

The Quest for a Technocratic Utopia in Russian Subnational Governance

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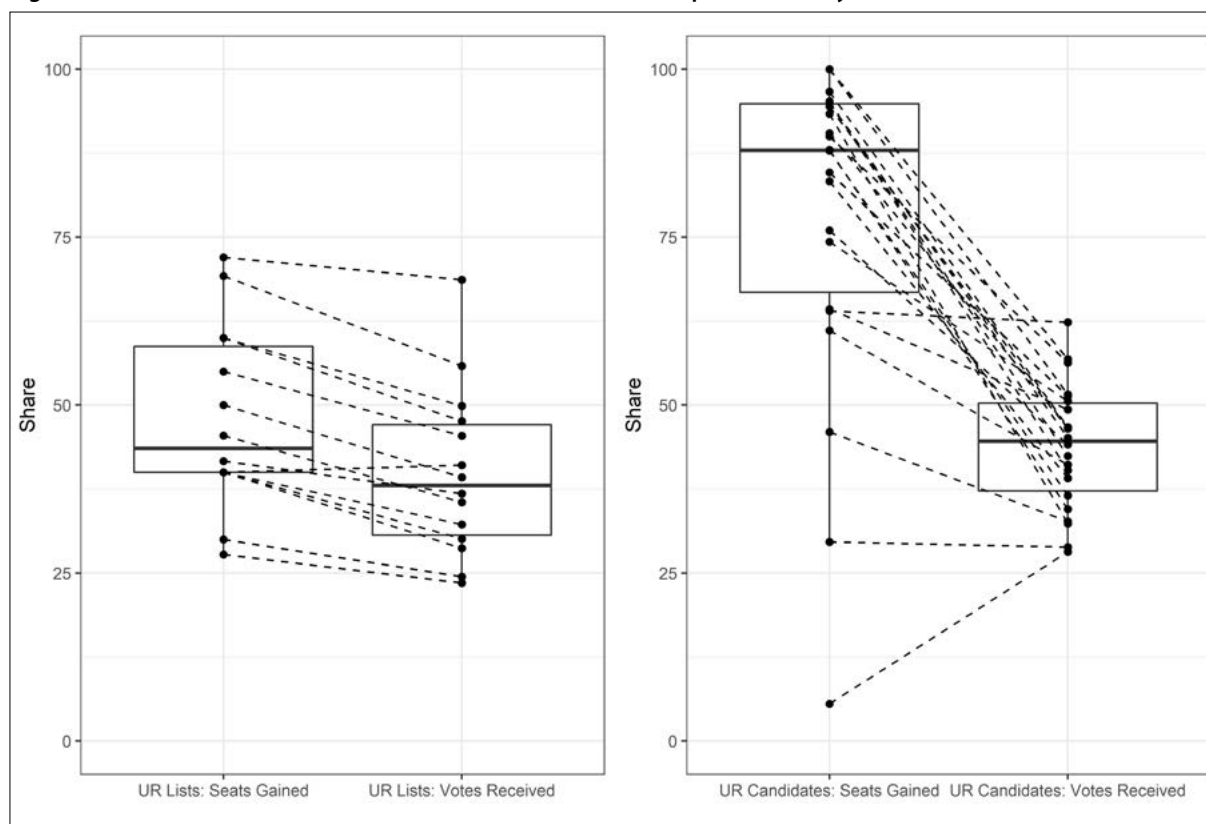
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Figure 7: Votes-to-Seats Conversion for United Russia in Municipal Electoral Systems

Source: Author's calculations based on data from the Central Election Commission of Russia

ANALYSIS

The Quest for a Technocratic Utopia in Russian Subnational Governance

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Abstract

Technocratic selection could help address two challenges faced by the Russian political regime: the need to prevent the opposition from mobilizing and gaining support through subnational competitively elected offices and the need to ensure popular legitimacy. What we see, though, is technocratic selection either being used for the wrong offices or being applied selectively, rendering it useless or even harmful.

Technocratic Politics, Politics and Regime Legitimacy

September was marked by two seemingly unconnected events. On the “single election day,” which this year went on for several days due to the extended voting period, most Russian regions voted in regional and municipal-level elections. Almost simultaneously, in

Solnechnogorsk (Moscow oblast’), the final round of the “Leaders of Russia” competition, an annual contest to determine the most promising public and private managers, took place. While different in scope and effect, those two events illustrate the use and limits of the technocratic approach to leadership at the subnational level in Russia.

