

Russia's Administrators: The Weakest Link in a Crisis

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The evolution of the Russian political system in the past 20 years was guided by several priorities that had a lasting impact on who we see as public officials at different levels of the state apparatus. These priorities included control, predictability, and minimizing the space left for independent politics. In this memo, I outline the unintended effects of these priorities on the descriptive characteristics of subnational officials—governors and mayors—who are the key actors defining policy implementation throughout the country. We are now more likely to see politically inexperienced and risk-averse individuals in these positions. These qualities make them less able to adapt in a crisis, illustrated by administrative inertia and failures during the “abnormal” politics of the past year.

Who are the people in regional and municipal executive positions in Russia? How did the evolution of the Russian political system over the past 20 years change the types of people likely to end up in decision-making roles and their behavior? The answers to these questions are crucial for our understanding of the Russian state today—and for efforts to imagine its future. In a sector beset by systemic inertia and uninspired personalities, change will be slow. However, enhanced fiscal autonomy and career prospects for local officials would encourage desired behavior from officeholders and attract higher-quality individuals to administrative careers in the future.

Selection at the Subnational Level: Control and Predictability

Despite increased centralization under Putin and due to the country's vastness and heterogeneity, subnational officials—governors and mayors—play a major role in policy implementation and everyday governance in Russia. For the past 20 years, the overall trend in selection for those positions can be described as prioritizing control and predictability of outcomes. Central authorities [experimented](#) with replacing direct

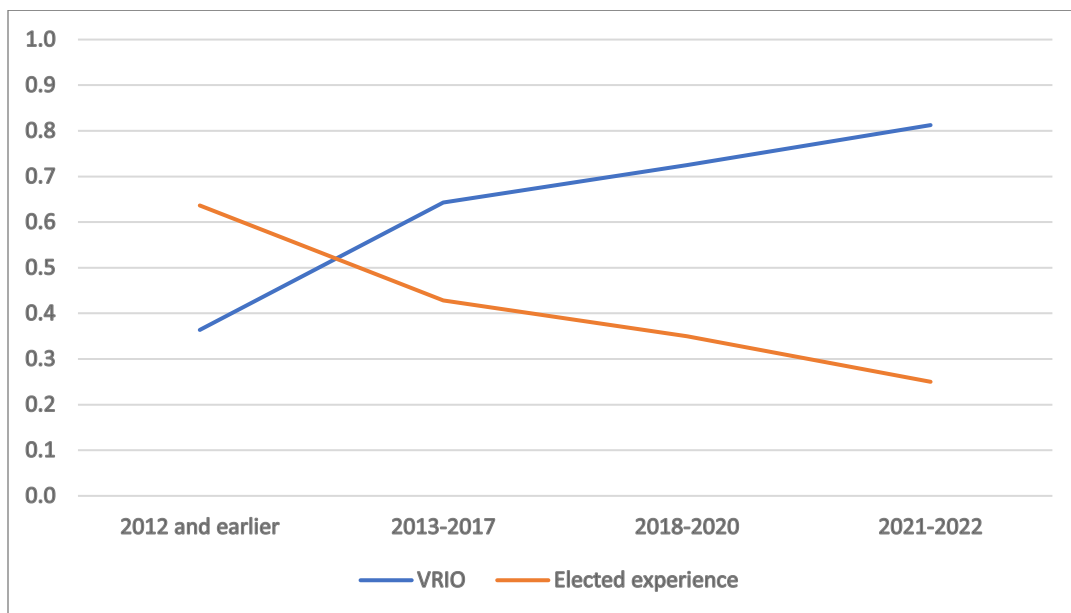
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gubernatorial elections with centrally coordinated appointments (2005-2012) and settled on phasing out direct mayoral elections in most larger municipalities.

