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Imported Practices and Domestic Logics: Supervisory Boards in Russian Universities

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ЕВРОПЕЙСКИЙ

Why Interesting?

- **Policy transfer; broader theoretical relevance**

How imported institutional models are adapted, repurposed in non-Western settings.

- **Formal structures can mask substantive practices**

Does formal membership on boards mean university–business collaboration? Context specific question

- **Business ties matter for universities** and *vice versa*

  Firms can provide access to funding, expertise, internships, employment opportunities, and research partnerships.

- **Russian universities are not institutionally homogeneous**

  Examining variation across university types reveals who is connected to national corporate and political networks.

Research Question

Does supervisory board membership, particularly of business actors, reflect observable public interaction as reflected in official university communications?

Expectation & Argument

- A context may suggest: **Formal board membership may not translate into broad external engagement** because it **is different from boards in the West** in terms of legal functions assigned (very limited)

- While these boards **were adopted as symbolic signals of modernization** to align with NPM models, **they are not merely "rubber-stamping" bodies** as was suggested previously (Gryaznova 2018).

- Supervisory **board membership is systematically associated with observable patterns of university–firm interaction** in public communications, even though **these interactions often diverge from the boards' formal legal mandates**.

Theoretical Framework [1]

- **New Public Management (NPM)**

  Supervisory boards as a mechanism of **“steering at a distance”**

  Greater university autonomy + external accountability

- **(Neo)Institutional Theory**

  Adoption of corporate governance models for **legitimacy** ("isomorphic shift" where universities emulate corporate structures to improve legitimacy);

  Formal Western structures may coexist with domestic institutional logics

- **Resource Dependency Theory** & **Entrepreneurial University**

  - Business representatives provide access to **resources, expertise and networks** (“institutional bridges”) - Boards can connect universities to external economic actors;

  - Industry links, commercialisation and external partnerships

Theoretical Framework [2]

- **State Capitalism**

  University–business relations in Russia are shaped by **strong state coordination;** the **state remains a dominant owner, investor, regulator, and strategic actor in markets**, while private firms and market mechanisms continue to exist

- **Hybrid Governance**

  Business participation may reflect a **hybrid mechanism**, rather than market governance

  Imported governance model × state-dominated institutional context;

  Key distinction: **substantive vs. symbolic governance**

Data [1]

46 Russian public universities with supervisory boards (initially 48)

main types of data:

- official regulatory documents,
- university websites

Data [2]

1. Supervisory Board Composition

Individual–affiliation dataset

Board size+ Members’:

- sectoral affiliation
- internal/external status (region)
- alumni status

2. Institutional & Regulatory Docs

University charters and board statutes

Formal board functions and responsibilities

Membership rules and terms of service

Legally defined financial and organisational oversight

Data [3]

