of both sustainable and unsustainable development in Kuzbass caused by objective, as well as subjective factors, and to set goals for further research.

4. Results and discussion
According to the authors, in considering the concept of “resilience” in the context of regional studies researcher should not only rely on the current situation, but also consider the factors that caused current circumstances and have impact on further development of situation. Consequently, the working hypothesis of this study is based on understanding the concept of resilience as ability of all levels of authority to endure stressful situations in economic, social and political spheres in short-term perspective as well as to develop mechanisms of adaptation based on the strategic partnership between state, business, academic community and non-commercial organizations in medium-term and long-term perspective [8-11].

In July, 2020, the authors conducted several expert interviews with members of academic circles and expert community who represent higher education institutions, regional mass-media, business and non-profit organizations of Kemerovo Region – Kuzbass. During the research, the authors surveyed 10 experts from the above listed areas, most of them having doctorate and candidate degrees in political science, sociology and economics. The focus of this research makes it the pilot project that is conducted as part of the activities of the Kemerovo State University Centre for Regional Social and Political Research aimed at identification and analysis of the region’s resilience indicators with possible application of Kuzbass experience in other regions of Siberian Federal District that struggle to overcome the consequences of global crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemics. During interviews, experts had an opportunity to express their assessment of situation based on six sets of questions.

The first set of questions was aimed at assessing the degree of Kuzbass resilience/instability in last few months in the context of COVID-19 pandemic crisis. Experts’ opinions divided in two groups: most experts acknowledged existing factors of the region’s resilience, above all, political stability, growth of federal funding for the federal and regional programs in Kuzbass that occurred over the past two years, established vertical pattern of power connecting the federal centre and the region and cen-
Centralized governance model in the region itself; the second group, on the contrary, highlighted factors of the region’s instability, such as lowering coal prices, growing financial burden in the spheres of housing and communal services and basic foodstuffs as well as cancellation of benefits. According to one expert, “resilience and stability are maintained by the systematic cooperation with regional offices of oppositional political parties, increased transparency of authorities in social networks (thus, easing the tensions) and the mindset of governor and regional deputies aimed at prevention of social explosion. However, current situation may change due to deteriorating socioeconomic conditions – growing budget deficit and inability of the regional authorities to fulfill their promises” (from the interview with Expert D, university professor, social activist, a member of the Expert Council under the Governor of Kemerovo Region – Kuzbass).

Another interesting feature revealed during the research was that the experts examined current situation in the region in comparison with the period of A. Tuleev governance. Experts noted that the COVID-19 pandemic became the catalyst for existing problems rather than provoked new ones. As one expert stressed it, “coal extraction decreasing by 11% for the first time in 23 years is not a recent fact – it is a part of general decline in energy resource mining” (from the interview with Expert G, journalist, social activist, expert). This assessment can be agreed with, but only particularly, since in May–July, 2020 municipal and regional Kuzbass authorities took two highly unpopular decisions to cancel the transport fee discount for retirees and to raise housing and communal tariffs by 15% in Kemerovo and Novokuznetsk (the latter caused social protest in the Internet in the form of petition and numerous appeals made to the Governor S. Tsivilev).

Several components can be singled out in the concept of “region’s resilience” (the authors regard them as indicators of regional resilience): political, social, economic and psychological ones. Resilience cannot be narrowed down to one or two of these indicators, as it will prevent researcher from obtaining a holistic view of this concept [12-14]. On the other hand, one of the indicators prevailing in experts’ opinions is likely to reflect their sphere of professional activity and their awareness of problems existing in this sphere.

The authors find it interesting enough that experts put an emphasis on the psychological component of resilience. To characterize the pandemic period, experts actively use collocations such as “will to survive”, “living day-to-day because nobody knows what will be tomorrow”, “bouncing” potential patients under the pretext of low salaries in the healthcare, taxation service inspections that continue as the “nightmare” for business and so on.

The economic crisis in the backbone industry of the region, coal mining, should be highlight specifically, as one of the most important factors for the region’s resilience. As one of the experts believes, resilience of the region is “directly linked with the coal price stability. In this situation we should diversify the region’s economy by creating industrial sectors that are independent from coal and by developing deep coal processing. There is a need to elaborate specific programs for small enterprises, light industry and agriculture. Kuzbass “Strategy 2035” has been adopted recently, it sets milestones for overall development but no strategic or tactical considerations. As a result, regional economy is fragile due to its unbalanced development and lack of strategic papers” (from the interview with Expert F, business community, social activist).

