



Career trajectories of regional officials: Russia and China before and after 2012

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ABSTRACT

Authoritarian leaders rely on regional leaders for both political support and the fulfillment of their policy objectives. In addition, top leaders face trade-offs between following established rules for managing bureaucratic officials' careers and exercising a free hand in choosing regional officials. This paper compares patterns of appointment of regional officials in Russia and China before and after 2012. The two countries share a legacy of centralized communist party rule, vast size, and a complex policy environment characterized by the balance between state control and market competition in their economies. In recent years, the leaders of both countries have centralized and personalized state power. We hypothesize that these changes have altered policies for managing the appointments of regional leaders in such a way as to increase their dependence on the central authorities and reduce their autonomy to create their own networks at the regional level. Leaders. Our analysis uses a comprehensive original set of biographical data on all top regional officials from 2003 through 2019 in China and from 2000 through 2019 in Russia. We discern clear differences between the pre- and post-2012 period for China and less marked differences for pre- and post-2012 Russia. These findings are consistent with our expectations. Turnover of regional officials has become more frequent in both systems; average tenure in office has fallen; and the share of "outsiders" – appointment of officials lacking prior ties to the region – has risen. However, the corps of regional officials has not been rejuvenated.

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Introduction: new leaders, new rules?

Political and economic performance in authoritarian polities depends critically upon the ability of regional executives to fulfill policy objectives set by the central leaders. At the same time, top regime leaders rely on those same regional officials for political support. Communist regimes employ a highly-structured set of procedures – the *nomenklatura* system – to groom, evaluate, and appoint officials to top positions in the bureaucracy. In other authoritarian systems, rules guiding appointments of regional officials are typically less formal. In all authoritarian systems, however, central leaders face trade-offs between reliance on institutionalized rules for choosing regional leaders as opposed to allowing the top leader free rein to build a personal base of support. A policy of leaving regional leaders in place for indefinite periods can lead to stasis as long-term system adaptability is sacrificed to the goal of maintaining short-term stability.

Russia and China form a particularly useful pair of cases for comparison with respect to the operation of cadre management systems. Notwithstanding the differences between them, they are closely linked by history. The Chinese regime was modeled on the Leninist party state, which assigned the party responsibility for policymaking, monopoly control on ideology, and the mechanisms for appointing leaders throughout state and society through the *nomenklatura* system. One is the largest country in the world by territory, the other by population, so both central governments face demanding spans of control challenges.⁵ Both regimes must manage the trade-off between market forces and maintaining state control over core sectors of the economy. Both regimes have tightened central level control over regional governments over the past decade. Since 2012, a number of observers have called attention to the similarity in tactics employed by Xi and Putin, almost as though they were observing and emulating one another (Kendall-Taylor and Shullman 2018, 2021).²

Their systems for managing bureaucratic careers differ, however, in some respects. For example, unlike Russia, China has followed rules governing the ages at which regional officials are appointed, the length of time they may serve in office, and their representation on central governing bodies such as the party Central Committee. Nonetheless, in both systems, the political leaders of first-order subnational units wield enormous authority in their regions, both overseeing the fulfillment of central-level policy priorities while forming a crucial base of political power for the top leaders.

Given these parallels, we explore the consequences of the trend toward personalization and centralization of power under Xi and Putin for appointments of regional leaders. Have the two regimes grown more similar with respect to their cadre management systems under Xi and Putin or have they diverged?

Because contemporary Russia and China have both inherited it, it is necessary to describe the essential features of the Soviet system's mechanism for balancing power and accountability between center and regions. Communist regimes recruit officials using "nomenklatura" system, where nomenklatura refers to a set of leading positions throughout the state and society and a set of people to fill them (Harasymiw 1984; Rigby and Harasymiw 1983; Voslenskii 1984; Manion 1985). Party officials use the nomenklatura to develop extensive personal networks of clients, who in turn maintain their own clienteles. However, it also serves as a mechanism of accountability by allowing superior officials to promote, demote, and dismiss subordinates based on their performance.

In a process known as the "circular flow of power," the general secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), working through the Secretariat of the Central Committee, appointed regional party secretaries. These leaders in turn controlled the selection of delegates to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) party congresses every five years. These congresses in turn "elected" – that is, they ratified a slate proposed to them by the secretariat – the members of the Central Committee, the Politburo, and the General Secretary. Although this process was highly centralized, it also accommodated the political interests of the regional power blocs comprising the party. In return for supporting the General Secretary in power, the party leaders who operated party organizations in their regions had considerable discretion to build their own clienteles. The circular flow of power provided a kind of reciprocal accountability between the regional party leaders and the top party leader: he had to maintain their support, even as he also dominated the process by which they were chosen to their posts (see Zimmerman 2016).

When Leonid Brezhnev pushed Nikita Khrushchev out of power in 1964, Brezhnev promised lower party officials that they could expect stable, predictable procedures for decision-making and cadre recruitment, based on collective leadership. However, as Brezhnev aged, his "stability of cadres" principle became a significant liability to the system's survival. Local party officials' upward career mobility was blocked, and the absence of leadership turnover meant the party became increasingly unable to respond meaningfully to deep-rooted policy problems such as secular decline in economic productivity. "Stability of cadres" turned into the ultimately fatal stagnation and collapse of the regime (Roeder 1993).

For its part, China underwent a different kind of crisis in the 1960s and 1970s. If the Soviet problem was that stability turned into stagnation, in China, Mao Zedong himself rejected stability in favor of the violent chaos of the Cultural Revolution. Arbitrary arrests, demotions, and imprisonment of leading party officials became common. Post-Mao party leaders understand the dangers of arbitrary treatment of party leaders, as well as the dangers of allowing regional leaders to remain in power too long. The breakdown of order within the party

was a major reason party cadres supported Deng Xiaoping's efforts to establish rules such as age and term limits, and to reject personalistic leadership in favor of collective leadership (Vogel 2011).

In 2012 both Russia and China underwent significant leadership changes. Vladimir Putin returned to the presidency after the four-year presidential term of his former prime minister Dmitrii Medvedev. In November of the same year Xi Jinping was named General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) at the 18th Party Congress.