3. University News

Jan 2020 – Nov 2025

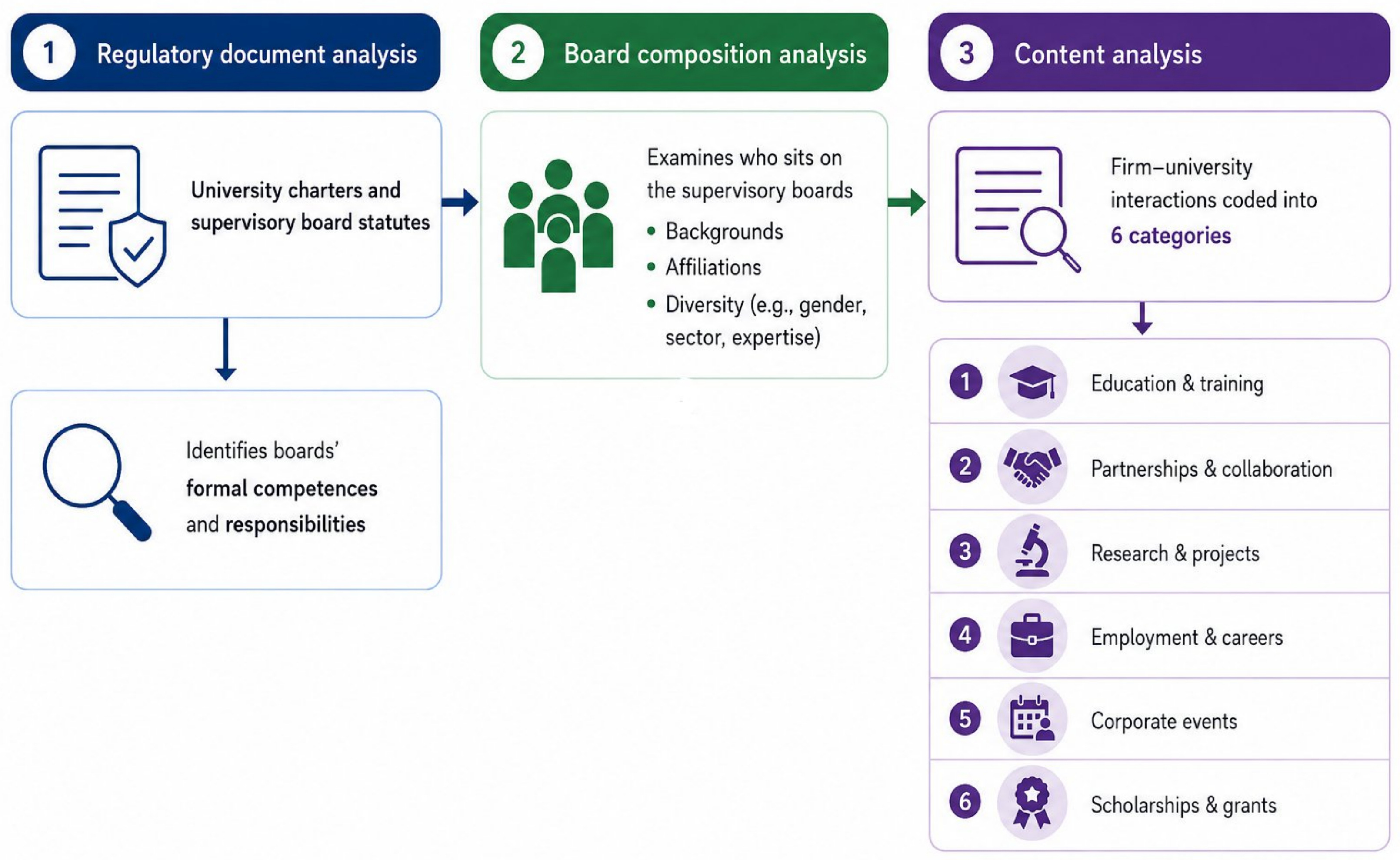
4. Benchmark

Board-affiliated firms compared with **large Russian corporations**

Benchmark: **Forbes Russia Top20 Companies**

Tests whether board-affiliated firms receive unusually high visibility in university news

Methods



Mixed-methods design

Combines **qualitative analysis of formal governance rules with quantitative analysis of observable interactions**

Formal roles *vs* actual engagement

Results [Legal Framework and Functions of Supervisory Boards]

- **Intermediary governance body** between the university, state and external stakeholders
- **Non-academic mandate:** financial, property and organisational oversight
- **Key powers:** financial plans, major transactions, audits and organisational changes
- **State-controlled composition:** members appointed by the university's **founder**; university staff ≤⅓ (typical, regulated)
- **Hybrid model:** formal external oversight, but **limited transparency**

Results [Supervisory Board Composition 1]

- **Composition:** politicians (3.9), academics (3.4) and business representatives (3.1) per board on average
- **Strong male bias:** 9.2 men vs. 1.8 women per board
- **External orientation:** 3.5 outsiders and 2.8 alumni per board on average

Results [Supervisory Board Composition 2]

- **Federal over regional:** boards favour **federal political and corporate elites**
- **Limited civil society:** non-profit representatives are largely absent (0.5 per board)
- **Institutional variation:**
  - **Technical universities →** stronger links to federal businesses
  - **Classical universities →** stronger links to politicians
  - **Regional businesses** are concentrated on boards of **non-Project 5-100 universities/NRUs**

