Boyars and Bureaucrats: Understanding the Dismissal of Subnational Executives in Russia (2016-2022)

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Abstract of Thesis

Under Vladimir Putin's leadership, the structure of Russian federalism has undergone numerous changes. Despite Russia's federal structure, Putin has been able to establish a hierarchical system of regional governance that has given him extensive control over subnational executives. In the decade preceding the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Kremlin used this to transform the gubernatorial corps from a collection of semi-independent regional political bosses to a disciplined cadre of career bureaucrats. This was accomplished thanks to an unprecedented number of gubernatorial resignations between 2016 and 2022. This thesis seeks to explain this turnover using an original dataset of 67 dismissals in 82 regions. I argue that the dismissals represent two separate processes: professionalization and centralization. The former is applied in regions that are already under the Kremlin's effective control and is based on the performance of governors. Through the latter process, the Kremlin seeks to remove governors with independent sources of authority, regardless of their performance in office. These decisions, instead, are based on changes in the balance of power between the center and the region in question.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The structure of center-regional relations is a key pillar of the Russian regime's stability. The institutions, rules, and informal agreements governing the Kremlin's relationship with regional governors have allowed it to prosecute the war in Ukraine for four years without facing any major internal threats to its power (Busygina and Filippov 2024). Despite reinstating gubernatorial elections in 2012, the Kremlin exercises effective control over virtually all regional heads. This is in large part due to the President's authority to fire governors and make temporary appointments. These appointments are usually made a few months before elections, allowing the incumbent to use regional resources to guarantee victory (Gaivoronsky and Balandin 2022, 147). This has allowed the Kremlin to establish a degree of centralized control over Russia's federal subjects not seen since the Soviet period (Gaivoronsky and Balandin 2022; Busygina and Filippov 2024). Nonetheless, this control is limited by the size of Russia and the idiosyncrasies of many of its regions. Thus, despite increasing centralization, certain power-sharing arrangements have proved indispensable to the task of governing the country.

Several factors complicate the study of gubernatorial appointments and dismissals in Russia. One problem is the opacity of the Kremlin's decisions. Nearly all gubernatorial dismissals are presented as voluntary resignations. If reasons for the dismissal are given, they tend to be vague or sanitized, masking the real underlying conflicts that led to them. Journalists, scholars, and other observers are obliged to determine the genuine causes by analyzing changes in the political context, rifts or realignments within patronage networks, and other signals.

One useful approach is to analyze the subsequent career trajectories of dismissed governors. Promotions to high-level federal positions often signal the Kremlin's satisfaction with a governor's performance (Reuter and Robertson 2012). However, this does not apply in all cases. In many instances, promotions are better understood as severance packages for influential incumbents whom the Kremlin wishes to push into early retirement. The most common destination in such cases is the Federation Council, which provides dismissed governors with prestige and senatorial immunity from prosecution while neutralizing them as political actors. That apparent promotions can signify two contradictory motivations illustrates a major obstacle to the study of gubernatorial dismissals.

This is the assumption that the Kremlin uses a single standard for determining its actions toward all governors, which rests on the dubious idea that Russian federalism is largely devoid of substance (Golosov 2018). Doubtless, the Kremlin has made efforts to standardize its cadre policies, issuing periodic rubrics and criteria for assessing gubernatorial performance. On top of this, there exist certain informal expectations related to electoral mobilization and political loyalty that seem to apply across the board. The study of official and unofficial performance metrics is critical to understanding gubernatorial appointments. However, it is important to bear in mind that the strict enforcement of metrics is not always possible. The Kremlin's ability to do so is contingent on it exercising sufficient political control over a region to be able to dismiss its governor at will.

A common approach in scholarship is to analyze the issue from the perspective of principal-agent theory (Klimovich 2024). However, principal-agent theory applies to

situations where rulers delegate some of their authority to intermediaries whom they expect to execute policy directives (Abbott et al. 2020). Indeed, the principal-agent approach is useful for understanding the Kremlin's relationship with many, if not most, governors. Nonetheless, a declining but significant number of governors cannot be accurately understood as agents of the Kremlin. These governors do not derive their authority from the center but from regional bases of power. These allow them to remain in power without active support from the Kremlin. As a result, they enjoy a degree of leverage in negotiations with the center, which shields them from dismissal. Relations with such governors are better understood as compromise agreements between two independent, albeit unequal, parties. Studies that recognize the independent power of some governors, however, often treat these as outliers within the otherwise stable "vertical of power" (Busygina 2024). Furthermore, within these outlier cases, disproportionate attention is given to strongman leaders in ethnic republics such as Chechnya's Ramzan Kadyrov and Tatarstan's Rustam Minnikhanov. As will be discussed below, ethnic leaders possess a major advantage in negotiations with the Kremlin. However, there are also strong political bosses and popular opposition politicians in non-ethnic regions with whom the Kremlin has been obliged to compromise.

This relates to another obstacle, which is the fact that center-regional relations in Russia exhibit a great deal of variation not just across space but also over time. In addition to the overall shift in the federal balance of power, the Putin era has seen several shifts in the legal procedure for the appointment and dismissal of governors, which can be divided into four periods. During his first term between 2000 and 2004, when the power and independence of governors were at their apex, Putin's primary goal was

establishing the federal legal framework and administrative capacity necessary for undertaking meaningful centralization. At this stage, it made little sense to speak of benchmarks or standards for regional appointees. Rather, relations with all but the weakest regions were governed by formal and informal agreements and compromises. In exchange for remaining loyal and delivering election results for the regime, most governors were allowed to oversee their domains under conditions of relative autonomy. By 2004, the regime had curbed most of the forces of entropy and established the state capacity needed for a firmer posture in relations with governors. This allowed it to shift to a more active policy of centralization, which began with the elimination of direct gubernatorial elections. In this period, the so-called vertical of power, Putin's hierarchical model of federal governance based on a clear chain of command and the delineation of responsibilities, began to take form. This success was made possible by the restoration of state capacity, impressive economic growth, and improvement in living standards that characterized Putin's first two terms. After the cancellation of direct gubernatorial elections in 2004, the Kremlin pursued a more intensive strategy of establishing political control on a regional level. By late 2011, domestic political pressures came to a boiling point as major protests broke out against election fraud in the recent State Duma elections. As a result, the Kremlin was forced to increase its attention to the maintenance of political legitimacy by reinstating regional elections in 2012. These major turning points make it harder to derive generalizable insights from long-range studies (Turovsky and Luizidis 2022, 170).

These obstacles notwithstanding, the question of why and when the Kremlin decides to dismiss incumbent governors requires an answer. Whatever the nature of

Russian federalism, it has proved itself to be a formidable and versatile tool. It has allowed the Putin regime to remain in power for over a quarter of a decade and achieved ever greater control over the Russian political system, economy, and society. It has also enabled the regime to govern and even expand the largest territorial expanse on the planet, weathering numerous political and economic crises, and prosecute the most destructive European war since 1945 without loosening its grip on power. This question is also of great value to theoretical understandings of the role of federal institutions in electoral authoritarian regimes. Specifically, the Russian case demonstrates how federalism can be substantively weakened while remaining procedurally intact.

This thesis will thus focus on the period immediately preceding the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. To avoid some of the obstacles described above, I have limited my analysis to the period beginning with the appointment of Sergey Kiriyenko as head of the Presidential Administration in October 2016. Kiriyenko has received significant latitude from the Kremlin to reshape Russian federalism fully and has done so in a systematic manner. His stated goal has been the "professionalization" and "standardization" of the Russian gubernatorial corps, which at the start of his tenure was becoming increasingly unpopular among the public. This amounts to the replacement of the old guard with young technocrats and the establishment of detailed performance metrics for the latter. As a result, between October 2016 and February 2022, 67 governors were removed from office across 60 of the 82 federal subjects studied.[1]

This thesis seeks to explain this unprecedented turnover by offering a theoretical framework for understanding the dismissal of subnational executives. I argue that the

[1] The analysis excludes the three cities with the status of federal subjects, Moscow, Saint Petersburg, and Sevastopol.

dismissals are explained by two distinct objectives, which help account for the outlier cases. These objectives are centralization and professionalization. The first is a political process that has involved an ongoing struggle between the Kremlin and regional elites to shift the balance of power in favor of the center. The second is a question of policy, administration, and cadre development, which can only exist in regions where political processes have been resolved in the center's favor. Therefore, before attempting to identify the criteria by which the Kremlin decides to dismiss governors, it is necessary to determine what the political status of a region is.

The Kremlin's choice of strategy depends on the governor's source of authority. Based on the latter, I divide governors into two broad conceptual categories: boyars, who derive their authority from the region they govern, and bureaucrats, who derive their authority from their connections to federal institutions and patronage networks. The latter are assessed according to the Kremlin's official and unofficial performance metrics. Relations with these governors follow the logic of principal-agent relations. They can be dismissed from office at will if the Kremlin is unsatisfied with their performance or determines that they cannot win reelection. They may also be transferred to other regions when necessary or promoted to high-level federal executive positions as a reward for good service. The Kremlin's relations with governors of the first type, on the other hand, are governed by mutual understandings, compromises, and arrangements that have evolved over years or decades. Their regional bases of power shield them from at-will dismissal. As a result, the Kremlin cannot enforce its compliance with standard metrics. The imperative of centralization, however, motivates the Kremlin to remove such incumbents and replace them with bureaucrats when the opportunity arises. In most

cases, this requires a combination of positive incentives for voluntary resignation and threats of repression for refusal. The Kremlin makes these decisions on the basis of a political calculation weighing the risks of dismissal, a function of the strength of the incumbent's independent power bases, against the rewards, a function of the region's significance and the costs of tolerating autonomy.

Another way of formulating the distinction between boyars and bureaucrats is to think of the former as the Kremlin's partners in an elite coalition who have the ability to threaten the regime's stability and the latter as agents whose power is based on the existence of a durable regime that can manage its coalition partners. It is important to note that the replacement of boyars with bureaucrats does not mean that Putin can govern without a coalition. It is simply reducing the number of regional elites to whom it is accountable. However, this has only strengthened federal political and business elites whose continued support is necessary for the regime's survival.

I classify all governors with regional bases of power as boyars, regardless of the source of this power. Thus, the category includes ethnic leaders, old guard political bosses, regional business elites, and popular opposition politicians. The type and strength of each governor's power affect the Kremlin's political calculus, but do not alter the overall goal of replacing these figures with bureaucrats. In sum, my argument is that the Kremlin will always prefer to oust boyars when it has the ability to do so. To test this, I constructed an original dataset on 148 governors in 82 federal subjects who served between October 2016 and February 2022. Using biographical data, I divided these incumbents into categories based on their connections to the federal center and regional sources of power, identifying 36 boyars who were in office at the beginning of the period

of study. I further categorized these incumbents based on the type of alternative power base. Finally, I conducted process-tracing on cases within each category, identifying factors conducive to dismissal, and assessed the level of protection offered by each type of power base.