Both faced rising political and economic pressures. The global financial crisis of 2008–2009 brought about a sharp fall (nearly 9% in 2009) in GDP in Russia and forced China to respond with a major surge of state-led infrastructure spending to maintain liquidity. Political tensions in China forced the postponement of the 18th Party Congress by several weeks (Dotson 2012). More fundamentally, Xi regarded the deep and pervasive corruption of the regime as a threat to the very survival of communist party rule. In Russia, the elections to the Duma in December 2011 had been accompanied by large-scale protest against electoral fraud and against Putin's return to the presidency. The December wave of protest was followed by further protests in early 2012, revealing widespread discontent in many major cities (Reuter and Szakonyi 2015; Dollbaum 2017).

These political and economic pressures help explain the similar trends toward centralization and personalization of power in the two regimes after 2012.¹ Both leaders ended the previous limits on the top leader's term in office. In March 2020, Putin pushed through constitutional amendments that would allow him to seek yet another two terms as president when his current term ends in 2024, potentially allowing him to continue in power through 2036. In March 2018, China's National People's Congress eliminated the constitutional clause limiting the president and vice-president to two five-year terms. This move was widely interpreted as a signal that Xi intended to stay on as general secretary beyond two terms, in view of the fact that general secretaries usually also simultaneously hold the position of state president. Both leaders also have tightened fiscal control and reduced fiscal autonomy of regional governments, increased reliance on state-owned enterprises to serve as "national champions" and engines of growth, increased political repression of potential opposition, and tightened political control over the mass media (Li 2016; Frye 2021; Smyth 2020; Diana and Distelhorst 2018).

We hypothesize that the centralization and personalization of power in the two regimes should also affect the mechanisms governing the appointments of regional officials. We expect that Xi Jinping has moved to make regional leaders more dependent on him personally by moving them more often and bringing in more outsiders (officials without previous work or education ties to the region), and that Putin likewise would replace governors more frequently and appoint more outsiders, thus curbing the ability of regional governors to forge strong

local ties. Therefore, for both countries, we expect to see higher turnover in office and a higher frequency of “outsider” appointments.

These hypotheses are grounded in the literature. Research on other communist and authoritarian regimes has shown that regional officials with strong local ties tend to be more attuned to the interests of their own regional clients and may have differing policy priorities than those of the center. Moreover, by building up their own power base, they are in a better position to resist control from the center (ef Stoner-Weiss 2006; Svolik 2012; Persson and Zhuravskaya 2016; Svolik 2012, pp. 170–178; Hodnett 1978). Regular rotation and recruitment of regional officials from outside the region may help ensure that officials depend more on support from the center than from local elites. The experience of the late Brezhnev regime, when few regional party secretaries were replaced, and of the Yeltsin years in the 1990s, when powerful regional governor successfully resisted central control, serve as clear cases in point.

In order to test these hypotheses, we collected biographical data on all officials who served as regional chief executives from 2000 through the end of 2019 in Russia and from 2003 through the end of 2019 in China, including all individuals who served as party secretaries as well as those serving as governors. For each individual we calculate age at appointment, length of time in office, and type of subsequent career step. The paper builds on our earlier research on this subject (Rochlitz et al. 2015) by incorporating appointments since 2012, but uses a more fine-grained set of categories for career moves. However, in contrast to the approach of Rochlitz et al. (2015), we did not include in our analysis performance indicators. In both countries, the system of performance indicators for regional officials is changing and scholars will need longer time series and reliable indicators of the new performance targets to estimate the impact of these changes on the careers of top regional officials.⁶

Literature review

The question of how authoritarian regimes manage appointments of regional officials, evaluate performance, and provide incentives to influence the behavior of regional officials has been studied extensively in the context of individual countries, but comparative studies are rare. A substantial literature has developed examining the determinants of career patterns among Chinese officials during the 30-year period of “reform and opening up.” With economic growth the overriding policy goal of the regime, China’s central government pressed its regional executives – governors and party secretaries as well as officials at lower administrative levels – to maximize economic growth (Maskin, Qian, and Chenggang 2000; Yao and Zhang 2015; Chen, Hongbin, and Zhou 2005; Li and Zhou 2005; Landry, Lü, and Duan 2018).³ The regime encouraged competition among regional leaders for successful policy performance (Landry 2008). The regime laid out a series of

policy priorities, of which economic growth took precedence and other objectives— such as maintaining social stability— were also considered crucial. For officials at higher levels, promotion was also affected by factional ties as well as education and revenue collection (Jia, Kudamatsua and Seim 2013; Shih, Adolph, and Liu 2012; Landry, Lü, and Duan 2018). Moreover, regional governors and party secretaries were moved regularly, some through promotion, others through demotion or retirement (Zhang 2014; Nathan and Gilley 2003; Zeng 2013; Landry, Lü, and Duan 2018, 2015; Ma, Tang, and Yan 2015; Xi, Yao, and Zhang 2018; Shih, Adolph, and Liu 2012; Chen, Hongbin, and Zhou 2005; Jia, Kudamatsu, and Seim 2015; Li and Zhou 2005; Choi 2012; Manion 1985; Shih, Shan, and Liu 2010; Bo 1996).

Most studies of gubernatorial appointments in Russia find no evidence that Russian governors are rewarded for good economic performance, but do find that governors face a strong chance of being removed if they fail to produce good results in elections (Rochlitz et al. 2015; Reuter and Robertson 2012; Reisinger and Moraski 2013; Buckley and Reuter 2019; Buckley et al. 2014; Reuter and Robertson 2012).

In the only comparative study of the management of regional officials' careers in Russia and China of which we are aware, Rochlitz et al. (2015) analyzed the career trajectories of all officials who had served as regional executives in Russia and China between 1999 and 2012: 205 individuals who had served as governors in Russia, and 201 governors and party secretaries in China. Rochlitz et al. (2015) mapped their career paths onto a series of performance indicators that the literature had indicated as being important criteria for evaluation used by the center. Rochlitz et al. (2015) found that in Russia, regional executives had lower turnover, were sometimes removed but almost never promoted to a higher position (such as a federal minister), were not rewarded for good economic results but were sometimes removed for poor political (electoral) outcomes. In contrast to China, there were few incentives for achieving good economic results or engaging in policy experimentation intended to bring favorable attention to their leadership. In China, by contrast, regional executives were regularly moved, sometime promoted and sometimes retired, had more prior executive experience, and were constrained by strictly observed age and term limits.

We build on that paper in the present research. We compare across countries and across leadership periods in each country. We concentrate on observable parameters of regional officials' career movements: ages at appointment and dismissal; types of career movement; frequency of turnover and tenure in office; and the share of outsiders as opposed to insiders appointed.