The second and third sets of questions were aimed at defining ability/inability of regional and municipal authorities to promptly contain the COVID-19 pandemic situation and assessing the actions implemented during the given period.

Experts agreed on the fact that authorities had generally contained the virus spread and reacted effectively. Kuzbass Governor, S. Tsivilev, had been one of the first regional leaders to sign an order introducing regime of high alert, “skillfully balancing” between keeping existing restrictions and introducing new prohibitive measures from April to June. In some cases, (for example, allowing to hold the Victory Day Parade on 24 June, 2020) he had taken the unnecessary risk. A number of in-patient facilities had been deployed, and measures on defining the array of infected and potentially infected had been taken promptly. There are sufficient essential medical supplies and lung ventilators, as regional authorities had timely purchased the equipment needed). Among difficulties listed by experts, it
is worth mentioning enforcement of the prescribed 14-day quarantine, providing entrance to and exit from the region for the people of other regions, ambiguous legal support of the governor’s statements, disproportionate focus on solving the infection problem by healthcare system.

Experts are generally positive about actions taken by the governor and heads of municipalities. Specifically, according to one expert, “current policy is generally adequate and it is aimed at bailing the region out as fast as possible. In the shortest time possible restrictions in the area of services have been lifted as well as in the regional and municipal administration system. It was absolutely true to define the construction industry as essential for stabilization of economic development, as it stimulates many related industries, namely production of construction materials or transport and wood processing industries. Other important actions were aimed at developing regional infrastructure, first of all at modernizing the road system” (from the interview with Expert D, university professor, social activist, a member of the Expert Council under the Governor of Kemerovo Region – Kuzbass). Another expert highlighted the following among main results achieved by the authorities: “activity of heads of municipalities in social networks geared towards establishing the feedback system with residents (especially Mayors of Mezhdurechensk, Belovo, Guriyevsk, Novokuznetsk and authorities of Kemerovo municipal district), their focus on construction industry, especially road construction, as a driver of regional development, and constant contacts of Governor with the people, varying from personal to impersonal based on the urgency of an issue” (from the interview with Expert G, journalist, social activist, expert).

The fourth set of questions was aimed at examining the way of regional authorities’ participation in solving problems that have risen during the crisis, to assess the degree of stability of the current situation and to characterize actions that had been taken (had they been complex or discrete, short- or long-term). Undoubtedly, all experts agree that measures taken during the pandemic were short-term and discreet by their nature. Style and methods of governance have changed, this change is manifested in revision of several programs, halting and conservation of several construction sites, more sensible pledges and accurate definition of completion time for the goals set.

However, some experts took a more critical position. For example, one expert highlighted “observation” and “rescue” in case of identification as components of the taken actions. “Problem solving should be complex, houses cannot be built without infrastructure as it will cause social discontent. Economy development should be balanced, that is the goal of short-term, medium-term and long-term strategic planning. Lack of complex approach entails not the stressed condition of society, but the condition of active search for a rational solution” (from the interview with Expert C, expert, social activist).

The fifth set of questions allowed experts to evaluate the dependence between resilience and such factors as regional political regime, influence of the expert community on introduction of proposals and projects that are considered by the decision-making mechanisms, and the role of civil society institutions.

Experts recognize the influence of political regime on the current situation in the region during pandemic. Similar to previous crises (economic crisis of 2008), one should consider socioeconomic conjuncture, ability of the regional authorities to influence federal authority regarding inter-budgetary transfers (for example, Kuzbass received one of the biggest tranches from the reserve fund) and specific nature of relations between authorities and society.

Regarding the activity of expert community and non-profit organizations, experts had controversial opinions. Representatives of social organizations, mass-media and business do not see current situation as an opportunity to develop expert organizations and civil society institutions, including NGOs.

An expert that represented business community supposed that “liberalization of the political regime in Kuzbass is taking place but very slowly. It needs time to fundamentally change the model that has emerged during A. Tuleev’s rule” (from the interview with Expert A, mass-media business, social activist).

Another critical statement can be shown: “Expert community and NGOs have little influence on the decision making. Currently, the most influential organization is the A. Tsivileva’s Custody Council.
The Kemerovo Region – Kuzbass Public Chamber plays no role. Lack of effective political parties and small number of social organizations is a problem for the region” (from the interview with Expert G, journalist, social activist, expert).