Results [University–Business Interaction in News] [1]

- **Board-affiliated firms are more visible**

  Mentioned more frequently than comparable **Forbes-listed corporations** that are not on boards

  Suggests an **institutional proximity effect**, not simply firm size

- **Mission-related interaction dominates**

  Education & training → most common (±50%)

  Research & projects (dominates in NRUs, technical)

  Partnerships & collaboration (NRUs, Project 5-100)

  Employment & careers (federal)

  Corporate events (NRUs, technical) Scholarships & grants (least common ±16%)

- **Financial involvement is marginal**

  Direct financial contributions account for only **~1.5–1.9%** of news

Results [University–Business Interaction in News] [2]

- **Similar pattern across university types**

  NRUs and Project 5-100 universities publish more because of size

  But the **thematic structure is remarkably consistent**

- **Formal role ≠ public interaction**

  Legal framework emphasises **financial and property oversight**

  News emphasises **education, research and collaboration**

Conclusion [1]

1. Disconnection Between Formal Mandates and Public Visibility

- **Formal Legal Role:** University charters and statutes focus on **non-academic oversight**, specifically financial management, property issues, and organizational control.

- **Public Image:** University news almost never mentions these formal oversight activities. Instead, it focuses on **mission-related domains** such as education, research, and collaborative partnerships. While **almost no variation within HE is not detected** (university status).

Conclusion [2]

2. Higher Visibility for Board-Affiliated Firms

- Firms represented on a university's supervisory board are **mentioned more frequently** in that university’s official news than other major corporations (such as those on the Forbes Top Companies List).

- Board membership is linked to **institutional proximity** and actual engagement rather than just size of the company.

Conclusion [3]

3. Focus on Non-Financial Interaction

While businesses are often viewed as resource providers, their interactions with universities are primarily **non-monetary**.