We see our contribution to the literature as two-fold. With respect to the dynamics of Russia's and China's regimes, we seek to shed light on the way the political and economic pressures faced by Putin and Xi as they entered office in 2012 have been reflected in their strategies for managing appointments of

regional officials. More broadly, the study has implications for the trade-offs between personalized and institutionalized authority in an authoritarian regime.

Russia is sometimes treated as an electoral authoritarian regime inasmuch as it does hold nominally contested elections (Smyth 2006, 2020; Schedler 2006, 2013). Under Putin, however, and particular since Putin's return to the presidency in 2012, the regime is best characterized as a "personalist autocracy" (Frye 2021; cf Baturu and Elkink 2016, 2014).⁷ In such an autocracy, although elections and parties may exist, the power to decide on policy and personnel are made by the top leader, who rules through a close coterie of associates, relies on the security services, and works to build and maintain popular support. Other institutions lack the independence to constrain the leader's power. The degree of personalism in an autocracy can vary with time: if the leader accumulates more personal power at the expense of the ruling party, top government executives, regional leaders, and other centers of power, the system becomes increasingly dependent on a single person's ability to maintain cohesion among the political elite. This trend became marked since 2012 in both countries. For this reason, we treat 2012 as a turning point.

Our research strategy, therefore, relies on treating both elected and appointed governors as if they were appointed, even though Russia nominally employs a system of popular elections to choose governors.⁴ Given the extensive controls that the Kremlin exercises over the selection and removal of governors, whether there is an election or not is largely a formality – with the president's right to remove and replace a sitting governor on any of a set of vaguely enumerated grounds (see DeBardeleben and Zherebtsov 2014). A governor who is elected against the wishes of the Kremlin can readily be dismissed on the grounds that the president has lost confidence in him or in connection with criminal charges developed for the occasion.⁸

Research design

This paper compares the post-2012 patterns of career management with the pre-2012 patterns in the two countries to ascertain the effect of the greater centralization and personalization of power under presidents Xi and Putin. We examine the data on appointments and career changes for regional officials, both party secretaries and governors, testing whether age and term-related rules continue to guide career movement. For each country, we expect to observe a certain amount of house-cleaning in 2012, as presidents Xi and Putin used their appointment powers to build a base of support among regional leaders. Beyond that, however, we examine whether the average ages at the time of appointment, the duration of service in office, rates of turnover, the share of "outsiders" (that is, officials who lacked previous work experience in the region), and patterns of promotion, demotion, retirement, and so on, following a replacement.

We have attempted to apply the same coding rules for career movements to the two countries as much as possible. However, the institutional differences between them require some adjustments to the coding scheme. China has retained the dual structure of governors and party secretaries in which governors bear principal authority for managing economic and social policy whereas party secretaries exercise general oversight functions and ensure the fulfillment of the center's top political priorities. For that reason, we use a code category for governors reflecting the fact that the appointment of a governor of a Chinese province-level unit to the position of party secretary in the same or different region is a clear promotion. For Russia, there is no such promotion available for a regional governor; the only available upward move for a governor is an appointment to a high-ranking central level post. We are also constrained by data availability, which differs somewhat between the two countries.

For China, we have collected biographical data on all top regional officials who occupied the positions of a province CPC secretary, a province governor, chair of the regional government in an autonomous region or mayor of a municipality of central subordination in the period from 2003 to 2019. Our overall dataset contains data on 208 persons who occupied these positions in 22 provinces, 5 autonomous regions and 4 municipalities under the direct administration of central government. For Russia we have gathered biographical data for 304 individuals who served as governor from January 2000 through December 2019.⁹ Three periods were identified within this time span. The period from January 2000 to April 2008 covers the first and second terms of Vladimir Putin as president. The period from May 2008 to April 2012 is the time of Dmitry Medvedev's presidency. The period from May 2012 to December 2019 covers the third and fourth presidential terms of Vladimir Putin.

In the Chinese bureaucratic system, the party secretary has a higher status than a governor and transfer from the position of a governor to the position of a party secretary is viewed as a promotion. Therefore, we divided our sample into two sub-groups, 161 observations for governors and 117 observations for party secretaries, and analyzed each separately. More than half (70 individuals) of party secretaries previously held the post of governor.

The categories of data we collected for each official are presented in [Table 1](#).

As indicated, we distinguished among various types of appointment: first appointment, transfer to another region and promotions at the regional level (for governors), transfers to central government positions, including promotions and transfers without promotion, and appointments to final positions in an official's political career, including appointments to positions of high prestige but without any real executive responsibilities ("honorific retirements"), retirement, dismissal, demotion, and criminal prosecution for corruption. Death while in office was classified separately.

For China, we distinguished the Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao (2003–2012) and Xi Jinping (2013–) leadership periods. Data collection ends with 2019. We

Table 1. Code categories for biographies of regional officials.

Background	
	Year of birth
	Year (age) of first appointment to position as governor or party secretary
	Year (age) of promotion
	Year (age) of end of term as governor or party secretary
	Length of tenure in office
	Place of birth
	Place of higher education
Career	
	Prior career positions (Used to code “outsider” or “insider” status)
	Subsequent career positions
	Appointment to same position in another region
	Promotion
	Promotion to position at regional level (<i>only for governors in China</i>)
	Promotion to central level
	Transfer to central level without promotion
	“Honorific retirement”
	Dismissal
	With prejudice
	Without prejudice
	Demotion
	Death in office
	Remained in office

assume that the relatively small number of appointments at the end of 2012 that occurred after Xi Jinping was elected CPC General Secretary were cleared while Hu Jintao was still general secretary, whereas Xi Jinping’s appointees are those who became party secretaries or province governors in 2013 or later.

Because the Chinese cadre management system includes age restrictions for various types of positions and the restrictions on length of tenure in office, we examine the age of regional officials at the moment of their appointment and during their further career movements as well as the length of time they served in each position. Based on our analysis of each group of officials for each year, averaged over each leadership period, we calculated ages at the time of each appointment; average tenure in office for each position; average share of new appointments, transfers, and remaining in office for each year; and shares of insiders and outsiders among appointees. We then compared the level of turnover of regional leaders under Xi Jinping with that in Hu and Wen period. For each of the two main leadership periods, we also analyzed the career trajectories of officials appointed under the previous and current general secretaries. We have also separately examined the group of party secretaries and governors who were in office at the end of 2019 in calculating the average tenure, in order to ensure that our calculations for tenure in office are not biased by right-censoring. Additionally, we also separately considered the effects of temporary delays between removals of officials and the appointment of their replacements.