The remainder of this study proceeds as follows. Chapter 2 reviews the literature on electoral authoritarianism, authoritarian federalism, and gubernatorial appointments in Russia. Chapter 3 presents my theoretical model for understanding gubernatorial dismissals. Chapter 4 provides an overview of the evolution of center-regional relations under Putin to identify the political imperatives shaping the regime's policies in the period under study. Chapter 5 contains the case studies and conclusions related to each category of boyar. Chapter 6 concludes with a summary of my findings and a comparison of the strength of the various sources of independent authority.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The analysis of gubernatorial dismissals in Russia touches upon several questions of critical importance to understanding the operation of electoral authoritarian regimes. Why do authoritarian rulers allow limits to their power in the form of elections and federal institutions? Why do electoral authoritarian regimes continue to hold elections even in the apparent absence of meaningful competition? Do federal institutions help or hinder the functioning of electoral autocracies? To answer these questions, it is useful to outline in broad terms what the primary challenges are to durable authoritarian rule, and the ways in which democratic and federal institutions mitigate them. This will allow us to better contextualize the drastic reforms to center-regional relations made during Putin's quarter-century tenure as president.

Gandhi (2008) argues that the primary challenge of authoritarian regimes is securing the compliance and cooperation of their subjects. These can also be understood as the right to rule, or political legitimacy, and the ability to rule, or competent administration. From the point of view of the regime's economic interests, this translates to the acquisition of sources of rent and the efficient extraction of rent from these sources. The relative importance of these goals depends on the political context. If the regime faces only weak political opposition, it does not need to devote resources to securing compliance and can focus its energy elsewhere. However, when political opposition threatens the stability of the regime, it may be forced to make compromises to retain its legitimacy. Compromises can backfire if they give the appearance of weakness, encouraging the opposition to apply more pressure. To avoid this, authoritarian regimes use nominally democratic institutions such as legislatures and controlled opposition

parties to channel grievances and formalize concessions, minimizing the potential for destabilization that can be caused by extra-constitutional pressure campaigns (Gandhi 2008). This dynamic is evident in the Russian case. In his first two terms as president, Putin did not face major challenges from the opposition. This allowed him to focus on strengthening the levers of state power, canceling direct gubernatorial elections, and curbing the independence of strong regional leaders. However, by 2011, large-scale protests threatened to undermine his legitimacy. The ensuing reinstatement of gubernatorial elections in 2012 sought to protect the regime's legitimacy and facilitate political and social stability (Blakkisrud 2015).

A major obstacle to securing both compliance and cooperation is the limited availability of information in authoritarian regimes. The absence of competitive elections makes it difficult to accurately assess public approval for officials and policies based on voting patterns. Limits on the freedom of the press and public criticism of the government further exacerbate this issue. Even within regimes, self-censorship can cause administrators to hide crucial information from leaders (Reuter and Robertson 2012, 1025). For these reasons, the regime may have a flawed assessment of its level of political legitimacy among its citizens, leading to difficulties in maintaining the balance of control and concession it needs to stay in power.

The information problem can undermine the very foundations of authoritarian governance (Svolik 2012). In addition to maintaining sufficient legitimacy in the eyes of citizens, authoritarian regimes must also ensure compliance from elites through power-sharing arrangements between members of elite coalitions. These arrangements are held together by the distribution of spoils and opportunities for rent extraction from the ruler

to elites in exchange for their loyalty. To discourage rulers from reneging, elites must be able to present a credible threat of rebellion. However, the opacity of authoritarian governance may cause elites to mistakenly believe that the ruler is withholding spoils and lead them to rebel. To avoid this, rulers can create institutions that increase transparency. Protection from unnecessary rebellions justifies the limits these institutions may place on the regime (Boix and Svolik, 2013). This problem was a key preoccupation of Putin's first term as president, much of which was spent institutionalizing and standardizing the myriad informal relationships and understandings that existed between the Kremlin and strong regional political bosses (Sharafutdinova 2010)

Institutions can also alleviate the negative effects of authoritarianism on the economy as a whole, thus increasing the total availability of spoils. Blattman, Gehlbach, and Yu (2026) demonstrate that whereas personalist autocracies suffer from endemic economic problems due to their structure, institutionalized autocracies do not lag behind democracies in terms of economic performance. Competent administration can also be a crucial source of legitimacy for authoritarian regimes. Guriev and Treisman (2020) write that the Russian regime's durability is a result of its ability to convince citizens of its competence. They argue that the actual level of competence is secondary to the public perception of it, which is why they call this type of regime an "informational autocracy". The Kremlin's professionalization of the gubernatorial corps is thus likely motivated as much by the need to increase the regime's legitimacy as by the desire to strengthen administrative control.

The study of center-regional relations in Russia is also relevant to the broader discussion on non-democratic federalism. Though a higher degree of federalism is

generally associated with democracies, Busygina and Filippov (2023) argue that these institutions can be useful tools for authoritarian regimes. Specifically, these institutions allow them to maintain stability, prevent the rise of alternative nationwide coalitions capable of challenging the ruling coalition, and insulate regimes from public criticism by creating an intermediate layer of authority.

The most important figures in this structure are subnational executives. For the center to manage these officials, it must be able to gather the information necessary for assessing their intentions and loyalty (Reuter and Robertson 2012, 1024). Relations in systems of indirect rule, however, are characterized by asymmetrical access to information. Specifically, principals cannot directly observe the agent's actions and intentions. This gives rise to one of the most important challenges of authoritarian federalism, the loyalty-competence or competence-control trade-off. The competence of appointees can also increase their ability to coordinate plots against the center. Leaders may therefore prioritize loyalty over competence in subnational appointments. (Egorov and Sonin 2011).

Even in the absence of plots, information on the behavior of agents is necessary for measuring performance. One solution to this is to institute regional elections that give signals to the center on whether to reward or punish appointees. However, the information-gathering utility of elections is limited by another imperative of electoral autocrats: demonstrating strength to elite coalition partners. Weak performance in elections may prompt members of the elite to defect from elite coalitions. As a result, regimes are obliged to engage in electoral mobilization and fraud. This requires the recruitment of governors who can command strong political machines. However, the

ability to engage in electoral mobilization for federal elections also allows them to ensure their own reelection on the regional level. Political machines can also give them significant autonomy and leverage against the center. Furthermore, they can undermine effective governance, harming the long-term stability of electoral authoritarian regimes (Reuter and Robertson 2012). In principle, the elimination of direct gubernatorial elections can enable regimes to appoint governors who can engage in electoral mobilization for federal elections without the risk of creating independent power bases. However, such moves can backfire by undermining the regime's legitimacy (Blakkisrud 2015).

I have outlined the general considerations that authoritarian leaders must make when designing optimal institutional frameworks for center-regional relations. Institutions must be transparent enough to facilitate the peaceful distribution of spoils without undercutting the ability to extract spoils. Regional elections must be competitive enough to generate legitimacy without threatening the stability of elite coalitions. Governors must have strong enough political machines to deliver electoral results but not strong enough to establish autonomy. Administrators must be competent enough to execute directives but not ambitious enough to sabotage their principal.

With these in mind, we may turn to an overview of how scholars have approached the question of gubernatorial appointments and removals. Though there are many commonalities across the literature, the conclusions scholars draw on these questions depend on the method of analysis, the period studied, and what is understood to be the nature of Russian federalism and Russian elections. This is because it can be difficult to determine which aspects of Russia's federal structure are genuine and which are purely

formal. Furthermore, both the informal and formal mechanisms governing center-regional relations in Russia have undergone numerous changes in recent years. This confusion is made possible by the numerous tools that the center can use to exert influence on regional governments beyond its constitutional prerogatives.

The same problem also applies to the study of regional elections. The elimination and subsequent reinstatement of gubernatorial elections were key developments in the history of center-regional relations. However, scholars disagree on the nature and purpose of Russian elections, both on a federal and regional level. Some argue that both Russian federalism and regional elections lack substance due to the center's extensive control over political processes (Golosov 2018). Others find that voter preferences affect both the results of elections as well as the government's pre-election behavior (Gorokhovskaia 2017).

Scholars have approached the relationship between the Kremlin and Russian governors through two main lenses. In the early years of Putin's presidency, scholars tended to see governors as junior partners in elite coalitions, whose relations with the center were structured by informal compromises and agreements. In this view, the removal of governors is not primarily a function of the Kremlin's desire but rather of the political balance of power (Sharafutdinova 2010). The elimination of gubernatorial elections in favor of universal appointments in 2005 weakened the ability of governors to resist dismissal. This has led more scholars to adopt the principal-agent lens, treating governors as functionaries whose task is to implement central directives (Klimovich 2024). This approach sees Russia's federal structure as a "vertical of power", wherein only a select few governors can exercise any degree of independence (Busygina 2024). A

slightly modified approach involves a more granular examination of the upper stratum of this vertical, focusing on the numerous patron-client relationships between federal elites and governors (Gaivoronsky and Balandin 2022).

One's understanding of the nature of governors shapes one's expectations for the kind of tools the Kremlin will employ against them. If governors are members of the elite coalition, then we should expect the regime to either coopt them or repress them (Svolik 2012). On the other hand, if governors are administrators whose influence and power are derived exclusively from their office, then the Kremlin should be expected to treat them as employees, dismissing, demoting, or promoting them. Within both approaches, there are also disagreements on the role of Russian governors. Identifying the most important factors in the Kremlin's assessment of gubernatorial performance is the key to understanding why and when it chooses to remove incumbents.

Based on a statistical analysis of gubernatorial reappointment, Reuter and Robertson (2012) argue that the primary role of Russian governors is electoral mobilization, with good public policy and economic development taking on secondary importance. However, they acknowledge that the Kremlin's emphasis depends on the context. The relative importance given to loyalty and electoral mobilization is likely to be strongest during national elections. When elections are not at the top of the regime's agenda, competence is likely to increase in importance. (Reuter and Robertson 2012, 1026). Though this study analyzed the period of 2005-2010 when all governors were appointed, subsequent studies suggest that electoral mobilization remains the regime's main priority (Reuter and Turovsky 2021).

Nonetheless, it is important to distinguish between the various periods of center-regional relations since the system of appointments reduces the need for governors to maintain the support of the local population. On the municipal level, Beazer and Reuter (2022) find evidence that appointed mayors are more likely to prioritize relations with the Kremlin at the expense of the local population compared to elected mayors. This incentivizes them to focus on delivering votes in national elections. As a result, local public service provision is undermined (Beazer and Reuter 2022).

On the other hand, there is evidence that governors and regional FSB heads in regions with good economic performance remain in office longer (Yakovlev and Aysin, 2019). Similarly, Turovsky and Luizidis (2022) find that socio-economic criteria play a larger role in gubernatorial resignations than commonly thought and find little support for political explanations such as electoral mobilization for the regime.

At the same time, it is difficult to disentangle political and economic motivations since poor economic administration can have adverse effects on regime stability. For instance, Clardie (2022) finds that between 2007 and 2010, the most important predictor of regional protests was poor regional governance. Although most such protests remain regional affairs, simultaneous protests across a sufficient number of regions can easily transform into nationwide movements.