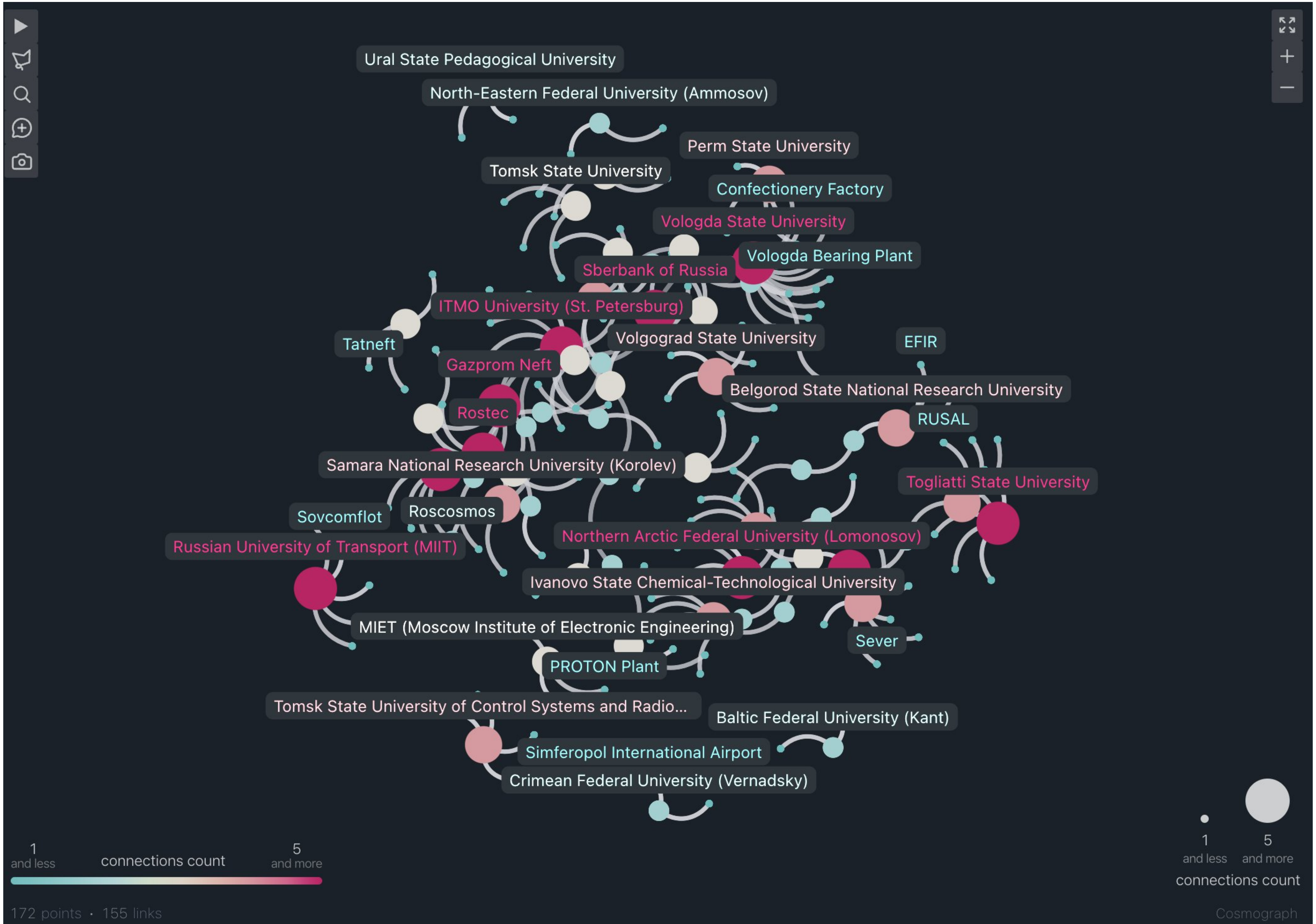
4. Hybrid Governance Model

Beyond “symbolic governance”

- Boards are not simply **rubber-stamping bodies**
- Symbolic adoption of boards coexists with **recurring, observable interaction**
- Board-affiliated firms are systematically embedded in universities’ **external networks**
- Evidence of interaction, but not of specific resource exchanges or causal mechanisms

Conclusion [4]