Our coding scheme was the same for Russian officials as much as possible. We standardized the Russian data by taking into account the change in the number of regions due to consolidation of regions in the 2000s and accession of Crimea and Sevastopol in 2014¹⁰. These data were then aggregated for three selected periods: January 2000 – April 2008 (first and second terms of Vladimir Putin as president of Russia), May 2008 – April 2012 (presidency of Dmitry Medvedev), and May 2012 – December 2019 (third and continuing fourth terms of Vladimir Putin). The governors were divided into four cohorts: those who were appointed during Yeltsin’s rule and continued service after January 2000, those who were elected or appointed during Putin’s first two presidential terms, Medvedev’s appointees, and those appointed or elected during Putin’s third and fourth presidencies.

Main results

The major results for China are presented in Tables 2 and 3.

With respect to regional governors in China, we can summarize our main findings as follows:

- (1) Governors were rotated frequently. On average a quarter of all governors were newly appointed every year. Moreover, the rate of new appointments rose from the early period (2003–2012) to the latter period (2013–2019) from 24.2% to 26.7%.

Table 2. Share of career movements of governors and party secretaries, by periods.

Career movements	2003–2012		2013–2019	
	Governors	Party secretaries	Governors	Party secretaries
Newly appointed in given year	0.242	0.155	0.267***	0.171
Remained in same position	0.613	0.768	0.700***	0.760
Lateral move (appointment to another position at same rank)	0.010	0.061	0.009	0.069
Regional promotion	0.103	X	0.152***	x
Promotion (appointed to a higher-ranking position at the central level)	0.035	0.055	0.041	0.028***
Move to center (appointment to a position at the central level without promotion)	0.013	0.013	0.014	0.005
Honorable retirement (appointed to a position with honorific status)	0.077	0.081	0.032***	0.097***
Fired (dismissed from position)	0.003	0.003	–	–
Corruption (removed in connection with investigation for corruption)	–	0.006	0.009	0.018
Pensioned (removed from position without disgrace and without appointment to a new position)	–	–	0.009	0.023***
Demoted (transferred to a lower ranking position)	0.003	–	–	–
Died in the office	–	0.006	–	–

“–” if no observations; “x” if category is not applicable for the group.

Statistical significance of differences between periods: * $p < 0,1$; ** $p < 0,05$; *** $p < 0,01$

Table 3. Average age, tenure and share of outsiders compared between governors and party secretaries appointed in 2003–2012 and 2013–2019.

		2003–2012		2013–2019	
Career movements		Governors	Party secretaries	Governors	Party secretaries
Tenure (in years)	Newly appointed in given year	4.1	4.6	2.7***	2.7***
	Remained in same position	-	-	2.6	2.7
Age of appointment (years)	Newly appointed in given year	55.7	56.9	57.1**	60.1***
	Stayed In Place	58.6	59.2	58.3	61.2
No ties to region	Newly appointed in given year	0.32	0.63	0.45***	0.60*

“–” if no observations; “x” if category is not applicable for the group

Statistical significance of differences between periods: * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$

An official was coded as an “outsider” if he/she did not have work experience in the region before appointment.

We also included in this category those party secretaries who served as governors in the same region but had no prior ties to the region.

- (2) At the same time, the share of governors who stayed in their positions also grew slightly: from 61.3% in 2003–2012 to 70% in 2013–2019. This effect was caused by lengthy delays in appointments of new governors to replace the retired ones during the first period. After Xi Jinping came to power, delays in appointing governors decreased: during that period not more than two provinces had no sitting governors at the year’s end.
- (3) Governors experience appointment to the position of the province party secretary at a relatively high rate, particularly under Xi Jinping. The share of such personnel rotations rose from 10.3% in 2003–2012 to 15.2% in 2013–2019.
- (4) “Honorific retirement” (appointment to a position of high prestige without real executive powers) was relatively frequent during the periods studied. However this type of move fell from 7.7% during Hu Jintao’s period to a mere 3.2% under Xi Jinping.

Promotion to a higher-ranking position became slightly more common under Xi Jinping (4.1% vs. 3.5% but this difference is not significant). A small number of governors are appointed to positions to the center at the same rank (7 persons during 16 years, or 1.4% on average) or same-rank appointments in a different region (5 persons, or 1% on average). Other outcomes for governors (resignation, retirement, demotion, accusation of corruption) were rare.

The age data for governors (Table 3) shows that the average age of those governors who “stayed in place” was practically identical in both periods – approximately 58 years old. However, the average age of newly appointed governors grew by more than 1.5 years in the second period (from 55.7 to 57.1 years old). We return to this point below.

With respect to party secretaries in China, we found that:

- (1) Overall, turnover among party secretaries was lower than among governors – 16.9% per year on average (see Table 2). This of course is partly due to the fact that there are simply fewer opportunities for further promotion as party secretaries advance in the hierarchy. Turnover rose slightly during the period of Xi's rule to 17.1% as compared with 15.5% during the Hu-Wen period, but this difference is not significant.
- (2) The share of party secretaries who stayed in place at the end of each year was higher than for governors (75.4% on average during 16 years) and decreased slightly from the Hu to the Xi period: from 76.8% in 2003–2012 to 73.1% in 2013–2019. However, these differences are not statistically significant.
- (3) The most frequent type of personnel transfers of party secretaries in both periods was “honorific retirement” (9.3% during 16 years on average). However, the frequency of such transfers has increased under Xi: 9.7% on average vs. 8.1% in 2003–2012.
- (4) The share of party secretaries' transfers to higher-ranking positions in the center has decreased. Under Xi, it was only 2.8% annually on average vs. 5.5% in the period of Hu Jintao's rule.
- (5) Under Xi the share of party secretaries who simply retired rose slightly (5 persons, or 2.3% annually on average during the period under survey – versus 0% under Hu Jintao's rule).
- (6) After 2012, removal from office in connection with investigation for corruption (often followed by criminal prosecution and sentencing to long prison terms) became more frequent for party secretaries, although the numbers remain small. During six years under Xi Jinping the political careers of four regional party secretaries ended this way (compared to only two cases under Hu Jintao).
- (7) Appointments are not evenly distributed across time. Most promotions and lateral movements have occurred in the years when CPC congresses were held. However, under Xi this process began earlier and spanned two years, 2016 and 2017 (relevant table can be provided on request).