Even works that test the application of certain criteria across all regions acknowledge that not all underperforming incumbents will be treated similarly. The regime faces practical constraints to its control over regional governors stemming from Russia's vast territory (Busygina 2024). The dismissal of governors can be highly destabilizing in cases where the central government lacks requisite control over a region.

Thus, when facing particularly strong regional leaders, removal may not be an option (Reuter and Robertson 2012, 1030). On the municipal level, there is evidence that a mayor's popularity can shield them from arrest if the regime fears popular backlash (Buckley et al. 2022). Another challenge stems from the need to appoint a successor once a governor is ousted. Even if the problem of popular backlash is solved, resistance from an influential and cohesive regional elite may prevent the Kremlin from designating a satisfactory replacement (Garifullina, Kazantcev, and Yakovlev 2020).

Some scholars have attempted to reconcile the Kremlin's differential treatment of governors by constructing typologies. Klimovich (2024) offers a typology based on two criteria: whether the governor's goals are aligned with the Kremlin's (approved vs. disapproved candidates), and whether the governor has preexisting ties to the region (insider or outsider). The study finds that the Kremlin's approach to approved governors depends on their ties to the region. When the Kremlin appoints outsiders, it must take measures to legitimize them in the eyes of regional elites and voters. In dealing with governors with preexisting regional ties, the Kremlin must instead focus on coopting incumbents. Candidates who defeat Kremlin candidates through elections, or disapproved insiders, face repression. Other scholars have observed that cooptation may also be applied to popular opposition candidates before elections, allowing the regime to avoid the risks inherent in repression. If the Kremlin is able to identify such candidates in time, it may choose to preemptively coopt them, offering high-level federal positions to entice them to remove themselves from contention (Blakkisrud 2015, 111).

According to Klimovich (2024), approved outsiders offer the optimal solution for the competence-control dilemma as their limited ties to the regions they govern prevent

them from establishing alternative bases of support. If governors threaten to establish such ties, the Kremlin may rotate them to other regions (Reuter and Robertson 2012, 1031). The need to prevent the establishment of regional power bases can explain the Kremlin's shift to a more professionalized gubernatorial corps. As a result of this shift, the turnover rate of governors increased dramatically, and the typical appointee is more likely to be a regional outsider (Remington et al. 2022). Furthermore, governors have increasingly been integrated into federal patronage networks and career ladders (Gaivoronsky and Balandin 2022). Nonetheless, outside appointees remain vulnerable to electoral challenges. Despite the Kremlin's high degree of control over elections, popular opposition candidates have managed to secure breakthrough victories in several regions. This was the case in the 2018 regional elections, in which the Kremlin lost control of Khabarovsk Krai, the Republic of Khakassia, and Vladimir Oblast, in part due to the unpopular pension reforms passed that year, which raised the retirement age.

Chapter 3: Theory

To engage in the systematic analysis of gubernatorial dismissals requires the assumption that there exists a set of criteria that the regime uses to assess the performance of governors. However, as we have seen, there is disagreement among scholars as to which criteria are most important. The most plausible explanation for this is that the criteria for unseating governors vary over time and across space. To account for this variation, it is necessary to establish what the regime's overarching goals are.

At the most basic level, a state must claim and enforce a monopoly on the legitimate use of physical force in a given territory (Weber 1978, 54). In other words, the regime must have political legitimacy and political control. In the context of center-regional relations in Russia, political legitimacy is the Kremlin's right to govern a region without facing rebellion from regional elites or citizens. Given that it is at present impossible for the regime to eliminate Russia's federal constitution, this right cannot be explicitly claimed. The reinstatement of gubernatorial elections involves the acknowledgment that citizens are the ultimate arbiters of a governor's performance. Directly intervening to oust governors can therefore be perceived as a violation of this commitment if it is done frequently. Appointment, in contrast, is the president's constitutional prerogative in the case of a vacancy. Consequently, cadre changes require the Kremlin first to use informal channels to encourage or pressure governors into resigning. Thus, maintaining political control without diminishing political legitimacy requires the Kremlin to exercise enough informal influence over appointees to be able to secure the resignation of governors at will and guarantee electoral victory for its preferred candidates. In addition to the right to govern, the Kremlin must also have the ability to

govern, which requires administrative control of a region. Administrative control is the Kremlin's ability to select and ensure the execution of policies that are the responsibility of regional government (as opposed to those of regional branches of federal institutions). This, in turn, requires the ability to select competent officials and ensure their continued execution of central directives. In other words, this is the ability to assess the performance of governors using systematic criteria and to correct deficiencies. This also requires maintaining the loyalty of governors to prevent them from threatening the Kremlin's right to govern.

Abbot et al. (2020) provide a useful framework for understanding indirect rule based on two variables: the initial source of authority and the ultimate site of authority. When initiating indirect governance, the center can either delegate its existing authority to an intermediary or enlist the intermediary's authority. The ultimate site of authority determines the management of these relationships after they are established. There are two forms of management: hierarchical or non-hierarchical. The first means that the center can remove the intermediary's source of authority at will, allowing it to dictate the terms of the relationship. Non-hierarchical control, on the other hand, requires the center to convince the intermediary to change its course of action through positive or negative inducements. These two variables, in turn, generate four types of indirect governance. The first type, delegation, occurs when initial authority belongs to the center and the relationship is governed hierarchically. This is the classic principal-agent relationship. The second type, trusteeship, occurs when the center grants the initial authority but can only manage the relationship non-hierarchically. The third type, cooptation, occurs when the initial authority comes from the intermediary, but the center manages the relationship

hierarchically. This relationship occurs when the center is able to make the governor reliant on additional sources of support under the center's control, which it can then threaten to withdraw. If these additional sources are greater than the initial authority of the intermediary, these threats can be effective. Finally, orchestration occurs when the initial source of authority lies with the intermediary and the relationship is governed non-hierarchically. This type of relationship is based on shared interests and voluntary cooperation.

In the Russian context, the goal of professionalization of governors requires a relationship of delegation. Once this is established, the Kremlin is free to determine the precise criteria by which it assesses its appointees. However, if a relationship with a governor is of a different type, the Kremlin will seek to transform it into a relationship of delegation. Governors, on the other hand, will seek to acquire alternative sources of authority and move toward orchestration relationships. Crucially, these movements face limits on both sides. Governors are constrained by the regime's ability to repress them, and the center is limited to the extent that governors can credibly threaten to rebel (Boix and Svolik, 2013).

Thus, in order to determine how the Kremlin will behave toward a governor, it is necessary to determine what form the relationship takes. The first step in my analysis is to distinguish between governors with independent authority and governors whose authority is delegated from the center. Governors who have independent bases of power within their respective regions can resist pressure to resign and can threaten rebellion if fired. I refer to such governors using the term *boyar* for two reasons. First, it appropriately contextualizes contemporary processes within the long history of center-

periphery conflicts in Russia. In a country as vast as Russia, such conflicts are bound to be one of the primary drivers of political development. Second, the term appropriately underscores the fact that independent governors derive their power and legitimacy from the land, or the territory that they govern. However, boyars in this context do not need to be members of the regional elite, though they often are.

Governors can derive their independent authority from several sources. In this study, I consider four sources. The most powerful is ethnic politics. Ethnic mobilization in republics with strong titular majorities presents the most credible threat of rebellion. Though this is most obvious in the case of Chechnya, it is common to other republics as well. The leaders of ethnic republics can undertake a wide range of measures against the center that fall short of armed secession but are still potent. The second source of authority is machine politics. At the beginning of the period of study, several regions were governed by strong political bosses with extensive ties to regional elites and influence among regional publics. Though the Kremlin has dealt with boyars of this type with far greater ease than ethnic leaders, they were still a formidable force in Russian politics during much of the 21st century. Though their ability to threaten rebellion is limited, their role in electoral mobilization gave them bargaining power in relations with the center. The third source of authority is economic power. Boyars of this type are strongest in regions that have vast natural resources, particularly the energy-producing areas of Western Siberia. The final type of boyar includes popular opposition politicians. Though they are smaller in number, several of them have successfully challenged regime-backed incumbents in gubernatorial elections. Whereas the first three categories mainly include incumbent governors, the fourth category is unique because of its ability to take

back regions that are under federal control. They are also second only to ethnic leaders in their ability to credibly threaten rebellion. On the one hand, they are at a disadvantage compared to ethnic leaders because the prospect of a popular armed insurgency that cuts across ethnic lines is unlikely. At the same time, as the case of Sergey Furgal in Khabarovsk shows, their removal has the potential to spark protests even outside their home regions.

I contend that removal is the regime's optimal course of action in cases where a governor is not part of the bureaucratic cadre. Naturally, this preference will be strongest in regions of strategic importance. However, in all cases, the regime should be expected to act when the opportunity for a peaceful removal arises. There are two ways the Kremlin can do this, depending on the strength and source of its autonomy. When possible, it will target the incumbent directly. In other cases, it will target the incumbent's sources of authority, laying the ground for future removal.

The conceptual distinction between boyars and bureaucrats becomes muddled when examining the details of cases. Because of the Kremlin's image of the new generation of appointees as well-educated young technocrats with glasses, we risk ignoring the fact that most earlier appointees did not fit this mold. It thus bears underscoring that the single defining characteristic of boyars is the locus of their authority. Those whom the Kremlin can remove from office without regional pushback, even in the absence of acute crises, are what is meant by bureaucrats. The political challenge the Kremlin has sought to solve in recent years is the establishment of a gubernatorial corps made up entirely of such figures.

On the other hand, the Kremlin's professionalization campaign has sought to replace the older guard among the bureaucrats with what it presents as the "new type" of governor, namely educated, mild-mannered technocrats unlikely to embroil the Kremlin in major scandals. However, these latter can only be appointed in regions where the political problem has been solved conclusively. These are the transitional regions, where the Kremlin secured the right to remove old boyars, but has not fully established the legitimacy required to appoint whomever it pleases. In these places, pockets of regional resistance remain, whether in the form of ethnic autonomists, strong business interests, remnants of political machines, or members of the systemic opposition with less conciliatory approaches than their national parties. In such cases, the Kremlin must first appoint fixers to eliminate these threats before it can progress to the final stage of centralization. Though not always the case, these fixers are often "insider outsiders" with enough ties to the region to make inroads but whose ties to the local elite are not strong enough to override loyalty to the Kremlin. Examples of these "insider outsiders" include two appointees in Ingushetia, who are ethnic Ingushes from outside the republic; Radiy Khabirov in Bashkortostan, who once had close ties to the Bashkir establishment but dissolved those and integrated into federal power structures; and Mikhail Degtyarev in Khabarovsk who as a member of the LDPR was a more acceptable replacement for Sergey Furgal than a United Russia appointee would have been, but whose loyalty to the rules of the game of acceptable opposition behavior and lack of ties to the region made him a safe candidate.

Chapter 4: Historical Background

Putin's current policy toward gubernatorial appointments is the amalgamation of years of experience in negotiating relationships with regional elites. Thus, to understand the drivers of current policies, it is necessary to examine the history of center-regional relations and the political arrangements Putin inherited upon assuming office. This inheritance was the combined result of Soviet and Yeltsin-era developments that had placed hard limits on Putin's ability to control Russia's federal subjects when he assumed office.