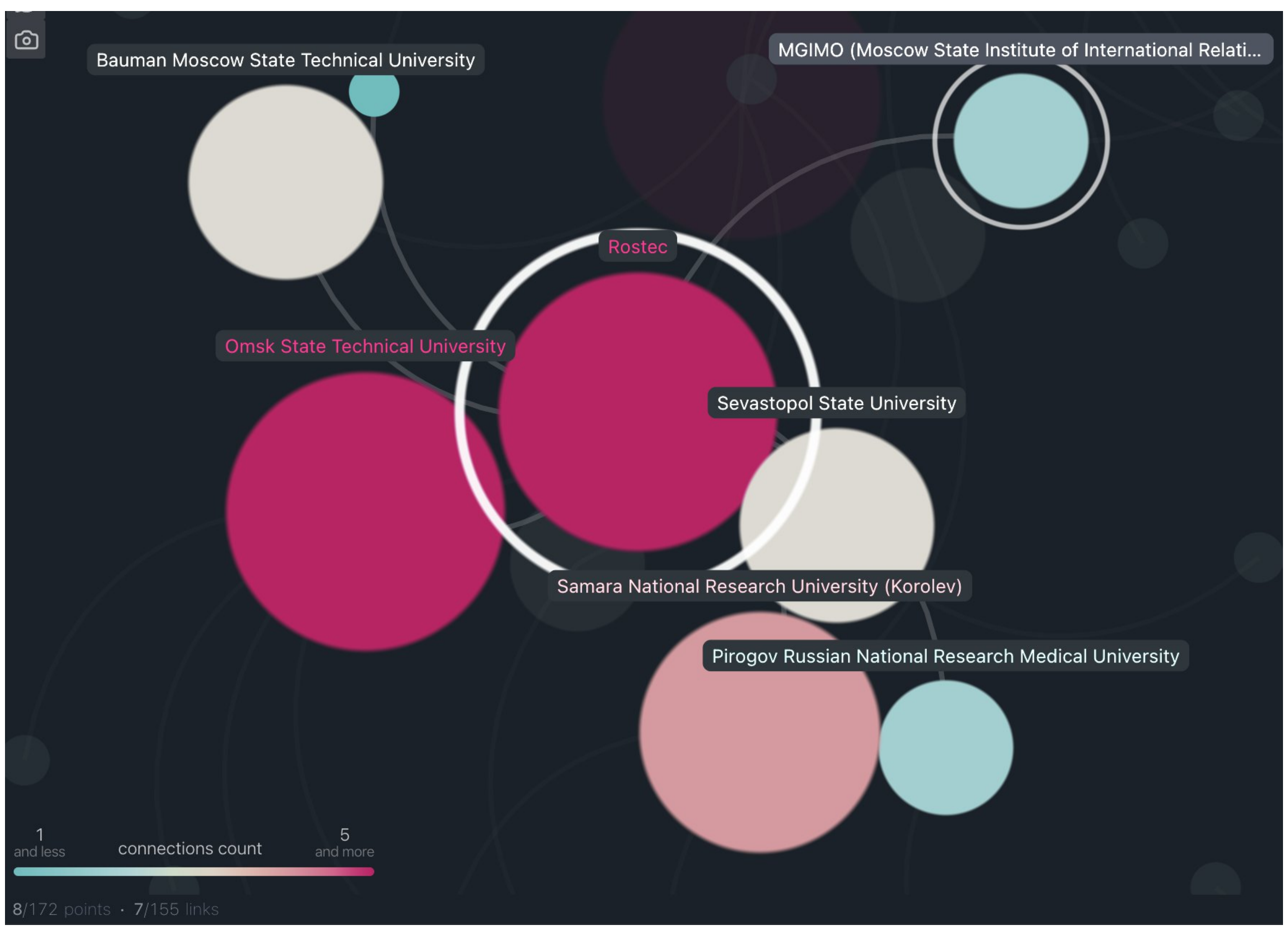
- **Methodological contribution**
  - Web-scraped university news provides evidence of a **traceable, observable interaction of business and universities**
  - Complements traditional forms of research taking the form of surveys and interviews
- **Important limitations**
  - Captures **public visibility**, not interactions inaccessible for public eye
  - Subject to selective reporting
  - No causal inference



Ural State Pedagogical University
North-Eastern Federal University (Ammosov)
Perm State University
Tomsk State University
Confectionery Factory
Vologda State University
Vologda Bearing Plant
Sberbank of Russia
ITMO University (St. Petersburg)
Tatneft
Volgograd State University
EFIR
Gazprom Neft
Belgorod State National Research University
Rostec
RUSAL
Samara National Research University (Korolev)
Togliatti State University
Sovcomflot
Roscosmos
Northern Arctic Federal University (Lomonosov)
Russian University of Transport (MIIT)
Ivanovo State Chemical-Technological University
MIET (Moscow Institute of Electronic Engineering)
Sever
PROTON Plant
Tomsk State University of Control Systems and Radio...
Baltic Federal University (Kant)
Simferopol International Airport
Crimean Federal University (Vernadsky)
1
and less
connections count
5
and more
1
and less
5
and more
connections count
172 points · 155 links
Cosmograph

Rostec
(divisions: Aircraft, Electronics, Armament)