Analysis of the age characteristics of party secretaries (Table 3) shows that the average age of new appointees has risen under Xi by more than 3 years. However, although newly appointed party secretaries under Xi have tended to be older than those under Hu and Wen, they stay in office for shorter spells. The difference in average tenure of Hu Jintao-era party secretaries and those appointed after Xi took power fell from slightly over 4 years to 2.7 years.

In addition, the number of governors who had no prior ties to the region – ie “outsiders” – has risen significantly under Xi's rule (see Table 3). The share of such governors under Hu Jintao (including those appointed during Jiang

Zemin's rule) was 32%, but rose to 45% under Xi. For party secretaries this proportion fell a bit.

In this connection we should note that whereas during the Hu-Wen period, 31 out of 48 appointed party secretaries (or 65%) had previous experience of work as a governor, under Xi, 33 out of 37 appointed party secretaries (approximately 90%) had previous experience of work as a governor ($p = 0.000$). Therefore, Xi tended to send outsiders to regions to serve as governor, then relied mainly on those individuals to take regional party secretary positions.

Summing up, we can highlight several points. In both periods governors (a lower-ranking category) were characterized by a higher share of promotions or transfers to the center and a small share of movements leading to the end of the professional career ("honorific retirements" or dismissals) as compared to party secretaries. Under Hu Jintao, on average, 15.2% of governors and 6.8% of party secretaries were annually promoted or transferred to the center, and 8.4% of governors and 9.0% of party secretaries ended their careers. However, in the period of Xi's rule these differences have become more pronounced. Since 2013, 20.2% of governors and only 3.2% of party secretaries were promoted or transferred to the center. At the same time, only 5.1% of governors vs. 13.8% of party secretaries ended their careers. It should also be mentioned that only one of the 5 cases of removal from position in connection with accusations of corruption in 2013–2019 concerned an official appointed under Xi Jinping, while all the others were first appointed under Hu Jintao.

Presumably, these shifts reflect the process of personnel replacement – with Xi Jinping sending into retirement those officials appointed before he came to power, even if they had not reached the normal retirement age, and replacing them with others, presumably more personally loyal. Moreover, as work experience as a governor before appointment to the position of a party secretary is typical, this process proceeds through the appointment of new governors and moving party secretaries into retirement. An indirect illustration of this assumption is the fact of 20 out of 33 governors who became party secretaries under Xi Jinping were appointed governors in 2013 or later.

The higher average age of newly appointed governors and especially party secretaries under Xi is interesting. It may be due to Xi Jinping's practice of appointing to top regional positions people whom he personally knew at an earlier point in his career. Since Xi Jinping enjoyed an unusually fast career rise, many of those he served with on his way up the ladder were either older or not much younger than he.¹¹ At the same time, this trend (along with the decision to lift restrictions from Xi Jinping's own tenure in the post of CPC General Secretary) signifies a departure from the conventions observed since Deng Xiaoping's time.

For Russia, the key findings are presented in [Tables 4–7](#).

Comparing Russian and Chinese data as well as data for different periods in Russia we can note the following main findings:

Table 4. Average age at appointment, by period (in years).

	Putin 1st and 2d Presidency	Medvedev Presidency	Putin 3d and 4th Presidency
Newly appointed in given year	48.2	48.2	48.7
Remained in same position	53.9	54.1	53.4

- (1) On average, newly appointed governors were 48–49 years old (younger than in China) and average age hardly changed at all from the pre-2012 to post-2012 period – see Table 4. We also continue to observe wide variation in age among newly appointed governors in all periods: from 31 to 65 years old for governors who assumed their positions before 2000, and from 30 to 69 years old for the third period. The difference in means across periods is not statistically significant.
- (2) The share of governors staying in their position every year (Table 5) is considerably higher than in China. This measure has fallen only slightly over time (from 89% in the first period to 86% in the third period), whereas the average annual share of newly appointed governors has grown (from 10% in the first period to almost 15% in the third period).
- (3) The chances of promotion for Russian governors are very low (0.4% in the first period and less than 2% in the second and third periods) and remain much lower than in China.
- (4) If in China, lateral movement is common (especially for party secretaries) the probability of a transfer to another region for Russian governors is negligible. There was only 1 such case in the first period and 3 cases in the third period, for an aggregate 0.5% probability of such transfers of sitting governors.

Table 5. Share of career movement types of governors, by period.

Career movements	Putin 1st and 2d Presidency	Medvedev Presidency	Putin 3d and 4th Presidency
Newly appointed in given year	0.099	0.127	0.143
Remained in same position	0.889	0.873	0.861
Promoted	0.004	0.019	0.015
Appointed governor in another region	0.001	-	0.004
Moved to center without promotion	0.003	0.006	0.009
Honorary pension	0.014	0.039	0.030
Demoted (appointed to a lower-ranking position)	0.010	0.015	0.018
Left position without problems	0.046	0.021	0.027
Left position with problems	0.015	0.020	0.018
Fired rough (removed in connection with criminal investigation)	0.001	0.003	0.011
Died in the office	0.011	0.003	0.002
Stayed in the office less than 1 year	-	-	0.007

“-” if no observations

Table 6. “Outsiders,” by period, as share of all governors.

	Putin 1st and 2d Presidency	Medvedev Presidency	Putin 3d and 4th Presidency
As share of newly appointed governors	0.29	0.33	0.53**
As share of governors who “stayed in place”	0.07	0.23	0.36

Statistical significance of differences between given period and previous one: * $p < 0,1$; ** $p < 0,05$; *** $p < 0,01$

Table 7. Average tenure of governors, by period (in years).