The USSR had an immensely complex federal system, which combined territorial and ethnic administrative units with varying degrees of autonomy (Slezkine 1996). The stability of this system was made possible by the Communist Party's absolute centralization of political power (Busygina and Filippov 2024). As the power of the central state apparatus declined in the *perestroika* era and the subsequent dissolution of the Soviet Union, federal subjects sought to expand their autonomy. Ethnic mobilization was especially effective in helping regional leaders maximize their independence from Moscow (Busygina 2017, 109).

In the early 1990s, several republics within Russia issued Declarations on State Sovereignty. With the exception of Chechnya, these fell short of secession. Nonetheless, they claimed significant prerogatives for republican governments, including ownership over natural resources and control of many industries (Sharafutdinova 2010). Though other regions also sought to maximize their autonomy, the leaders of ethnic republics were uniquely positioned to take advantage of popular mobilization due to the fact that

they were directly elected. In contrast, the heads of most other federal subjects were appointed until 1996 (Blakkisrud 2015, 105).

On March 31, President Yeltsin signed a Federative Treaty with all Russian regions except Chechnya, which was in the process of secession, and Tatarstan, which negotiated a separate agreement with Moscow. The Federative Treaty confirmed republican ownership of natural resources and recognized republics as "sovereign governments" with a higher status than other federal subjects (Busygina 2017, 110; Chuman 2011, 134). Though the status of republics and other subjects was formally made equal with the adoption of Russia's first post-Soviet constitution in December 1993, the control of natural resources gave republican heads vast economic resources to use as leverage against the center (Sharafutdinova 2010). Furthermore, republics maintained the right to draft their own constitutions and have national languages (Chuman 2011, 134).

The 1993 Constitution also established the Federation Council to replace the Soviet of Nationalities as the upper chamber of the legislature. This body apportioned two seats to all regions, regardless of population, which were filled *ex officio* by the chief executive of the region and the speaker of the regional legislature. Though the Federative Treaty and the Constitution sought to institutionalize center-regional relations after the dissolution of Soviet-era mechanisms, formal procedures and divisions between central and regional powers were, in practice, ill-defined. As a result, the central government under Yeltsin increasingly relied on informal practices to structure center-regional relations (Busygina 2017, 109). The absence of formal institutional mechanisms also gave regional heads significant independence from the center. At the same time,

economic decline throughout the country stripped the central government of fiscal mechanisms for establishing control (Yakovlev and Aisin 2019, 523).

Internally, governors also benefited from the dissolution of regional soviets in 1993, which allowed them to exercise power without oversight and establish strong political machines (Turovsky 2007, 142). Governors also influenced appointments to regional security services and controlled a major portion of their budgets, allowing them to take over responsibility for regional law enforcement from the federal government (Yakovlev and Aisin 2019, 523). Some governors even established *de facto* control over international borders, allowing them to extract significant rents (Busygina 2017, 111). Economic autonomy also affected interregional relations, with many wealthier regions opting to enact protectionist measures. These included limits on agricultural exports through direct bans and informal suggestions. Grain was the primary target of these controls, which aimed to establish "food security" and counteract inflation. Other restrictions included limits on the ability of outside businesses to enter regional markets. These factors led to a drastic decline in interregional trade and crippled economic integration (Busygina 2017, 111).

Putin's ascension to the Russian presidency was due in large part to his handling of the most challenging issue in center-regional relations, the secession of Chechnya. His prosecution of the Second Chechen War, which began immediately after his appointment as Prime Minister in 1999, earned him significant public support and set the tone for his presidency (Sakwa 2008, 17-23). Reforming center-regional relations was a central priority for Putin's first term. Ahead of the March 2000 presidential elections, Putin published an open letter to voters that outlined his policy priorities. The message decried

the weakness of Russian state institutions and the rule of law, arguing that democracy required a "dictatorship of the law" (Putin 2000b). Earlier in January, Putin (2000a) detailed what this meant for center-regional relations in an address to employees of the Ministry of Justice. His priorities included the harmonization of regional constitutions and laws with federal laws, clarification of the division of powers and responsibilities between federal and regional governments, and increased monitoring of regional governments to ensure their compliance with the law. This was part of the broader goal of increasing state capacity and enhancing centralization. The goal was the creation of a "uniform political and economic space" (Busygina 2017, 112).

One of Putin's priorities was the harmonization of federal and regional legislation. To accomplish this, he issued decrees suspending numerous regional laws for contradicting federal standards or violating human rights. Despite major progress, thousands of regional acts that violated federal legislation remained in force throughout Putin's first term in office. The situation was especially complex in national republics. Several republican constitutions contained clauses asserting their sovereignty despite a July 2000 Constitutional Court ruling that found such practices unconstitutional (Chebankova 2005, 934-935).

A related impediment to Putin's centralization policies was the fact that the center's relationship to half of Russia's federal subjects was governed by a series of bilateral treaties. In 2000, 42 federal subjects had such treaties with the Russian government, which made major concessions to the regions. By 2002, 28 had voluntarily withdrawn from these agreements. However, the treaties that involved the greatest federal concessions, such as those with Bashkortostan and Tatarstan, were more durable. In

recognition of this fact, the government was obliged to create a new legal framework for signing and ratifying these treaties, effectively accepting limits to federal authority while slightly complicating the process of approval. (Chebankova 2005, 936-937).

Fiscal centralization was another key objective. The most important component of this was placing tax collection entirely in the hands of federal authorities to increase collections and deprive governors of revenue streams. The Kremlin also placed limits on the amount of federal funds that could be diverted by regional governments (Busygina 2017, 112). However, these policies were often only cosmetic. In practice, influential regions received federal subsidies to offset increased tax payments (Chebankova 2005, 939).

To facilitate the centralization reforms and improve coordination across regions, Putin grouped Russia's regions into seven federal districts, each overseen by a Presidential Plenipotentiary Envoy (abbreviated as *polpred*). An eighth district for the North Caucasus was added in 2010. The first appointees to these posts were mainly military and law enforcement officers (Busygina, 112). Among other things, *polpreds* were tasked with overseeing the appointment of officials in regional branches of federal bodies, most importantly in law enforcement. Nonetheless, governors remained highly influential in making regional appointments. This was partially due to their diminished but significant control over funding sources for most institutions. The power of federal representatives was also limited by the fact that they were competing with elected governors, who derived legitimacy from popular support (Chebankova 2005, 940-943).

Despite Putin's efforts, federal politics were not fully centralized by the end of his first term as president. The president had been obliged to make several formal and

informal concessions to various regions, and regional heads maintained considerable political autonomy (Chebankova 2005). Furthermore, Putin was politically dependent on governors who controlled powerful political machines capable of mobilizing voters. These machines were critical to United Russia's electoral success in the 2003 State Duma elections, which gave Putin his first stable majority in the legislature. Another fundamental problem was the fact that all governors in this period were directly elected, and many had won their first elections before Putin's presidency, giving them an important source of legitimacy (Reuter and Robertson 2012, 1027). Though the Kremlin employed a series of legal and administrative mechanisms to influence regional elections and install more dependable governors, these had limited success (Chebankova 2005, 941).

The goal of centralization thus depended on the regime's ability to bring governors under control. To that end, Putin introduced legislation during his first term that enabled him to dismiss regional heads and dissolve regional legislatures if they had issued decrees or passed laws contradicting federal legislation. The legislation was eventually amended by a Constitutional Court verdict, which limited the president's power to only the most egregious violations and allowed regional governments to appeal decisions. A new proposal was submitted in November 2002 to simplify the dismissal process, but faced political opposition from regional heads. The final proposal, which reflected the Constitutional Court's requirements, was enacted in July 2003 and fell short of satisfying the regime's needs (Chebankova 2005, 938).

Despite failing to secure the right to dismiss governors easily, the Kremlin created a separate mechanism for exercising central control. Under specific conditions, namely in

cases of natural disaster, high regional debt, or violations of federal law or the Constitution by regional executives, the Kremlin won the right to establish temporary central control over regions. To minimize regional opposition, the Kremlin agreed to delay the entrance into force of this mechanism until January 1, 2007. A second reassurance was that temporary management did not entail the removal of governors from office and could only remain in place for one year. The law further protected governors by banning such interventions within one year of gubernatorial elections. Nonetheless, this procedure would still involve judicial oversight of the Kremlin's decisions, making it a weak tool in practical terms. A more useful tool for undermining regional governors was the initiation of criminal cases. The Kremlin failed to secure convictions in any of the nine cases launched against governors between May 2000 and May 2004. However, these charges nonetheless helped undermine the popularity of governors before elections in some cases (Chebankova 2005, 938).

Eventually, the Kremlin adopted a more radical approach to reducing the influence of regional executives, the elimination of all direct elections for governors, including the heads of republics, who had heretofore never been subject to presidential appointment. Putin announced this on September 13, 2004. The announcement came after the Beslan school massacre, which was the deadliest terrorist attack in Russian history. The Kremlin argued that the creation of a centralized institutional framework to oversee regional governance was necessary for combating terrorism (Chebankova 2005).

The shift to gubernatorial appointments brought about a renewed contract between the regime and regional heads. The regime demanded loyalty and electoral mobilization. In exchange, regional heads received the freedom to extract rents. Regional

heads, in turn, expanded this freedom through information asymmetry by withholding information or misinforming the regime (Busygina 2017).

The 2008 global financial crisis and the endemic corruption that continued to plague the regime threatened to strip Putin of his popular mandate for strengthening the central state apparatus. In December 2011, two key developments made many Russians fear that Putin's promised "dictatorship of the law" may soon devolve into a personal dictatorship. These were the 2011 State Duma elections, which were accompanied by a level of fraud unprecedented under Putin's tenure, and Putin's announcement that he would seek to return to the presidency after serving as prime minister under Dmitry Medvedev due to term limits. The nationwide protests that followed were the greatest political challenge the regime had faced. As a result, the need to restore the regime's legitimacy became a primary driver of regional policy. This was accomplished with the restoration of direct elections for regional executives.

Vladimir Putin first floated the idea of reintroducing direct gubernatorial elections on December 15, 2011. However, his proposal stipulated that the president must approve candidates nominated by regional parties before standing for election to filter out potentially "dangerous" figures. President Medvedev announced a series of reforms that included the reinstatement of gubernatorial elections on December 22, 2011, in his final State of the Nation address. His proposal did not entail the kind of filter envisioned by Putin. Medvedev's proposal was formalized and submitted to the State Duma for consideration on January 16, 2012. The bill did not require presidential approval for candidates but mandated "consultations" between the president and regional political parties. Communist Party and A Just Russia deputies opposed the consultation

mechanism. The final version of the bill was approved on April 25 and signed by President Medvedev on May 2. It included a mechanism for municipal governments to pre-screen candidates. Both the Communist Party and A Just Russia opposed the bill. The Liberal Democratic Party also voted against the proposal because it opposed the reinstatement of elections entirely (Blakkisrud 2015, 106).