Technocracy can be loosely defined as rule by experts who are unelected and unaccountable to voters. In the Russian context, the term is typically used to describe public officials and bureaucrats alike, as long as they were selected for their expertise in a particular sphere and not for their political skills or ability to gain popular support. For public office holders, such as governors and mayors, a shift to technocratic selection is driven by two considerations. First, replacing political competence with technocratic experience as the criterion for picking candidates is meant to bring in effective managers. Second, restricting competition during elections is intended to minimize the public accountability of elected politicians. Replacing popular elections with appointments is, in a way, an extreme example of the same trend. For bureaucrats, the technocratic approach involves an attempt to introduce a system of pure merit-based selection to fill key positions.

The technocratization of selection for both groups is compatible with two general goals of the federal authorities. The first is to minimize the political space available at the subnational level, where the opposition could mobilize and where challengers to the existing regime could appear. After all, it was through subnational offices that Mexico's hegemonic regime was eroded, as the opposition parties gained both recognition and the political and administrative experience to challenge the incumbent party. The second is to enhance regime legitimacy through effective governance, which explains the need for competent individuals in both higher public offices and bureaucratic positions.

Elements of Technocratic Selection for Elected Offices

In mid-September, many Russian voters cast their ballots in various elections—including 18 gubernatorial races, 11 regional legislative elections, city council elections in 22 regional capitals, and municipal executive elections in 5 cities. With the exception of a few races at the city council level, the results of the elections were not surprising. In most cases, United Russia maintained its legislative majority. Most importantly, all the incumbent governors held onto their seats—unlike in several of the 2018 contests. The gubernatorial races best illustrate how technocratic principles are introduced into the selection process of even popularly elected political offices.

The first element of technocratic selection that can be seen here is the set of criteria used to select the candidate who will be backed by the regime. In 2020, 9 of the 18 gubernatorial elections featured active governors who were running as incumbents. Many of them had no prior electoral experience or connection to the region they were sent to govern. Selected based on their expertise and experience working in regional or federal

executive agencies, these individuals exemplify technocratic candidates.

The second element of technocratic selection for public offices is reflected in the efforts taken to minimize political competition and reduce the unpredictability of the electoral outcome. As a result, the voters have minimal effect on the elected officials, who instead depend mostly on support from elites. Lack of accountability to voters is one of the traits of technocracy. Here, the authorities used a series of strategies to increase their control over the elections. On top of existing candidate registration requirements, pandemic-related innovations (such as new forms of voting) were widely evaluated by experts as a major factor in the outcome. As noted by experts from the Golos voter rights organization, these elections were held under the worst electoral regulations in the past 25 years (Golos 2020).

Technocratic selection of public officials has important shortcomings. First, these offices are inherently political—they involve dealing with uncertainty and conflicting interests. Eliminating politics from selection results in officials who are unprepared and unqualified to face some of the key challenges they encounter.

Second, technocrats often have lower capacity when it comes to electoral mobilization. Research suggests that political leaders without electoral experience in a given locality will be less effective at mobilizing voters during federal elections because they do not control local political machines (Reuter 2013; Reuter et al. 2016). Additionally, outside technocrats are often in conflict with local elites, further impeding their ability to procure the required electoral results and ensure the social and political stability valued by the federal center. Finally, technocratic appointees at all levels often seem to lack the ability to build relationships with citizens. When Bashkortostan's president Khabirov says in an interview that he is “a man of the system” or, facing protesters on the Kushtau mountain in summer 2020, insists on protecting a municipal official from public anger because the latter is “one of our own,” he behaves as a technocrat and provokes hostility from citizens.

Besides shortcomings related to political management, technocratic selection for political positions has effects on governance. To date, there are no conclusive evaluations of the comparative efficiency of “politically competent” and “technocratic” public officials, but there is some suggestive evidence. A study by the “Petersburg Politics” (Peterburgskaia Politika) Fund shows that, as of 2019, socio-economic stability had declined in a large proportion of those regions that had new “technocratic” governors (Bocharova 2019). The main factor that works against technocrats is that their bureaucratic experience and the formal criteria on which they are selected are limited and do not reflect

the types of issues they have to deal with in a municipal or regional public office.

Technocracy in Bureaucratic Appointments

Though it does not cover the entire regional bureaucracy, “Leaders of Russia” is an attempt to create a nationwide system of purely technocratic recruitment and promotion for leadership positions, mostly oriented toward public administration. The contest has been held annually for the past three years. Personally backed by Putin and part of his most recent electoral campaign, the project states its mission as promoting social mobility and creating a reserve of cadres for the country.