	Yeltsin Presidency (Served in 2000)	Putin 1st and 2nd Presidency	Medvedev Presidency	Putin 3d and 4th Presidency
Number of Observations	88	75	51	96
Age at The Year of Appointment	48.4	48.2	48.2	48.7
Number of governors in every cohort moved at end of 2019	81	68	37	29
Tenure for moved governors (at the time of transfer to new position)	11.7	7.4***	6.0**	3.6***
Number of governors in every cohort stayed in office until 2019	1	4	14	66
Years in office for governors in every cohort stayed at end of 2019	26.5	14.8	8.7	2.6
Sum of moved + stayed in place through 2019	82	72	51	95
Tenure of moved + stayed in place thru 2019	11.9	7.8	6.7	2.9
Died	6	3	0	1
Less than 1 year in office	0	0	0	5

Statistical significance of differences between given period and previous one: * $p < 0,1$; ** $p < 0,05$; *** $p < 0,01$

- (5) In nearly all cases, a governorship is the last position in an individual’s career. The sum total of “honorific retirement,” “resignation without problems,” “resignation with problems” and “arrest” was 7.6% in the first period, 8.3% in the second period, and 8.4% in the third period. The share of officials who left their positions with problems or who were arrested has increased slightly (from 1.6% to 2.7% in the third period).

On the whole, there are only two indicators for which significant differences were observed between the periods. First is the share of “outsiders,” ie appointed governors who had no ties with the region at the moment of their appointment (see Table 6). During Vladimir Putin’s first two presidencies their annual average share among sitting governors was less than 7%. However, it was much higher among newly appointed governors: 29% in the first period and 33% in the second period (Medvedev’s presidency). But in the third period (despite the nominal return to the system of elected governors) this percentage for “new appointees” rose to 53% and exceeded 36% on average for sitting governors.

The second point concerns average tenure (see Table 7). Formally, a governor's tenure is restricted to two terms; however, in practice, this rule is regularly circumvented. Another five governors appointed during the first two presidential terms of Vladimir Putin were also still in place as of the end of 2019. Despite these unusual cases, however, average tenure is becoming shorter. The mean tenure of governors appointed under Yeltsin and who were in office as of 2000 exceeded 11 years. For governors appointed in the first two terms of Putin it fell to less than 8 years, and for Medvedev's appointees it was approximately 6 years. In the third period the average tenure decreased even more. If we count only the governors who were appointed in May 2012 and were moved before the end of 2019, their average tenure was merely 4.2 years. Moreover, the tenure of sitting governors from this cohort was even lower at the end of 2019–2.6 years. We believe that these changes can be attributed to the vigorous renewal of the governors' corps in 2017–2018, when regional leaders were replaced in 20 regions in both years.

Comparing Russia and China

For each country, we compared the pre- and post-2012 period in order to discern differences in patterns of appointments of top regional leaders. For the most part, the cross-national differences identified in our 2015 study still hold. Specifically, Russian governors continue to be appointed governor at a younger age than in China (48–49 years old vs. 56–60), stay in place longer and almost never are moved from region to region. We can assume that since Russian governors have a far greater prospect of being removed than being promoted, their principal incentive is to keep their position. By contrast, cadre mobility, including promotion opportunities, continues to be much higher in China, especially for governors, as opposed to party secretaries. Moreover, although the average age of regional leaders is higher in China, age variation at the time of appointment is much lower than in Russia. This is further evidence of the higher overall institutionalization of the cadre management system in the PRC, a pattern which has continued under Xi Jinping.

At the same time, several changes in these patterns are evident in both countries. In both, average length of tenure in office has fallen considerably in the last decade. In China, after Xi Jinping came to power, the average tenure of both governors and party secretaries fell sharply, from approximately 4 years under Hu Jintao to over 2 years under Xi. Personnel renewals under Xi generally take the form of appointments of new governors among whom the share of "outsiders" – officials without any ties to the region – has risen considerably. At the same time, there has been a decrease in the opportunities for older officials (in particular, party secretaries) to be moved to the center, and a higher probability of their dismissal, including getting fired in connection with accusations of corruption. These tendencies support our hypothesis about tightening

centralization in the Chinese governance system, in that senior party officials with established power bases have fewer opportunities to attain higher-level postings and are more likely to run afoul of Xi's anticorruption campaign.

We believe that the tendency toward personalization of the appointments system in China is manifested in the higher age of new appointees – by 1.4 years for governors and 3.2 years for new party secretaries. We conjecture that this pattern is due to Xi Jinping's practice of appointing to senior positions in regions people whom he personally knew and who were presumably more personally loyal.

This approach gives Xi Jinping tighter personal control of the party and government and logically complements the lifting of restrictions from his tenure as PRC President and (prospectively) CPC general secretary. But at the same time these changes may undermine long-term performance incentives for party and government officials, because the higher age of senior officials results in a lack of vacancies and fewer opportunities for career movements of lower- and mid-rank officials within the bureaucratic hierarchy.

Interestingly, similar tendencies are observed in Russia: growing shares of "outsider" governors and falling average tenures of governors. Both trends make governors more dependent on the Kremlin. But, in contrast to China, there was no clear breakpoint in these practices. They have been steadily intensifying since early 2000s. The period of Dmitry Medvedev's presidency showed no major departure from the general trend.

We laid out two expectations about tendencies common to both countries: first, that there would be more frequent turnover of regional officials following 2012, and second, that there would be a higher percentage of outsiders brought in to manage the regions.

The data are consistent with both hypotheses. Length of time in office has fallen in both countries (newly appointed Chinese party secretaries' average tenure fell from 4.6 years to 2.7; Russian governors' average tenure fell steadily across the periods, from 7.4 years for those appointed during Putin's first two terms, to 6.0 for Medvedev's appointees, to 4.2 years after 2012. Consequently, we observe a significant increase in overall turnover.

Our second hypothesis – that more outsiders would be brought in both in Russia and China – was supported by the data for two of three categories of officials. For Russia, the average number of outsiders among newly appointed governors in 2000–2008 was just under 30%, but rose to nearly 50% after 2012 (See Table 6). For China, the number of outsider governors rose from about 30% in 2003–2012 to about 45% in 2013–2019. Meantime the share of outsiders among party secretaries fell a bit but it remains much higher than for governors.

Somewhat surprisingly, in neither country are the newly appointed officials younger than those they replaced. We found essentially no change in average age at appointment in Russia, and higher ages in China both for governors and party secretaries. For Russia, age appears not to be a significant criterion for

appointment. In China, Xi evidently regards experience as a crucial means to judge competence and loyalty. Therefore the substantial renewal of the corps of regional leaders has not brought a new generation of leaders into office. This finding is consistent with the premise that in Russia, the factors that determine governors' appointments have much less to do with their ability to solve problems than with their ability to support President Putin; higher rates of replacement since 2012 only reinforce their personal dependence on him. The greater change appears to be in China. There, Xi Jinping has continued the pattern of promoting governors into party secretaries' positions but has increased the rate of exits from politics for party secretaries. They are moved into positions of ceremonial power or are arrested at significantly higher rates than before 2012. Likewise, like Putin, Xi is relying more on outsiders to take over party secretary positions than in the past.