The remaining elections—gubernatorial and legislative—demonstrate a highly uneven playing field with an increasing number of formal and informal obstacles to the participation of non-regime candidates. For governors, the predictability of selection outcome is best illustrated by using the “temporary appointee” (*vremennno ispolnyayuschyi obyazannosti*, or *VRIO*) status: an individual is appointed as a temporary appointee and then participates in the gubernatorial elections as a de facto incumbent with all corresponding resources.

The victory of such candidates is effectively guaranteed, and 55 of the currently serving 81 governors (excluding Moscow, St. Petersburg, and the recently incorporated territories) came to power that way (see **Figure 1**). Furthermore, trying to exercise vertical control, the center prefers gubernatorial candidates with fewer ties to the region and more ties to the federal bureaucracy.

Figure 1. Share of Current Governors by Political Background and Starting Year

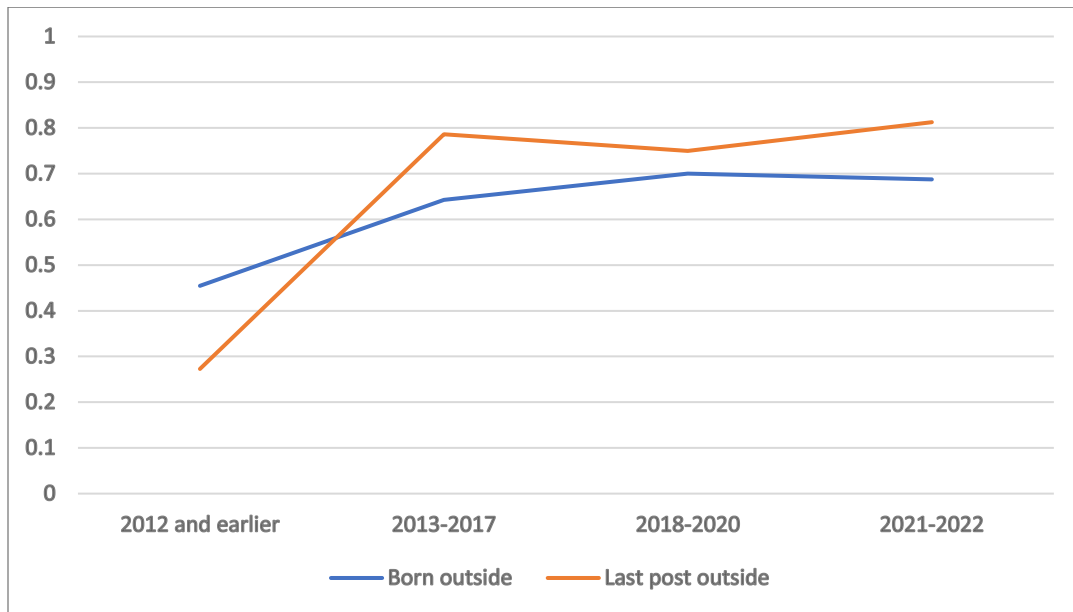


Effects for Observable Characteristics: Non-Politicians in Political Office

As a result of these preferences and corresponding institutional changes, the observed characteristics of local officeholders have changed as well. Russian governors (see **Figure 1**, author’s estimate) and mayors are [less likely](#) to have any prior electoral experience. Combined with the fact that gubernatorial elections for those with a *VRIO* status are not associated with the uncertainty of outcome, many subnational leaders have no experience

with political struggle or public debate. Furthermore, we can also see that a large share of governors did not previously work in the region they are currently heading – at least not right before their election, illustrating their greater detachment from the territory (see **Figure 2**, author’s estimate). This is compensated by locally embedded municipal leaders, as most mayors come from the region and, often, the municipality they are heading.

Figure 2. Share of Current Governors by Connection to Region and Starting Year



Effects for Non-Observable Characteristics: Experimental Evidence

What about less visible characteristics? To explore that question, I conducted a series of laboratory experiments with young adults in Russia aimed at simulating the cancellation of direct elections and an uneven playing field.² They demonstrated that such institutional changes could affect what types of individuals self-select into political careers in the first place. The personality trait I focused on was risk aversion, or how comfortable a person is with taking risks. Risk aversion would affect a candidate’s behavior during the campaign and later on, influencing the likelihood of rule-breaking, protesting electoral results, and even one’s policy choices when in office.