The updated bill left the decision on whether to hold consultations to the president and allowed the Presidential Administration to determine the specific form these consultations took. At the same time, candidates nominated by political parties were required to secure signatures from between 5% and 10% of elected municipal legislators and mayors representing at least 75% of municipalities in the region. Notably, municipal officials could only support one candidate in each election cycle. A second mechanism, designed for independent candidates to secure ballot access, required them to obtain signatures from between 0.5% to 2% of registered voters. Regional legislatures were given significant leeway to set the threshold for support from municipal officials and choose whether to honor the self-nomination mechanism (Blakkisrud 2015, 107).

The 2012 law limited elected governors to two five-year terms, which had been the requirement between 1999 and 2004. The law also required all gubernatorial elections to be held on the "Unified Election Day" on the second Sunday of September. The law also provided two mechanisms for unseating elected governors before the end of their term. Citizens could put the matter to a recall referendum through a voter initiative, as long as it was supported by a court ruling that the governor had violated the law or failed to perform their official duties. The second mechanism allowed the president to remove governors under the same circumstances as well as in cases where they had "lost the

confidence" of the president. Notably, the mechanism for popular removal was far more onerous, since a declaration of "loss of confidence" was mostly at the president's discretion (Blakkisrud 2015, 107).

With these reforms, the Kremlin sought to restore the legitimacy of governorships while simultaneously minimizing political risks by maintaining control over the outcomes of elections. In addition to the barriers to ballot access for opposition candidates, the Kremlin accomplished this through the removal of unpopular incumbents to avoid upsets in the first set of gubernatorial elections scheduled for Autumn 2012. Between December 2011 and June 1, 2012, at least 20 governors were replaced, three of whom were reappointed. 9 were replaced in May alone, likely because of the approaching June cutoff for presidential appointments. The reasons for replacing governors included unpopularity and inadequate performance. Despite the Kremlin's success, the legitimacy of the elections was threatened by the so-called "municipal filter" for nominations. The limit on the number of candidates municipal officials could support created an incentive for incumbents to "hoard" signatures. In subsequent elections, several candidates opted to collect far more signatures than needed in order to block potential challengers from ballot access. Incumbents could also use their influence over officials to ensure that they faced desirable opposition candidates. Shortly after the elections, outcry from the opposition forced the government to recognize the issues caused by the municipal filter and express openness to reform. State Duma representatives from the Communist Party and A Just Russia petitioned the Constitutional Court to annul the municipal filters in November 2012. Though the petition failed, the Court effectively banned the practice of hoarding

signatures by limiting the number of signatures a candidate could collect to 105% off the minimum threshold. (Blakkisrud 2015, 108-112).

The reintroduction of direct elections raised a second type of objection as well, particularly among elites in the ethnic republics. Some republican leaders considered the reintroduction premature and worried that elections could worsen political tensions and exacerbate ethno-religious tensions. The State Duma passed amendments to the 2012 reforms, allowing federal subjects themselves to determine whether they wished to hold direct elections. For those who opted out, the reform outlined an alternative presidential appointment scheme. Under the revised procedure, all parties represented in the State Duma were allowed to submit up to three candidates for presidential consideration. The president would then choose three of the candidates. The choice among the final candidates would then be made by the State Duma (Blakkisrud 2015, 112–14).

Though centralization remained a priority, elections made it harder to accomplish this through regional strongmen and political bosses capable of keeping the peace and delivering federal election results. The major democratic deficiencies of Russian regional elections notwithstanding, their reintroduction required governors to maintain a higher level of popularity than before the reforms. Consequently, this period saw the first major steps toward establishing a more professional, modern pool of regional executives, dubbed “governors of the new type”. The spike in Putin’s approval rating that followed the 2014 annexation of Crimea eased some of the pressure stemming from the regime’s declining legitimacy. Nonetheless, Russia’s gubernatorial corps represented a persistent liability. By 2016, their approval ratings had reached near-historic lows, prompting the regime to undertake its final policy shift before the 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

Sergey Kiriyenko's appointment as head of the Presidential Administration on October 5, 2016, marked a decisive shift in the Kremlin's gubernatorial policy. Kiriyenko's primary objective was to create a technocratic corps that could be systematically assessed according to standard metrics and performance targets. Whereas his predecessor, Vyacheslav Volodin, favored the appointment of young municipal politicians and mayors from within regions, Kiriyenko preferred Moscow-based bureaucrats from the federal government and major state corporations. Whereas previously governors were rewarded with access to regional spoils, Kiriyenko envisioned securing the loyalty of appointees with the promise of more prestigious federal appointments (Pertsev, 2026). The Kremlin has also institutionalized cadre development through the so-called School of Governors, organized through the Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration (RANEPA). Today, nearly half of Russia's governors are alumni of this program.

Chapter 5: Case Studies

Officially, Russia has 89 federal subjects. Of these, six are internationally recognized as Ukrainian territory: Crimea, Sevastopol, Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia. The latter four were annexed after the period under study (October 2016-February 2022) and will not be considered in this thesis. Of the remaining 85, 22 are republics, 46 are oblasts, 9 are krais, 4 are autonomous okrugs, 3 are federal cities, and 1 is an autonomous oblast. Given the unique position of federal cities in Russian politics, especially Moscow and Saint Petersburg, they are also excluded from this study, bringing the total number of federal subjects considered to 82.

In addition to excluding the above regions, I have also excluded a handful of removals from the proceeding analysis. Specifically, I have excluded six acting governors who served for fewer than three months and were replaced at least three months before the next gubernatorial election. This is because their initial appointments were provisional and do not necessarily give insight into the Kremlin's cadre policy. In five of these cases, the acting governors gained the positions automatically due to their positions within regional governments. The other case occurred between the first and second rounds of the 2018 gubernatorial elections in Khakassia. After losing the first round, Viktor Zimin, the United Russia incumbent, resigned from office. His replacement was appointed to prevent the opposition's victory in the second round, but failed to do so. While there is no reason to believe the latter's appointment was intended to be provisional, his ouster was nonetheless part of Viktor Zimin's removal through elections. Thus, the two are treated as a single event.

Of the 82 federal subjects considered in this study, all but 22 had at least one change in regional leadership during the period under study. Of these incumbents, 11 have remained in office through the war in Ukraine. Overall, 67 governors and regional heads lost their positions between October 5, 2016, and February 22, 2022. Despite the fact that governors are directly elected in all but ten of these regions, only four lost their seats through the democratic process. President Putin directly fired an additional four governors for "loss of confidence". The remaining 59 resigned voluntarily, albeit under varying degrees of pressure. All four cases of direct dismissal were against boyars. In three of these cases, the dismissals came immediately after the incumbents were arrested. In the other case, that of the Chuvash Republic's Mikhail Ignatyev, the dismissed governor died soon after, though there is no reason to believe he would face prosecution had he survived. Three other governors faced criminal prosecution within two years of their resignations, bringing the total to six. Of the remaining removed incumbents, 14 received senatorial appointments, four became governors in other regions or were appointed deputy Presidential Envoys in their Federal Districts, two received minor diplomatic appointments, 18 received cabinet-level appointments, other major positions in the federal government or state corporations, or became advisors to the President. An additional six received minor federal positions. Finally, 17 did not receive any reappointment by the president, though some were elected to the State Duma or regional legislatures.

As of October 2016, 36 of the 82 federal subjects studied had leaders with significant regional power bases who could be considered boyars. By February 2022, the number of such regions had dropped to 11. Of these regions, eight had no changes in

leadership, and four saw boyars transfer power to designated successors. Of the regions that remained under boyar control, six were ethnic republics. In this period, the center lost effective control of only one region. In Khakassia, the Kremlin's control was diminished with the upset electoral defeat of Viktor Zimin by the Communist Valentin Konovalov. Though Konovalov was only one of five opposition governors at the beginning of 2022, he was the only such governor to gain office without tacit approval from the Kremlin. Though similar figures won elections in Vladimir Oblast and Khabarovsk Krai, the Kremlin succeeded in ousting them before 2022. These regions were among the seven where two removals occurred. In all of these cases, the final appointee was a federal bureaucrat. Overall, the Kremlin was able to replace boyars with bureaucrats in 26 regions.

Though the Russian Federation includes several subjects that are nominally intended as homelands for one or more ethnic minorities, only a handful of these regions can be functionally classified as ethnic republics. In a large number of republics, ethnic Russians form a demographic majority, while the titular ethnic group's share of the population is relatively modest. The Jewish Autonomous Oblast in Russia's Far Eastern federal district is the most extreme example of this type. Despite its designation as the territorial home for Russian Jews, and despite recognizing Yiddish as an official language, the region is home to fewer than one thousand ethnic Jews, who comprised 0.6 percent of the population at the time of the latest national census. Though the Jewish Autonomous Oblast is an outlier, many republics have comparable demographic profiles. In Karelia, just over 5 percent of the population belongs to the titular ethnicity. While such regions may offer certain cultural or linguistic protections for titular groups, they do

not offer the opportunity for the kind of ethnic mobilization needed to secure leverage against Moscow.

Thus, for this thesis, the term "ethnic republic" is used to refer only to those republics where the titular group, or groups, comprise a majority or strong plurality of the electorate. This formulation offers more clarity but is complicated by demographic realities. Thus, before discussing the general dynamics at play in ethnic republics, it is necessary to provide a brief outline of these realities. Of Russia's 89 federal subjects, only 25 have ethnic designations. These include 21 of the 24 republics, the four autonomous okrugs, and the Jewish Autonomous Oblast. Ethnic Russians constitute the absolute majority in the Jewish Autonomous Oblast, all four autonomous okrugs, and all but 12 of the republics. In Bashkortostan, Russians are the single largest ethnic group, comprising nearly 40 percent of the population, with Bashkirs comprising just over 30 percent. Only in 9 of the remaining 11 republics does a single titular group constitute an absolute majority. In Dagestan, fewer than 5 percent of residents are ethnically Russian, but the largest of the republic's 12 indigenous ethnic groups, the Avars, comprise less than a third of the population. Similarly, in the Karachay-Cherkess Republic, the two titular groups form a majority of the population, but Karachays only comprise around 45 percent.

As a closer look at these cases will demonstrate, a favorable demographic profile can allow incumbents to insulate themselves from Kremlin pressure, provided that they belong to a group that can credibly mobilize the grievances of the non-Russian majority. This protection is not absolute, however, and its strength depends on the size of the demographic advantage and the specific characteristics of each region. Nonetheless, the

removal of the heads of ethnic republics tends to require far greater misconduct than in other regions, and removed individuals tend to receive far better "severance packages". At the beginning of the period of study, all 11 republics with titular majorities were led by members of one of the titular ethnic groups. In eight of these republics, the leaders were veteran regional politicians or bureaucrats with strong ties to the republican elite. In only three cases did the Kremlin succeed in replacing these figures with bureaucrats or co-opted regional figures. Three ethnic leaders remained in power: Chechnya's Ramzan Kadyrov, Tatarstan's Rustam Minnikhanov, and Karachay-Cherkessia's Rashid Temrezov. In two cases, Tuva and Sakha, ethnic leaders transferred power to anointed successors from within the regional governing apparatus. Notably, Chechnya, Tatarstan, and Tuva, all have titular ethnic groups comprising over 85 percent of the population. In the Republic of Tuva, long-time leader Sholban Kara-ool was replaced by Vladislav Khovalyg, a fellow ethnic Tuvan and former mayor of the region's capital. Despite being an insider, Khovalyg went through the School of Governors. Nonetheless, this does not diminish his status as an insider and should be seen primarily as a sign that moves toward professionalization do not always have to come after centralization has been achieved. In the long term, the Kremlin certainly seeks to draw him closer to its orbit. However, high-level appointments play a much more important role in this process than training.