We believe that the data support the thesis that both leaders have used cadre management policies as a mechanism for consolidating personal power. The greater reliance on outsiders undercuts opportunities for local notables to maintain their own local power bases, and the higher frequency of turnover gives newly appointed officials fewer opportunities to build new ones. We also see clear evidence that both leaders have sought to clean house and staff key regional leadership positions with people who owe their advancement to the top leader. Consistent with this line of reasoning is the fact that the age at which people are moved into honorific retirement has actually decreased in China, as well as the fact that in China there are no longer observable intervals between the removal of one official and the appointment of a replacement.

Major differences remain between the two countries, however. We see no evidence that Russia has returned to the practice – standard under the *nomenklatura* system – of grooming regional officials for higher office by moving them from one region to another. In the Soviet era, this practice enabled the central party staff to monitor performance and allowed officials to accumulate experience. Russia continues to show no regular pattern of rotation across regions. Moreover, the age at appointment continues to vary widely, and length of time in office remains highly variable as well – albeit shorter in recent years. Most importantly, it remains the case that Russian governors enjoy almost no upward channels for mobility; instead, governors are much more likely to be dismissed or demoted than promoted. In China, the “up or out” rule for governors continues. More of them are promoted under Xi Jinping than in the past. However, for party secretaries, we see fewer opportunities for upward mobility. Perhaps Xi is unwilling to party secretaries not directly tied to him the ability to wield power at the center.

In this paper we have not tested for the hypothesis that career mobility is related to performance by regional officials in managing economic and social policy. As we noted above, numerous empirical studies on China have shown that promotion opportunities have been higher for regional leaders who

achieved economic growth and higher investment rates. In Russia, on the contrary, economic and social performance of relevant regions had no effect on governors' careers. The key factor for remaining in office in Russia has been demonstration of loyalty to the center by delivering the required election results (Reuter and Robertson 2012). The Furgal case is further evidence in support of this point.

Conclusion

We observed that both countries faced an intensification of political and economic pressures in the period following the global recession of 2008–09 albeit in very different ways. At the point Xi Jinping assumed office as general secretary, Chinese policymakers emphasized that China needed to adopt a new model of economic development, one less oriented to maximizing GDP growth and more oriented to higher value-added production, greater attention to environmental sustainability, and progress in science and technology. Moreover, Xi worried deeply that corruption had eroded the viability of party rule and embarked on major programs of ideological rectification and a sweeping anti-corruption campaign. He extended his personal control over all domains of policy-making and ended the former rules of collective leadership and regular rotation in office of the top leader. He crushed the political autonomy of Hong Kong and heightened political repression against restive ethnic minorities within China. Xi steadily increased party ideological control over communications. Xi has also placed greater emphasis on state control over the private sector and the use of state-owned enterprises as the engines of investment.

Xi's comprehensive overhaul of China's domestic and foreign policies following 2012 is strikingly similar to the series of policy initiatives undertaken by Vladimir Putin after he took power in 2000. Putin too initially followed a strongly pro-market, pro-business policy agenda but soon turned back toward a consistently statist policy. He encouraged the consolidation of state and private firms in the hands of a small number of giant state corporations that were to serve as "national champions." He seized the free-wheeling private oil company Yukos, arresting its head, and turning over its assets to the state oil company, Rosneft'. He tightened central control over regional governments (including by abolishing gubernatorial elections) and marginalized the federal parliament. Then, upon his return to the presidency in 2012, Putin implemented a set of repressive measures against non-government and opposition organizations. Putin also increased political control over the communications media. Both Putin and Xi enacted formal rules changes that allowed them to extend their tenure in office indefinitely. Much as Xi effectively annexed Hong Kong to China in 2020, so Putin annexed the Crimean peninsula to Russia in 2014. Both

leaders have adopted strongly anti-Western foreign policy postures aimed at minimizing dependence on foreign technology and markets.

These policies stand as the backdrop to the changes in the system for managing regional officials' careers, which, as we have argued, are consistent with the thesis that both leaders have moved to extend greater personal control over regional leaders.

These parallels raise broader questions than can be answered here. How likely is it, for example, that either the concentration of power in the hands of the top leader or the reliance on large state corporations to achieve economic goals will be effective in raising economic productivity and growth? To date, the models of economic development in both countries have resulted in extremely high levels of rent-seeking. The privileged position of large state corporations in both countries is conducive to cronyism and corruption (Ang 2020; Aslund 2019; Lardy 2019). Likewise, in both, the political insecurity of those who have amassed great wealth has led them to hide their assets overseas rather than to invest in their own countries (Zucman 2019).

The example of the late Soviet period stands as a stark reminder that centralization and personalization of power produce distinctive pathologies of governance. First, they incur high information losses as a result of censorship and the incentive of lower officials to report positive results upward. Second, if the top leader is not replaced at regular intervals, the regime faces the danger of stagnation and drift, as well as the accumulation of frustration on the part of lower-level leaders who are deprived of the opportunity to aspire to the top position. Finally, the regime sacrifices technological innovation and efficiency gains to dependence on state owned corporations for investment and growth. Because state owned enterprises are protected from competitive pressures, they stay profitable only thanks to their access to state-subsidized credits and state procurement orders. The state relies on them not only for political objectives such as maintaining employment and stability and extending the state's power overseas, but also for revenues for the regime's political interests. To the extent that the mechanisms for managing appointments of regional officials operate principally to meet the top leaders' political needs rather than to create the conditions for a more productive economy, the changes in cadre management patterns traced here will intensify the risks of stagnation in both countries. This risk may be magnified to the extent that regional officials fear taking initiative out of fear of arrest or dismissal (Yakovlev and Aisin 2019; Li and Manion 2019).