Rostec

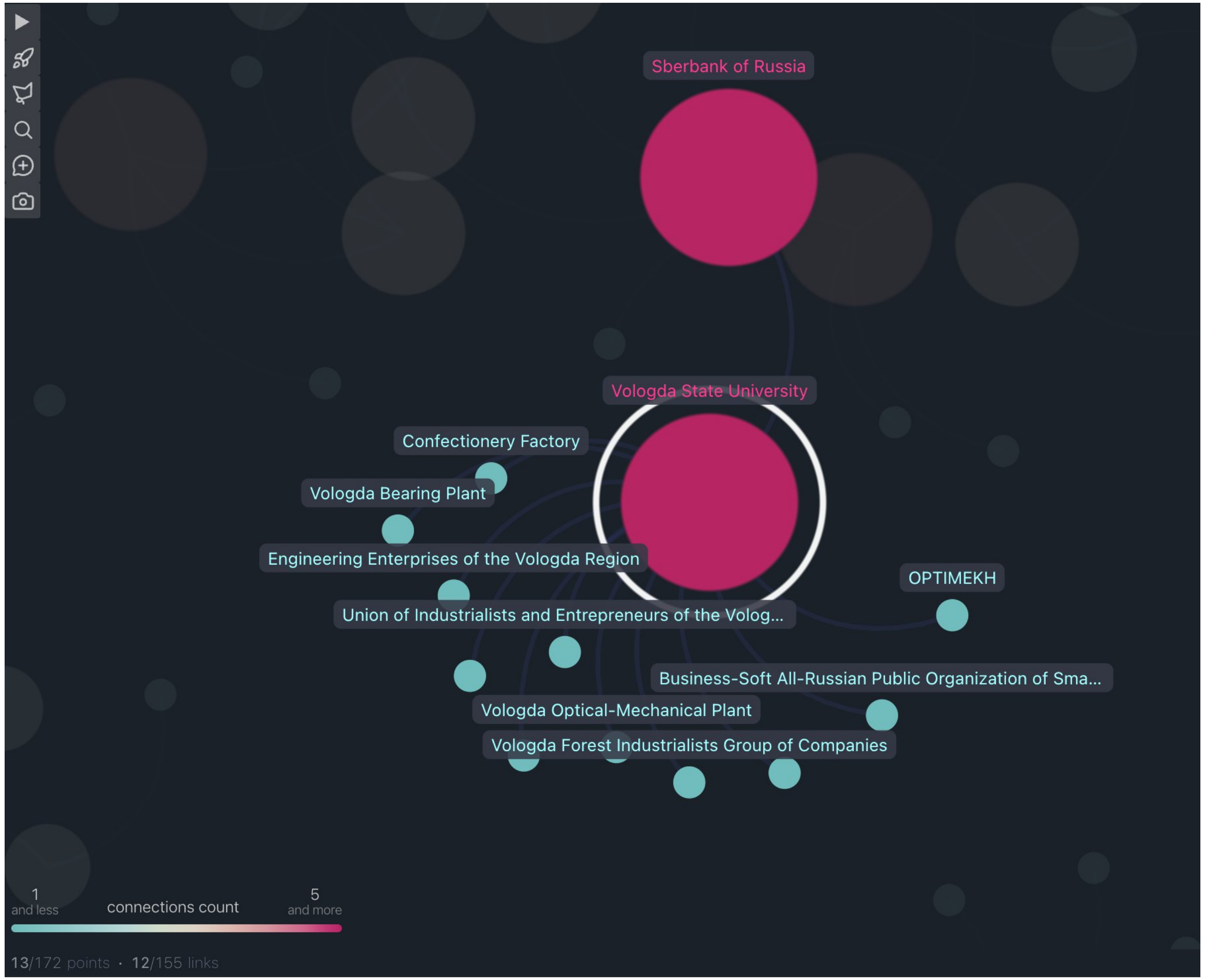


4 NRUs, 1 flagship, 2 Project 5-100,
2 without special status

Not necessarily central: 4 in Moscow, 3 in regions

Academic profile:
Technical (3)
Classical (2)
Medical (1)
Social Sciences/Humanities (1)

Vologda State University (12 businesses on board out of total 21)



Sectors:
Machinery/manufacturing
Metalworking
Food processing
IT / digital services
Instrument engineering / optics
Finance / banking
Forestry / wood processing
Manufacturing / plastics

9 have **regional origin**

Classical university, no special status

Further Work

- Analytical framework (contribution to institutional and resource dependence perspectives)

è Reformulate research question into why/how instead of do/does/whether

è Formulate specific hypotheses based on additional literature on how the board should work in an authoritarian context

è Elaborate on comparison to the Western practices