In Dagestan and Ingushetia, the only other regions where over three-quarters of the population belongs to one of the titular ethnic groups, the Kremlin remained in control only by appointing transitional *siloviks*. In both cases, a full stabilization still eludes the Kremlin, preventing the appointment of "governors of the new type."

Among the six republics where titular groups represent between 25 and 50 percent of the population, the Kremlin has seen far greater success. To begin with, only two of these republics had independent leaders belonging to the titular ethnic group as of October 2016, Adygea and Mordovia. Of the four regions with independent leaders, all but Adygea fell under Kremlin control by 2022. In the latter, Aslan Tkhakushinov was permitted to retire, transferring power to his deputy, Murat Kumpilov. The decision not to intervene in Adygea is likely due to the fact that the republic is surrounded by the much larger Krasnodar Krai, which was under reliable Kremlin control for the entirety of the study period. Thus, unlike nearby Ingushetia and Dagestan, where the Kremlin has been embroiled in low-intensity counterinsurgency operations for much of the 20th century, establishing control of Adygea is not a pressing matter. In Bashkortostan and Buryatia, where the regime already exercised control, older bureaucrats were replaced with younger, more electable cadres ahead of elections. Notably, the Kremlin's appointee in Buryatia, a reliable bureaucrat from outside the republic, was the first Buryat to lead the region in the post-Soviet period.

Though ethnic relations are relevant even in regions with relatively small titular populations, the dynamics specific to ethnic republics are more evident in republics with titular majorities. The remainder of this section will thus explore leadership changes in the 11 republics where titular ethnic groups constitute absolute majorities.

The threat of ethnic mobilization is more effective in regions that can credibly pose a threat to national stability, such as Chechnya. Leaders who can position themselves between the regime and more radical regional elements can reap significant political rewards. As the head of the only region to have launched a secessionist war,

Ramzan Kadyrov possesses a uniquely secure position. Though a new war in Chechnya does not seem likely now, the Kremlin must factor its implicit threat into its negotiations with Kadyrov (Busygina 2017, 114).

Though ethnic mobilization can be useful in relations with the center, it can also create zero-sum conflicts with neighbors. This was the case in a controversy involving Ingushetia and Chechnya, both of which have titular ethnic groups comprising over 95 percent of the population. Ingushetia's leader, Yunus-bek Yevkurov, was forced to step down after being forced to make concessions in a 2019 land swap agreement with Chechnya, which ceded nearly a tenth of Ingushetia's territory. A few months after massive rallies broke out against the deal, Yevkurov resigned and was immediately promoted to deputy Minister of Defense (OC Media 2024).

Yevkurov's position was also complicated by the fact that, while he was an ethnic Ingush, he was not born in the Republic and did not have independent ties to regional elites. Rather, Yevkurov was a career military officer with little experience in the region before he was appointed governor in 2008. Indeed, the initial decision to appoint an experienced officer like Yevkurov was to combat Islamic extremism. Within a year of his appointment, Yevkurov suffered an assassination attempt that left him hospitalized (Harding 2009). His policies as governor also led to persistent conflicts with mainstream religious authorities in Ingushetia, who excommunicated him a year before his resignation (Kvakhadze 2018). Yevkurov's replacement, Mahmud-Ali Kalimatov, is also an ethnic Ingush from outside the region. However, Kalimatov had prior experience in Ingushetia, serving as the chief prosecutor between 2004 and 2007.

The Ingush case is instructive for several reasons. It demonstrates that the center's intervention can create ethnic tensions that last for decades. Even leaders belonging to titular ethnic groups cannot easily overcome the continued threat of ethnic mobilization, especially if they are seen as outsiders serving the interests of the center at the expense of regional autonomy. This was exacerbated in the Ingush because Yevkurov was essentially sent as a military governor on a counter-insurgency mission.

The Ingushetian case also explains the Kremlin's appeasement of Ramzan Kadyrov. No Ingush leader has been able to maintain the same level of stability since the Kremlin ousted Ruslan Aushev in 2001. Aushev was the last leader of the Republic who commanded independent authority based on widespread popular support. This also underscores that, particularly in the case of ethnic republics, the transition from boyar to bureaucrat does not always occur immediately.

Both Yevkurov and Kalimatov represent a relatively rare but important category of appointees, which includes members of the military and law enforcement, or siloviks, as well as prosecutors, investigators, and other legal experts. These figures are the bridge between regional autonomy and centralization. In the context of center-regional relations, these figures fall into the same category as the newer wave of bureaucrats because they derive their authority exclusively from the center. However, these fixers are not meant to be the benign face of 21st-century technocratic governance. Rather, their task is to manage acute crises that threaten the regime's stability.

Like Ingushetia, Dagestan has also had a prolonged transition. Here, the regime appointed two siloviks, Vladimir Vasilyev, former deputy defense minister and longtime chair of the Duma Committee on Security in 2017, and Sergey Melikov in 2020, former

deputy director of the National Guard. Both men were from outside Dagestan, though Melikov is an ethnic Lezgin, one of the 12 titular ethnic groups. Like their counterparts in Ingushetia, the two were sent to strengthen the Kremlin's control in the region.

The Dagestani context is similar to that of Ingushetia in many ways. Both regions suffer from endemic economic problems and radical Islamic terrorism dating back to the Chechen War. However, unlike the highly homogeneous Ingushetia, Dagestan suffers from internecine ethnic tensions stemming from its demographic makeup. In principle, Islam could serve as a unifying force to mobilize Dagestan's diverse population against the center. However, the absence of a majority ethnic group has, in practice, weakened the leverage of regional leaders. This is because no single group has a large enough share of the population to monopolize politics. Though Avars are by far the largest ethnic group, comprising 30 percent of the population, Dargins, Kumyks, and Lezgins each have a share of around 15 percent. Thus, ethnic grievances can also be mobilized against regional leaders if they are seen to favor one group over others. This occurred in the case of Ramazan Abdulatipov, who began his tenure as the leader of Dagestan in 2013 with the goal of weakening the clan-based system of patronal politics that dominated the republic and easing intraelite economic conflicts (RFE/RL 2013).

However, Abdulatipov was accused of favoritism toward members of his own clan and fellow ethnic Avars. This, alongside widespread corruption and the economic neglect of ethnically Lezgin areas, created resentment. He was forced to resign in October 2017 in part due to his mishandling of interethnic relations. As is most often the case, Abtulatipov's resignation was presented as voluntary. Abdulatipov cited his age, 71, as the primary reason for the move, arguing for the need to pass leadership to "greener"

cadres. This statement was made before the appointment of his successor, the 68-year-old Vladimir Vasilyev (RIA 2020a). Abdulatipov was first appointed as a special representative of the President to Caspian Sea states and later sent to Saudi Arabia as Russia's permanent envoy to the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. The appointment of Vasilyev, an ethnic outsider, reflected the regime's desire to prevent the perception of favoritism. The replacement of a veteran politician, diplomat, and academic with a silovik also signaled a more active approach to centralization in the region (Konarzewska, 2018).

Vasilyev's tenure began with a major anticorruption campaign targeting top officials from the Abdulatipov administration, including the Prime Minister and two of his deputies. Vasilyev tied these efforts to the fight against terrorism, arguing that the problem is exacerbated by corruption and social injustice (BFM 2018).

Another source of leverage for ethnic republics is control of natural resources. This is the case in Tatarstan, where the region's sizable energy resources are owned by the Republic, making it one of the wealthiest Russian federal subjects. Furthermore, members of the ruling elite have secured smaller shares of regional energy companies for themselves through privatization. While the regime can in principle confiscate the latter, the direct seizure of republican assets is politically untenable (Garifullina, Kazantcev, and Yakovlev 2020).

Comparison with the neighboring Bashkortostan demonstrates the importance of keeping regional wealth under Republican control. During the breakup of the Soviet Union, both Bashkortostan and Tatarstan issued Declarations of State Sovereignty, laying claim to the natural resources in their respective regions. The Russian Federation recognized these claims, allowing the Republics to acquire controlling stakes in their

respective oil production conglomerates, Bashneft and Tatneft (Sharafutdinova 2010, 201).

However, whereas the Tatar leadership was content with privatizing small portions of Tatneft, Bashkortostan's President, Murtaza Rakhimov, privatized Bashneft in 2003, giving a majority of shares to his son, Ural, through shell companies. Sharafutdinova (2010, 201) argues that this hasty move could have been a result of Rakhimov's fear that he would lose the upcoming presidential elections. Regardless of the motivation, the move backfired catastrophically. In 2010, the Kremlin replaced Rakhimov with Rustem Khamitov, a federal bureaucrat working for the state-owned energy company RusHydro. Later, in 2014, the state-owned energy company Rosneft recovered over 70 percent of Bashneft's shares from Sistema, a major conglomerate that had secured possession of the company through Ural Rakhimov (BBC Russia 2014).

Today, over 50 percent of Bashneft is owned by the federal government through Rosneft. Bashkortostan is the second-largest shareholder with 25 percent of shares. In contrast, Tatarstan owns over a third of the shares of Tatneft, the fifth-largest oil producer in Russia, and exercises veto power over major decisions.

This comparison also highlights the stakes of center-regional disputes. A strategic miscalculation by Rakhimov led not only to his own ouster but ensured that his successors could no longer attain the kind of protection enjoyed by boyars like Minnikhanov. Due to his long tenure as the Republican leader and his credible claim to ethnic mobilization, Rakhimov's ouster required what state investigators described as an "unprecedented" theft of state property. Rustem Khamitov's dismissal, on the other hand, resembled an ordinary bureaucratic reshuffle. The latter was dismissed without

explanation in October 2018, ahead of elections scheduled for 2019. Furthermore, despite his successful handling of Rakhimov's ouster, Khamitov did not receive an appointment to a higher office, likely due to his unpopularity among Bashkir nationalists. In fact, shortly after his dismissal, he was removed from United Russia's Supreme Council (United Russia 2017). Khamitov's successor, Radiy Khabirov, boasted closer ties to the region, having worked for and then fallen out with Rakhimov. However, by the time of his appointment as governor, he was also fully integrated into the federal career ladder (Latypova 2025). Though both Khamitov and Khabirov are ethnic Bashkirs, they are ultimately federal administrators rather than politicians with independent power bases.

The cases where the regime replaced an ethnic boyar with a bureaucrat were all precipitated by major scandals, which greatly weakened republican leaders. By exploiting these crises in a timely manner, the Kremlin was able to reliably shift the Chuvash, Kalmyk, and North Ossetian-Alanian Republics into its sphere of influence. Notably, in all cases, both the outgoing governors and their replacements were members of the major titular ethnic group.