The results indicate that an uneven playing field would lead to risk-averse pro-regime candidates and increasingly risk-seeking opposition candidates. It is simply too risky to be in the opposition, so only the most risk-seeking individuals would pursue that route.

² The study was conducted in 2019 in three Russian cities. See the full details at [CDDRL Working Paper](#) (April 2023).

The replacement of direct elections, when officials are accountable to numerous citizens, with appointments leads to the self-selection of more risk-averse individuals overall.

These findings shed more light on some consequences of the aforementioned institutional changes in subnational political selection in Russia. Where elections were canceled altogether (such as mayoral positions in most larger municipalities), more cautious individuals would be self-selecting into a political career. Given that a municipal office is often a start of a public career, that should have long-term consequences further along the way as public offices become increasingly occupied by the cautious. Where elections remained or were restored (such as gubernatorial and local legislative positions) but are characterized by increasingly unfair conditions, pro-regime candidates would be more risk-averse. As pro-regime candidates are also more likely to win, this trait would become more and more prominent among loyal officeholders. At the same time, the remaining opposition politicians would be risk-seeking—counterintuitively, and not because restrictions and repressions somehow change people and make them more daring, but simply because the weak-hearted would not participate in the fight.

Personality, Incentives, and Behavior

These findings allow us to posit that the Russian state, through a series of institutionalized rules, selects and encourages the self-selection of subnational agents who are 1) politically inexperienced and 2) inherently risk-averse—except for local opposition politicians. What does that imply for their behavior—and specifically governance as these are the individuals responsible for policy implementation at the subnational level? To answer that question, we need to look also at the incentives that are in operation for the individuals who have been (self)-selected into decision-making positions, particularly the incentives that will interact with their risk-averse personalities.

Taking risks as a behavior means accepting the possibility of mistakes in pursuit of greater achievement. For individuals within organizations, such acceptance would depend not only on their inherent preferences but also on systemic incentives, particularly the rewards and punishments imposed for specific behaviors. For example, things like excessive regulation or red tape, status quo bias, and merit protection [encourage](#) risk-avoiding behavior among agents—and their effects would be particularly pronounced for individuals who were already risk-averse by nature.

In this regard, the Russian state exhibits several organizational features that would affect the willingness of its agents to take risks. First, potential mistakes for subnational officials are numerous and costly. Russian governors and mayors often become the center of corruption scandals and criminal investigations. According to one estimate, at least fifteen governors [faced](#) criminal investigations from 2011-2021. One of the few comprehensive studies on the topic [demonstrates](#) that over 10 percent of large city mayors in the period 2002-2018 faced arrest.

Based on my own fieldwork interviews with former and acting officials in Perm and Sverdlovsk regions and the Republic of Bashkortostan in the fall of 2018, even smaller settlements' mayors perceive their posts as incredibly precarious. They describe how the "sword of Damocles" of criminal prosecution is something they have to take into account constantly, as changing rules and arbitrary rule application make it impossible to stay 100 percent within the legal framework when dealing with public procurement procedures or other issues of public management. The prosecutor's offices, the Investigative Committee (*Sledstvennyi Komitet*), and a variety of overseeing bodies that work at the local level are not under the command of a governor or the mayor—and try to meet their own performance metrics or are used as a political tool. Furthermore, the federal authorities have been known to punish those officials who underperform politically or are unable to demonstrate sufficient electoral support for the regime in critical elections.