Notes

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2. One Chinese historian commented that Xi Jinping hoped to be “as strong as Putin when dealing with domestic and foreign affairs” and noted that they even have very similar personalities (Zhang Lifan, quoted in Li 2016, p. 12).
3. The personalization of power was neatly captured by Vyacheslav Volodin’s aperçu that “if there’s no Putin there’s no Russia.”
4. Elections were restored in the autumn 2012 after a period of seven years, when governors were appointed by the president.
5. To be sure, Russia has almost three times as many first-level units as China. First-order territorial jurisdictions in China therefore have far larger populations (the median province level territory in China has 38 million residents, while the median in Russia has 1.2 million). Because China’s political system is less centralized than Russia’s, notwithstanding the trend toward the tightening of central control under X Jinping, province-level governments have greater autonomy in implementing central-level policies (Remington 2019).
6. Russia used a formal system of assessment to judge the performance of governors until gubernatorial elections were restored in 2012, then modified it to determine which regions were to be eligible for federal budget transfers. China’s system is more elaborate and is described in more detail in (Rochlitz et al. 2015). It combines a number of economic, social and political indicators of performance. In our research for this article, we tested extensively for effects associated with a number of available indicators of economic and social performance, measuring performance as the ratio of change over the duration of an official’s term to change over the same period nationally. Because published statistical series vary slightly between the two countries, we could not use an identical set of indicators for Russia and China. Indicators we tested included, for Russia: Gross Regional Product and GRP per capita growth; mean income growth; value of investments; unemployment; share of transfers from the central government to the regional budget; poverty, suicide, and infant mortality rates; inequality, including the Gini index and the ratio of the top decile’s average income to the bottom. For China, we examined urban and rural mean household income growth, rural poverty, investment growth, and unemployment in addition to GRP and GRP per capita. The results were largely negligible. That is, almost no statistically significant relationship was found between an official’s career trajectory and any of the performance indicators. In a few cases, although worse performance was associated with a lower probability of downward mobility, better performance was as well (in Russia, lower suicide and infant mortality rates were weakly related to a lower chance of downward mobility, whereas higher economic growth appeared to raise it). For China, a higher GDP growth rate relative to the national average appeared to improve a party secretary’s likelihood of a promotion, but this was not the case for governors. For governors, in fact, a higher investment index was negatively associated with the chance of promotion. On the other hand, for both party secretaries and governors, we found that age and links to Xi Jinping were statistically significant predictors. For both countries, the results for economic and social performance indicators were unstable across specifications and rarely achieved statistical significance. Biographical indicators, on the other hand, were consistently strong co-variables. Our results are consistent with other reports and research showing that Xi Jinping has in fact substantially modified the CCP’s system for evaluating cadre performance, as he

has repeatedly demanded. In place of the practice over the previous two decades of giving high priority to economic growth and related targets, such as investment growth, Xi has demanded that cadres shift their focus to achieving high value-added growth and meeting environmental protection targets and balancing “hard” and “soft” goals. See, for example, (Wang 2018) and (CKGSB 2021). In Russia’s case, our results were consistent with the negative findings of Rochlitz et al. (2015) about the absence of any clear relationship between economic performance and governors’ mobility. For these reasons, and because there are no consistent, publicly reported indicators of the policy objectives associated with Xi Jinping’s new program, we chose to focus our attention on biographical and career patterns alone.

7. Note that recent research by Michel Wiebe casts significant doubt on earlier studies finding evidence for meritocratic promotion. Wiebe’s reanalysis of the data finds no evidence that prefecture-level officials were promoted based on achieving growth targets. See Wiebe (2020).
8. A case in point is Sergei Furgal, elected governor of Khabarovsk region in 2018. Furgal won by a wide margin, defeating a candidate from United Russia. However, a few weeks after Khabarovsk’s voters gave an insufficiently robust level of support to the constitutional amendments vote in June 2020, President Putin dismissed Furgal owing to “loss of confidence” and the procuracy charged him with organizing contract murders dating back to the early 2000s. Therefore, although gubernatorial elections were restored in 2012, the president demonstrated that he could overturn their results at will.
9. Note that for Russia, we have 310 observations for 304 governors. Governors Tolokonsky, Khloponin, and Merkushkin are counted twice because they occupied the posts of governors of two different regions during the period from 2000 to 2019. For the same reason, governor Kozhemyako was counted four times.
10. The final figures are: 89 regions in 2000–2005, 88 in 2006, 86 in 2007, 83 in 2008–2013, and 85 since 2014.
11. An example is Liu Cigui, who is just two years younger than Xi Jinping. Liu was appointed mayor of Longyan city in Fujian province in 2002 at the end of Xi Jinping’s tenure as governor of the province. Subsequently he was posted as division chief of a ministry in the central government before becoming governor, and later party secretary, of Hainan province. Meantime, he was made a member of the 18th Central Committee for Discipline Inspection in 2012 (regarded as a prestigious stepping stone to membership in the full party Central Committee) and then the 19th Central Committee in 2017. He may thus be viewed as a protégé of Xi.

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Appendix

Coding rules

The category of "regional promotion" was used for governors in any case when a governor was appointed as party secretary in the same or different region. Appointment to a senior position at the central level (e.g. ministries and leading small groups) was coded as a promotion. Officials were considered retired if after their resignation there was no information indicating that they were assigned to another position. Those who were appointed to a lower-ranking position were regarded as demoted. During the period under survey, three officials died while discharging their official functions in a region. Their career data were used in establishing the average age of appointment but were not taken into account in calculating the tenure and analyzing career movements.

Appointment to senior positions in the federal government (ministerial post or higher) or the presidential administration (department head or higher) or the State Duma and the Federation Council (deputy chair or higher) was considered a promotion. Honorific pension means an appointment to a post equivalent to the position of a Federation Council member adjusted for the age of the transferred governor. The category of demotion included governors appointed to less prestigious public positions after resignation. Such a position could be an assistant or deputy presidential envoy in a federal district, assistant to the head of the presidential administration, or a deputy minister. Governors who retired upon the expiration of their terms of office and engaged in business or public activities were coded as officials who completed their bureaucratic careers without problems. If a governor's resignation was accompanied by conflicts at the regional or federal level, including criminal investigations against his or her subordinates, or if a governor was fired due to "loss of confidence" but without a criminal case being initiated against him or her personally, such cases were assigned the category of "dismissals with problems." All criminal cases against governors were placed into a separate category, even if the cases were initiated after resignation. Another category included governors who left their position for natural causes (death) or who stayed in their position for less than one year. Data on this group of governors were taken into account during analysis of new appointments but were not included in the calculation of average tenure or age.