The first of these occurred on March 20, 2019, with the resignation of Aleksey Orlov, who had led the Republic of Kalmykia since 2010 after decades of service in the regional administration. Orlov's extensive ties to the republican elite and his membership in the republic's titular ethnic group, which constitutes over 60 percent of the population, made his removal under normal circumstances difficult. The impetus for his resignation was a major corruption scandal which implicated top republican officials in embezzling funds during the construction of social housing for orphans. In response, law enforcement officials detained Kalmykia's construction minister, and Orlov dismissed a deputy prime

minister, though he did not acknowledge responsibility for the violation (Malykh 2019). Prior to these revelations, Orlov's administration had already faced serious corruption scandals. In two separate cases in 2015 and 2017, several top republican officials, including two deputy prime ministers, faced criminal charges. The new revelations, appearing in the context of long-standing corruption issues, raised the prospect of an electoral embarrassment for United Russia in Kalmykia's September 2019 gubernatorial elections, even though Orlov had won reelection in 2014 with over 80 percent of the vote (RBC 2019). Orlov's ability to achieve such electoral success, however, made his dismissal challenging even in the face of a major scandal and the possibility of his own prosecution. Thus, as compensation for his voluntary withdrawal, he received an appointment to the Federation Council. Orlov's replacement, Batu Khasikov, is a typical representative of the new crop of gubernatorial appointees. Khasikov had an extensive career in republican politics, serving in the regional legislature and representing Kalmykia in the Federation Council. By the time of his appointment as governor, however, he was a full-fledged federal bureaucrat, having served as an advisor to the head of the Federal Agency on Youth Affairs (Rossmolodezh) since 2017, and graduating from the school of governors (RIA 2025).

Thanks to the many levers of influence at the Kremlin's disposal, Putin has only rarely had to resort to openly dismissing governors using his legal prerogative to declare a "loss of confidence" in incumbents. Out of the 67 removals covered in this thesis, 59 were presented as voluntary resignations, regardless of whether they truly were voluntary. An additional four removals occurred when regime candidates unexpectedly lost

gubernatorial elections in 2018. Only four governors received dismissals, three of whom had already been arrested for major crimes while in office.

This context underscores the unconventional nature of the removal of Chuvash leader Mikhail Ignatyev in 2020, the only governor to be dismissed without being accused of a crime and the only dismissed governor to challenge his removal in court. Ignatyev's case did not receive a verdict, however, due to his sudden, tragic death caused by COVID-19 only a few days before the start of judicial proceedings (Moscow Times, 2020b). Ignatyev was dismissed on January 29, 2020, for "loss of confidence". Though the President usually refrains from providing details during such dismissals, he made an exception in this case, noting that Ignatyev lacked a "feeling of respect for people". That these scandals occurred ahead of gubernatorial elections scheduled for September likely contributed to the timing of the Kremlin's decision (RIA 2020b). The removal came after several scandals, including Ignatyev's use of disrespectful language toward voters and a threat to "wipe out" pro-Western journalists. The immediate impetus for the dismissal came during a public event in which the governor presented new equipment to firefighters. In a viral video, Ignatyev was seen dangling the keys of one of the new engines above the head of an official, forcing him to jump to reach them (Moscow Times 2020a).

Since assuming office in 2010, Ignatyev, an ethnic Chuvash, had sought to position himself as a regional patriot. However, despite his long service in various high-level posts within the Republic's administration, Ignatyev lacked the support and respect of regional elites necessary for presenting a unified front against the center (Meduza 2020).

Oleg Nikolayev, a fellow ethnic Chuvash, replaced Ignatyev. Though Nikolayev had been a member of A Just Russia prior to his appointment, he ran for election as an independent and later officially joined United Russia. The fact that Ignatyev was a long-time UR member underscores the fact that party membership can be secondary in assessing an appointee's loyalty and reliability. Nikolayev's career trajectory is also instructive as an instance of the Kremlin's cooptation of opposition politicians with regional political experience. Though he began his career as a regional bureaucrat and later elected official, Nikolayev was absorbed into the federal career ladder first through employment in Moscow-based banks and later as the chair of the State Duma Committee on Nationality Affairs, where he served from 2016 until he was appointed governor. Furthermore, Nikolayev graduated from the School of Governors ("Nikolayev, Oleg Alexeevich").

The COVID-19 pandemic was one of the major challenges to the regime's legitimacy during the period of study. It also served as the trigger for the resignation of Vyacheslav Bitarov, a long-time North Ossetian politician who had led the republic of North Ossetia-Alania since 2016. He resigned after protests against his handling of the pandemic undermined his public support (OC Media 2020). His dismissal is notable given that North Ossetia is one of a handful of regions that opted to eliminate direct gubernatorial elections after their reinstatement in 2012, a right enjoyed by Republics and Autonomous Oblasts. Thus, his removal was not motivated by the Kremlin's fear of electoral upset. Nonetheless, the scandals facing his administration provided the Kremlin with an opportunity to appoint a successor from its own cadre pool, Sergei Menyailo, the

former governor of Sevastopol (Moscow Times 2021). Like his counterpart in Chuvashia, Bitarov did not receive any further appointments.

It is important to note that the advantage of ethnic leaders is not a distinct relationship but a subtype of similar phenomena that exist throughout Russia. Other characteristics can give governors important informational advantages that can be used to navigate regional politics and informal elite networks. Crimea provides an illustrative example of this. There, Sergey Aksyonov has managed to remain in power since the region was annexed in 2014, despite the fact that the Republic is overwhelmingly ethnically Russian. Nonetheless, Aksyonov's experience in Crimean politics well before the Russian annexation gives him an insider status that he can leverage against encroachment from the center.

For example, an Autumn 2018 internal Kremlin poll found that Aksyonov's approval rating had dropped by 31 percentage points since April of that year, the third-worst result of any governor (RBC, 2018b). Aksyonov is also far from the Kremlin's ideal of a technocratic professional, having allegedly been involved in Crimean petty organized crime in the 1990s under the moniker of "Goblin" (Business Insider 2014).

In several other regions, long-serving governors have been able to create robust political machines, elite networks, and popular bases of support. Though these political machines have helped deliver votes for the Kremlin, they have also allowed governors to insulate themselves from federal pressure (Pertsev 2012).

More recently, however, the old model of federal elections that relied on massive mobilization efforts in loyal regions has been replaced by more uniform election results across all regions. This is in part due to the Kremlin's direct involvement in electoral

mobilization through state-owned companies and businesses that rely on state contracts. As a result, the importance of governors has diminished, and they have lost a crucial lever of influence (Pertsev 2018b).

The most important of these are governors who began their tenure before the cancellation of direct gubernatorial elections in 2005. Unlike subsequent appointees, these figures had to secure electoral victories using their own resources and connections, as the Kremlin's ability to influence regional elections was still limited. By October 2016, only eight such figures remained, three of whom began their tenure before the beginning of Putin's presidency. One of the Kremlin's greatest successes in the period of study was the replacement of all eight of these incumbents with federal bureaucrats. The replacement of these figures with outside cadres accounts for an important portion of the gubernatorial ousters in the period of study. Notably, all eight were members of United Russia.

The first removal underscored the fact that loyalty to the regime is no longer a source of immunity. This came in April 2017 when Leonid Markelov, who had led the Republic of Mari El since 2001 and did not have major conflicts with the center, was arrested for bribery (Pertsev 2017).

Markelov's case, however, is atypical. Veteran regional leaders more often receive senatorial appointments in exchange for voluntary retirement, a practice that has been likened to the assignment of "honorary pensions". These appointments can also serve as elite status markers and de facto guarantees of immunity from prosecution and harassment. Four of the eight removed boyars received senatorial appointments. These were Alexander Mikhailov, who governed Kursk Oblast from 2000 to October 2018;

Oleg Korolyov, who governed Lipetsk Oblast from 1998 to October 2018; Anatoly Artamonov, who governed Kaluga Oblast from 2000 to February 2020; and Yevgeny Savchenko, who governed Belgorod Oblast from 1993 to September 2020. Another veteran, Sergey Morozov, who governed Ulyanovsk Oblast from 2005 to 2021, was appointed deputy Presidential Envoy to the Volga Federal District (RBC 2018a).

Savchenko was the longest-serving governor at the time of his removal on September 22, 2020, having first been appointed to his position in 1993 by Yeltsin. Though Savchenko was a formidable figure in his prime, his case highlights a key weakness of political bosses in ethnically Russian regions. Unlike their counterparts in ethnic republics, the authority of these figures is rooted almost entirely in their own person. Thus, as Savchenko's political influence declined with old age and the broader shift in the balance of power in favor of the Kremlin, he failed to designate a successor and was obliged to accept senatorial appointments in exchange for voluntarily relinquishing power (RBC 2020b). Though age is often dubiously cited by governors as the reason for their resignation, there is reason to believe Savchenko's case is different. Prior to his resignation, Savchenko had been struggling with chronic health issues. As a result, he had been spending extended periods of time in Europe receiving treatment, which created dissatisfaction in the Kremlin (Svoboda 2020).

Only two veteran boyars did not receive any federal positions after their removal. Alexander Zhilkin, who had governed Astrakhan Oblast since December 2004, resigned on September 26, 2018. Zhilkin was facing numerous crises, including ethnic tensions between the region's Kazakh and Tatar populations and conflicts within the regional elite. Most significantly, Zhilkin was facing a popular electoral challenger from the Just Russia

Party in gubernatorial elections scheduled for September 2019. His opponent had benefited from the nationwide wave of discontent against the raising of the retirement age. The fact that Zhilkin did not receive any reappointments is a sign of his fraught position (RBC 2020a).

The other was Aman Tuleev, who led Kemerovo Oblast from 1997 to April 1, 2018. Tuleev resigned on April 1, 2018, after a fire at a shopping center killed 64 people, including his niece. However, a closer analysis demonstrates that this was more likely an excuse for his ouster rather than the primary cause. The Kremlin had sought to remove Tuleev since at least 2015, and had even arrested two of his deputies in 2016. Furthermore, the Kremlin's candidate for Tuleev's replacement, Sergei Tsivilev, the husband of one of Putin's nieces and a former official at Kolmar, a major coal company owned by Gennady Timchenko, one of the Kremlin's closest allies within the oligarchy, was appointed deputy governor a month before the fire (Pertsev 2012). Notably, Tsivilev did not offer his resignation after another fire at an unregistered nursing home killed 22 people in 2022 (Reuters 2022). In fact, he was promoted to Energy Minister in 2024.

The decision to oust Tuleev was more likely driven by his independence, a product of his popularity, which has been described as a "cult of personality". Tuleev's popularity came from his arrangement with regional businesses, which required them to fund the construction of schools and kindergartens, public recreation facilities, host public festivities, and provide welfare assistance. These arrangements were upheld due to constant pressure from Tuleev's government. Alongside conventional government-provided benefits, these programs gave Tuleev immense popularity in Kemerovo. He used this to eliminate political rivals and monopolize regional politics. This was reflected

in his electoral performance throughout his tenure. He won reelection twice with over 90 percent of the vote. Though he also delivered impressive election results for the Kremlin, his popularity was a threat to centralization efforts (Pertsev 2012).