The competition selects winners based on objective, measurable criteria: participants take tests in social science, demonstrate familiarity with Russian geography and an ability to interpret tables and graphs, and display their problem-solving skills and initiative. The winners of previous rounds have been appointed to various positions within the municipal, regional, and federal authorities, as well as in private companies. The organizers claim that the contest is a tool of social mobility, boasting that 200 finalists have been appointed to managerial positions in the three years that the competition has been running.

When you look at the appointments, however, it appears that these individuals were already qualified for and moving toward a given position. For example, Petr Vaghin became vice mayor of Tyumen on October 12, 2020—but he had already spent 25 years building a career in the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) of Tyumen oblast. After winning the contest in 2019, he received a one-year appointment as a deputy head of MVD in the Republic of North Ossetia before returning to his home region and taking on the vice-mayoral position. Another experience—that of Ignat Petukhov—seems to contrast with Vaghin’s in the sense that Petukhov enjoyed incredibly rapid advancement at a young age, but even then, winning “Leaders of Russia” did not suddenly elevate him. Petukhov started his career at 22 in the Audit Chamber (Schetnaia Palata) of Sverdlovsk oblast and became a project manager in the Alabuga special economic zone in Tatarstan at 24. At 25, after

reaching the finals of “Leaders of Russia,” he became the head of the “Corporation of Development” agency of Orenburg oblast, having been personally invited to take the position by the regional governor. In both cases, the contest seems to have helped people who already had great career prospects to gain greater visibility. As the participants note in their interviews, participating in the competition is a good opportunity to meet equally ambitious and successful people and make useful connections: the finalists’ high-ranking mentors are the most obvious examples of such connections, but all participants who make it to the face-to-face rounds get to meet prominent politicians, bureaucrats, and businessmen. Despite being positioned as a merit-based opportunity, the contest assimilates itself into the system of Russian bureaucracy as a source of personal connections.

When evaluating the limited impact of the contest on cadre selection and promotion within the Russian subnational administration, it is important to remember what kind of a system the winners of “Leaders of Russia” are facing. Accommodating hundreds of meritocratically selected individuals every year cuts against the logic of the spoils system that governs most bureaucratic leadership appointments and promotions (Lapuente and Nisotskaya 2009).

Conclusion

While very disparate, the two examples brought up at the beginning of this article illustrate the main problems of the technocratic approach to governance in the Russian regions. In the first case, we see the shortcomings of technocratic selection to inherently political offices: the set of skills that the selected individuals have is ill-suited for managing conflicting interests, dealing with uncertainty, and building a rapport with citizens. In the second case, technocratic selection makes perfect sense—but in a system predominantly built on spoils, it often turns into just another opportunity to make useful connections. It seems that technocratic solutions to the regime’s problems bring additional challenges or fall short of the promised success due to the restricted application of meritocratic principles.

About the Author

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ANALYSIS

Regional Public Finance in Russia in 2012–2019

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Abstract

Regional public finance in Russia has undergone some important transformations since 2012. Although the structure of revenues remained relatively stable between 2012 and 2019, the structure of expenditures changed, due in part to new unfunded mandates in education and healthcare, as well as to the increased use of extrabudgetary funds. Moreover, the federal government revised its transfer policy to make it less generous, forcing several regions to significantly increase their public debt or reduce social spending. The transparency of the intergovernmental fiscal system also declined during this period as budget credits and politically motivated federal transfers (including new forms of discretionary unconditional grants and “other transfers”) became widespread.

Major Public Finance Trends in Russian Regions (2012–2019)

Regional expenditure priorities, federal transfer policies, and subnational debt management in Russia have changed considerably since the start of Putin's third term in 2012. However, the composition of regional revenues (excluding transfers) has been relatively stable over this period. This analysis will summarize major trends in regional government revenues, expenditures, and debt, as well as intergovernmental fiscal transfers that regions receive from the federal government. Additionally, I will briefly discuss the state of public finance in regions that elected their governors in 2020.

Figure 1 shows the evolution of nominal revenues and expenditures of consolidated regional budgets since 2012. A consolidated regional budget in Russia is calculated as the sum of the regional budget and corresponding local budgets, including the budgets of cities, city districts, municipal raions, and urban and rural settlements. One clear tendency is that regional expenditures usually increase after presidential elections. They grew steadily in 2012–2014 and 2018–2019. The crisis of 2014–2015, meanwhile, prevented regional governments from keeping up this pace. In fact, the real expenditure of consolidated regional budgets (adjusted for inflation) declined in both crisis years.