At the same time, these punishments are not matched by equal positive incentives. Studies have demonstrated that governors overseeing better economic performance are [not rewarded](#) by more generous federal transfers. Career opportunities for governors are also limited: for most, it is a dead-end position, with few openings at the federal level due to low elite mobility. Mayors have an option of moving to regional government positions, with a chance of [around](#) 20 percent for large city officials – but that does not accommodate all ambitious officials, and there is even less space for growth above a regional ministerial position.

Given this situation of scarce positive incentives, agents of the state face high costs for mistakes –and no particular benefits for exceptional performance. Keeping one's post appears to be the main reward available for subnational officials—together with any benefits one derives from that position, be it serving the public or personal gain. As a result, preserving the status quo is the main focus of the state apparatus, and institutional rules reinforce risk-avoiding personalities. At a time of crisis, when conditions change unexpectedly and often, agents are required to react and improvise. Yet by their personalities and the systemic incentives they are facing, public officials are ill-prepared for such a situation. For those with an extended interest in the Russian state, that situation may [recall](#) discussions of incentives and the lack of innovation within the Soviet economy. It appears that the last Soviet generation of state managers is reproducing the system of their youth in a new environment.

Example: 2022 Mobilization

The September 2022 mobilization illustrates some of the effects of the existing institutions. We saw regional and municipal officials minimizing engagement with the public, mostly refusing to provide any clarification or to make commitments when challenged by citizens and shifting blame to individual local agents when pressed. Importantly, in the absence of rewards for risky behavior, cautious officials were not overzealous either: in this system, there is little benefit to be had from extreme loyalty.

Except for the governors of the border regions that are in a very different situation, we did not see many examples of public officials' statements actively promoting the war effort. Many governors up for reelection [tried to avoid](#) the theme altogether. Their lack of experience in public politics and their disconnectedness from the public, characteristic for "outsider" governors, sometimes led to massive public relations meltdowns. For example, the governor of the Orel region publicly chastised the men who were drafted from the region and who complained about bad equipment, leading to an even greater public outcry. Overall, as a result of local implementation, all the drawbacks of the ill-prepared national draft campaign were reinforced and led to public grievances from initially relatively loyal popular groups.

Interestingly, throughout the past few months, independent local politicians – mostly local council members who were elected from the opposition or as independents, such as Alexey Gorinov, the first to [receive](#) a harsh prison sentence for his anti-war position – were the one group that was systematically vocal, despite an increasingly repressive environment. As suggested by my research, these people are the ones who are the most risk-seeking within the system, and their behavior (petitions and public actions) illustrates the other side of the spectrum of possible actions given the systemic incentives. They are few and far between, though, and not representative of the overall corpus of Russian officials.

Conclusion

The final question that stems from this analysis is: What if the systemic incentives were changed in the course of radical reform? What type of behavior would we expect from the same state agents? The question is justified because it is hard to imagine a radical change in the large corpus of Russian regional officials. This did not happen after the fall of the Soviet Union when most regional elites were preserved. And there is little reason to expect that a whole new population of local politicians with different personalities and backgrounds will appear overnight in contemporary Russia, a system that has been consistently sanitizing the field of public politics. What kind of rule changes would have the most dramatic effect on the behavior of current officials? One change that would both transform the incentives for current officials and, in the medium run, attract different types of personalities to local public offices is the introduction of better positive incentives or rewards.

Two forms of positive incentives are possible. On the one hand, Russia needs greater fiscal decentralization – and one particular form of such policies could involve discretionary funds distributed to regions and municipalities based on clearly outlined performance priorities. Those can include improved economic performance and citizen satisfaction with local public goods. On the other hand, introducing career incentives – positions in regional administrations, regional offices of the federal agencies, and in federal agencies – would be particularly interesting for younger and ambitious local officials. Making the

local elected office a major benefit for candidates for higher level elected positions would inspire those who have a political career in mind to also try and demonstrate their aptitude. Such incentives won't immediately change the people who are already in office – but they will encourage some of the risk-averse to try new strategies and policies if there is a promise of a great reward and attract different personalities to those careers.

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