An expert representing business gave similarly realistic evaluation: “Expert community is operational only partially. We could have more NGOs that could give the evaluation of present political and economic situation, but they do not emerge as authorities demonstrate no demand for the experts’ opinion. NGOs are also treated as something of marginal importance. Authorities should understand the importance of civil initiatives for the regional development but there is no sign of it” (from the interview with Expert F, business society, social activist).

At the same time representatives of higher education system believe that activity of Kuzbass business community leaders has increased (including “Business Russia” and members of the Kuzbass Chamber of Commerce and Industry), and there are examples of constructive cooperation between Kuzbass Legislative Assembly, Kuzbass government and public opinion leaders (members and experts of the Kemerovo Region – Kuzbass Public Chamber, members of the Kuzbass Youth Parliament). “Experience is mostly positive because proposals are discussed widely and timely commented by the top-ranking Kuzbass officials” (from the interview with Expert D, university professor, social activist, a member of the Expert Council under the Governor of Kemerovo Region – Kuzbass). Opinions divided like this highly likely reflect different approaches towards the evaluation of current situation and different access of expert community members to the authorities, i.e. their participation in different expert structures under government units.

In the last, sixth set of questions experts had an opportunity to provide their own evaluation of the possibility to implement the experience of other regions in developing civil activity in the form of non-profit organizations focusing on the sustainable development in Kuzbass. Experts named different factors that may facilitate the development of civil society institutions as a structure, that, in essence, would support government programs of social support, especially during crises. Economic and political measures referred to by experts, such as federal funding of the region, maintaining clear vertical of power, adopting experience of Novosibirsk Region and Krasnoyarsk Territory in representation of municipalities in Public Chambers, practices of civil activism, including fundraising, regional authorities’ support for projects of high public value, etc. In so doing, every region has its interesting ideas and projects that should be examined and developed whenever possible.

It is necessary to state that the results of this study will become a basis for further research, including a wider public, not only through expert interviews, but also through polls with subsequent application of Kuzbass researchers’ experience to other regions of Siberian Federal District in order to define the degree of their resilience.

5. Conclusions
Reviewed expert opinions made it possible to identify at least two main aspects of the resilience concept regarding Kuzbass: first, current issues and specific ways of solving them are the result of previous experience of Kuzbass development and A. Tuleev’s authoritarian development model that had been formed for at last decades; second, experts agreed that regional authorities had managed to stabilize the pandemic spread at an early date.

At least four components should be considered indicators of the Kuzbass resilience – political, social, economic and psychological. Their influence on a particular individual is defined by his/her sphere of professional activity, income level, social status, involvement in social and expert activity. Experts’ opinions demonstrate that medium-sized and large business shows the highest degree of resilience, for mass-media the situation remains largely the same, education and healthcare (and, to a lesser extent, sports and culture) have managed to adapt to new conditions, while non-profit sphere appears to be the most unstable and volatile.

Response of the representatives of non-profit organizations that closely deal with the problems of ordinary people shows the dependence on “traditional” forms of interaction with social groups and organizations (master classes, trainings, consultations and other open-air activities), that can timely...
respond to decreasing social demand in the context of voluntary lockdown and restriction of free movement, and to lower or “frozen” funding, including grants. These organizations, due to their social orientation, are able to perceive the lack of confidence in the future, which is now typical for most of the people.

Utterly different perceptions of the region’s adaptation in the context of COVID-19 pandemic shown by business, mass-media, higher education institutions and non-profit organizations is confirmed by how differently they perceive the term “global crisis” itself. For business and mass-media crisis essentially means production collapse, severe blow to their income system and decision-making mechanisms that have not actually happened. It means that, from their point of view, there is no real crisis. Education institutions and non-profit sphere view the crisis differently and do not question its existence, as for them there are obvious negative consequences for the society that are hard to overcome both in economic and psychological terms.

Summarizing the problems identified in this study, undoubtedly, the resilience of Kuzbass Region – Kuzbass cannot be linked solely with the economic sphere, especially with the coal mining bailout, although in future years or, likely, decades coal will remain the main source of income for the region. Resilience of the region relies not only on its income, but also on psychological comfort of the people which is crucial to maintain economic and political stability. Psychological comfort is closely linked with people’s confidence in the future, and, regarding this, development of civil society non-profit organizations has immense potential, not only as an instrument of developing civil initiatives, but also as an institution aimed at consulting and providing legal and financial assistance to people in hard circumstances.

Acknowledgements
The article was prepared with the support of the Russian Science Foundation, project 17-78-20218.

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