The final challenge to the regime's centralization efforts has come from regional opposition politicians. In the period covered in this thesis, the greatest electoral upsets occurred in 2018, resulting in the only four cases of governors being unseated through elections. Of the 21 regional elections held in this cycle, 17 resulted in first-round victories for the incumbent. In three of the remaining four cases, opposition candidates secured decisive second-round victories.

These cases are illustrative for two reasons. First, they highlight the importance of proactively removing unpopular incumbents before elections, which the regime has, for the most part, done effectively. Failure to do so forces the regime to choose between two undesirable courses of action: subverting the opposition's victory, which may result in destabilization and loss of legitimacy, or accepting defeat in the hopes of coopting the new governor, which may fail and result in the regime losing control of the region altogether. Additionally, these cases expose the range of actions available to the regime, its escalation strategy, and the practical limits to what it can accomplish. In Vladimir Oblast, the governor was pressured into resigning after three years. In Khabarovsk Krai, efforts to subvert the election, coopt, threaten, or sabotage the governor failed, leading the regime to engage in repression, triggering the largest regional protest movement in recent history (Gershkovich, 2020). In Khakassia, the regime failed to subvert the election of the Communist Party's Valentin Konovalov, who defeated the veteran governor Viktor Zimin in the first round of elections. Before the second round, Zimin resigned as governor and

dropped out of the race, delaying the election and leaving Konovalov as the sole candidate on the ballot. In the interim, prosecutors sought unsuccessfully to remove Konovalov from the ballot. (Vedomosti 2018). Since then, Konovalov has managed to remain in power despite Kremlin pressure and win a decisive reelection in 2023, thanks to his popularity with the regional electorate (Pertsev 2018a).

The case of Khabarovsk Krai highlights two of the least desirable outcomes that can result from opposition breakthroughs. Furgal's strong ties to the region and his immense popularity allowed him to do lasting damage to the regime's control of municipal and regional politics. This forced the regime to undertake drastic actions, which in turn created a major political crisis. After barely edging out his opponent in the first round with nearly 36 percent of the vote, Furgal received a whopping 70 percent of the votes in the second round. This victory came as a shock to the Kremlin. Immediately after Furgal assumed office, the Kremlin launched a pressure campaign against the governor. In December, Putin issued a decree moving the capital of the Far Eastern Federal District from Khabarovsk to Vladivostok, Primorsky Krai (Moscow Times 2018).

The 2019 municipal elections in Khabarovsk, the region's capital, highlight the compounding effects of opposition breakthroughs. Furgal's LDPR won 34 of 35 in the city council, receiving 56 percent of the votes to United Russia's 12.5 percent (Interfax, 2019). Nonetheless, Furgal exhibited some caution in his stance toward the center, supporting the 2020 constitutional referendum (Gershkovich 2020).

On July 9, 2020, federal law enforcement officials arrested Furgal and transferred him to Moscow. He was accused of involvement in a series of murders and assaults against regional business figures between 2004 and 2005. Later that month, Putin signed

a decree firing Furgal on the grounds that he had “lost the confidence” of the president. The same day, Putin appointed Mikhail Degtyarev, a member of LDPR and the Chair of the State Duma Committee on Sports, acting governor. (RIA, 2020c).

Unlike Furgal, Degtyarev had virtually no ties to the region. In the Duma, he represented Samara Oblast, located thousands of miles from Khabarovsk in European Russia. By appointing an outsider, Putin minimized the risk of losing control of the region. At the same time, by appointing a nominal member of the LDPR, he was able to lessen the political fallout of the arrest. As a reward for defusing the political tension, Degtyarev was eventually appointed Minister of Sports in 2024 (Zubarevich 2020).

The final challenge of the 2018 election cycle was Primorsky Krai, the fourth region where the United Russia incumbent, acting governor Andrey Tarasenko, failed to win in the first round. Though official results showed Tarasenko winning in the second round by just over one percentage point, the election was marred by an extraordinary level of fraud. This triggered immediate protests and a hunger strike by the opposition candidate, Andrey Ishchenko of the CPRF. The Central Electoral Commission yielded to public pressure and annulled the results, triggering a repeat election in December. Notably, Ischenko attributed his initial success to the LDPR victory in neighboring Khabarovsk Krai, which he believed upended what the regime had expected to be a relatively safe election (Focht 2018).

The regime’s actions in the ensuing weeks illustrate several tools that it has at its disposal for subverting the democratic process when necessary. According to Ischenko, a representative of the regional branch of United Russia approached him to secure his voluntary withdrawal from the repeat election. Ishchenko claims he was offered a

senatorial appointment to the Federation Council and state contracts for his construction business, which he declined (Focht 2018).

Failing to coopt Ishchenko, the regime opted to replace the disgraced Tarasenko in the hopes of shifting public opinion. On September 26, Putin issued a decree appointing Oleg Kozhemyako, then governor of Sakhalin Oblast, to the Primorsky Krai governorship. Kozhemyako is an exemplar of a governor of the new type and a reliable fixer for the Kremlin. Before Sakhalin, he served as the head of Amur Oblast and the now-defunct Koryak Autonomous Okrug. His appointment to Sakhalin in 2015 occurred under no less critical conditions. There, his charge was to tackle the rampant corruption that had culminated in the arrest in office of Alexander Khoroshavin, who had governed Sakhalin since 2007 (Carroll 2018). As a final precaution, the regional electoral commission barred Ischenko from participating in the re-run. The legal basis for the exclusion was the candidate's failure to collect enough signatures from local elected officials to clear the municipal filter (RIA 2018).

This chaotic episode underscores the importance of proactive measures to remove unpopular incumbents. At each stage of the electoral process, the retention of governorships requires a greater number of resources and involves a greater degree of political risk. This case also shows that the strategy of preemptive dismissal has its limits. Tarasenko himself had been appointed as acting governor months before the election because he was seen as a safer candidate. Nonetheless, in the 2018 election cycle, 90 percent of newly appointed governors won their elections, compared to 50 percent of established incumbents (Minchenko Consulting 2018).

Chapter 6: Conclusion

The cases discussed demonstrate how three of the principal alternative sources of authority operate. Though this is most obvious in the case of Chechnya, it is common to other republics as well. The leaders of ethnic republics can undertake a wide range of measures against the center that fall short of armed secession but are still potent. The second source of authority is machine politics. At the beginning of the period of study, several regions were governed by strong political bosses with extensive ties to regional elites and influence among regional publics. Though the Kremlin has dealt with boyars of this type with far greater ease than ethnic leaders, they were still a formidable force in Russian politics during much of the 21st century. Though their ability to threaten rebellion is limited, their role in electoral mobilization gave them bargaining power in relations with the center.

Ethnic mobilization in republics with strong titular majorities presents the most credible threat of rebellion. Ethnic republics differ from Russia's other federal subjects in several ways that are relevant to relations between the Kremlin and regional executives. For one, as already mentioned, the regions offer local politicians the opportunity to use ethnic mobilization to gain leverage in negotiations with the Kremlin. Though there are other paths for regional executives to establish independent power bases, ethnic mobilization is by far the most effective. Even now that the threat of secession is minimal, its prospect allows the heads of ethnic republics to dissuade the Kremlin from major encroachments on their personal autonomy as well as regional autonomy more broadly. Even in the absence of overt ethnic mobilization, cultural and linguistic barriers between the center and ethnic regions exacerbate the information asymmetry inherent in

principal-agent relations. Given the importance of informal networks to Russian governance, this barrier goes beyond matters of pure information or communication. In homogeneous regions like Chechnya, where traditional institutions and governance practices remain strong, the Kremlin cannot establish direct rule even under the most favorable conditions. While the prospect of ethnic mobilization is by far the greatest impediment to centralization, it is not an existential threat to the Kremlin. This is because ethnic mobilization cannot expand beyond the borders of a single region to create an elite coalition large enough to threaten the regime. Furthermore, ethnic mobilization can only be effective under limited circumstances. Without popular support or backing from regional elites, governors cannot engage in confrontation with the center. In cases of low elite support, the Kremlin can coordinate with regional elites to find a suitable replacement. In cases where governors alienate segments of the electorate, their dismissal may even improve the public's perception of the center, as long as the move is not seen as directed against ethnic autonomy. As of 2026, the three longest-serving regional executives are all heads of ethnic republics: Ramzan Kadyrov has led Chechnya since 2007, Rustam Minnikhanov has led Tatarstan since 2010, and Rashid Temrezov has led Karachay-Cherkessia since 2011. Notably, in all three republics, the titular ethnic groups constitute a majority of the population.

Popular mobilization is another method by which the vertical of power can be challenged, as the electoral upsets of 2018 demonstrate. That such upsets can occur even in the increasingly unfree system of "managed democracy" underscores the regime's need to maintain its legitimacy and the popularity of gubernatorial appointees. Opposition politicians represent a unique challenge to the regime that is far more durable

than that posed by political bosses. Though they are smaller in number, several of them have successfully challenged regime-backed incumbents in gubernatorial elections. Whereas the first two categories mainly included incumbent governors, this category is unique because of its ability to take back regions that are under federal control. They are also second only to ethnic leaders in their ability to credibly threaten rebellion. On the one hand, they are at a disadvantage compared to ethnic leaders because the prospect of a popular armed insurgency that cuts across ethnic lines is unlikely. At the same time, as the case of Sergey Furgal in Khabarovsk shows, their removal has the potential to spark protests even outside their home regions. Incompetent governors represent the weakest link in the Russian system of territorial administration. If they alienate the public, ceding the regional administration to the opposition, they also deprive Putin and United Russia of critical administrative and economic levers needed to mobilize votes for subsequent regional and federal elections. Though the Kremlin possesses and frequently employs the requisite tools for coopting, dismissing, or isolating opposition governors, such moves threaten to undermine the legitimacy of the regime as a whole. The preemptive dismissal of unpopular governors is designed to ensure that regional elections are as free as possible while minimizing the opposition's chances of victory.

A key source of the Putin regime's durability is its capacity to adapt to novel challenges in rapidly shifting domestic and international environments. This success cannot be attributed to his personal political acumen alone. Rather, it is a consequence of an institutional approach to governance that has focused first and foremost on strengthening and centralizing the levers of state power. Overall, centralization and a tighter control over political processes have steadily increased the Kremlin's ability to

shape the gubernatorial corps to its liking. However, these developments are not even in all directions. The decline of political bosses and regional oligarchs has been much faster than that of ethnic leaders. The major reason for this is that their source of power can be federalized, even if only with great difficulty. The Kremlin's managed democracy and "informational autocracy" have made traditional political machines less necessary. The consolidation of business in the hands of the state and federal oligarchs has made single-region patronage networks untenable. Nonetheless, such processes face limits when applied to ethnic politics. Furthermore, the gubernatorial office is primarily a political one. Though competence is desirable, it is not enough to stem the tide of popular discontent. As a result, the threat of opposition upsets will remain potent even amidst growing authoritarianism.

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