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Performance Evaluation of Regional Governors: The Case of the Russian Federation

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ABSTRACT

This study examines recent changes in performance-based appraisals of Russian regional governors, key criteria used in the decision-making process regarding the reappointment or dismissal of top regional executives, the role of non-governmental organizations in their performance evaluations, and existing problems in this area. Moreover, the study explores the extent to which values such as equity, social justice, and quality of life are embodied in the performance evaluations of these officials.

KEYWORDS

Performance evaluation; regional governors; political appointment; Russian Federation; sub-national top-level officials

Introduction

The incentives for rewarding better performing top-level executives are a key element of virtually any country's strategy for sustainable economic and social development. To be effective, these incentives should be underpinned by a well-developed system of performance evaluation (Bouckaert & Halligan, 2008; Kim, 2009). Top-level officials are responsible not only for politics and policy but also for public management. Consequently, they should make performance management a high priority in addition to their on-going policy and political duties; this is especially so because the demand for high performance derives from a government's responsibility to the people, and fiscal pressures generate a greater intensity of focus on performance (Kim, 2009, 2013).

Performance evaluation of top-level government officials (state and public institutions) at the regional level is a significant issue for the Russian Federation due to the country's vast land area and the great diversity among its regions (Kotchegura, 2008). The governor is the head and chief government executive of each of the subjects of the Russian Federation (region, autonomous region, republic, city). According to the recent amendments to the country's Constitution, the Russian Federation consists of 85 subjects of the federation with the offices of "head of region" in each subject.

In a country as vast and diverse as Russia, a well-designed system of performance appraisal for regional chief executives should consider the distinct baseline positions of its regions. Officials in these regional roles typically

confront uneven distributions of natural resources and population, heterogeneous climate conditions, various cultures and traditions, and differing levels of investment attractiveness.

Modern concepts of an effective performance evaluation of public sector institutions and their personnel prioritize a wide engagement of external stakeholders (including NGOs and expert communities) and proper application of the assessment results in HR management practices (Kim & Hong, 2013; Kusek & Rist, 2004). Scholars and experts in the field emphasize the difficulties associated with the development and application of a performance appraisal system for high-ranking government officials. In the complex and, as a rule, highly political context of public management, selecting criteria and setting standards for evaluation is often considerably more challenging than in most corporate or non-profit environments (Gill & Meier, 2001; Kim & Hong, 2013; Radin, 2006).

The mechanisms and practices of the appointment and replacement of the heads of the subjects of the Russian Federation (regions) and the role of the respective mechanism of performance evaluation have drawn attention from researchers (Buckley, Frye, Garifullina, & Reuter, 2014; Reuter, 2015; Reuter & Robertson, 2012; Turovsky, 2010). However, the issues of relevance and case specificity of performance criteria in such appraisals, the roles of non-governmental actors in the evaluation, and recent developments in this area remain largely unexplored (Buckley, Reuter, Garifullina, & Shubenkova, 2016). Accordingly, this paper intends to partially fill this gap in the literature.

Moreover, this study was launched as a response to the following problem. The Russian government introduced performance evaluation of regional governors over 10 years ago, but its real effect, if any, in terms of increasing the motivation of the heads of the regions and overall notable improvements in their performance has not yet been sufficiently explored (Baranov, Malkov, Polishchuk, Rochlitz, & Syunyaev, 2015).

Therefore, the present study seeks to determine a practical approach to defining performance-based appraisals of top-level government officials within the context of a performance management framework based on collaborative government principles. The study pursues the objective of finding answers to the following research questions: (1) How relevant and justified are the new criteria being applied to the performance assessments of regional governors, especially in terms of serving as objective bases for human resource management-related decisions? (2) Has the wave of dismissals of regional governors in 2017 – the largest in recent years – resulted from changes in the methodology of performance evaluation, especially from the greater attention being paid to public opinion and trust? (3) To what extent have public values such as equity, social justice, and quality of life been embodied in the performance assessment of regional governors?

Research methods

Within the framework of the research undertaken, a process-tracing method was applied for both analyzing the respective data and evidence and searching for causal mechanisms to allow interpretation and explanation of the derived findings. Process-tracing methods “are tools to study causal mechanisms in a single-case research design” (Beach & Pederson, 2013, p. 3). This method was described in detail by Bennett (2004) and has become a widely used research tool for case studies in recent years (Trampusch & Palier, 2016).

The study used an original dataset of gubernatorial appointments in Russia in 2017 provided by the Central Election Commission of the Russian Federation (http://www.cikrf.ru/banners/vib_arhiv/). In addition, a variety of data sources has been used, including the Federal State Statistics Service of the Russian Federation, respective ratings and reviews produced by government agencies and independent foundations, and academic publications on the topic.

The undertaken research uses the context of the largest wave of dismissals of regional governors in Russia in the last 10 years, which took place in the spring and autumn of 2017, to test the main hypothesis. The hypothesis implies that the changes declared in 2017 to the performance evaluation criteria, namely, main priority given to public

and expert opinion concerning the socio-economic situation in the respective region and the performance of its administration, have not yet served as a major factor in adopting important HR management decisions regarding top-level regional executives.

The core element of the research consists of the analysis of the extent of causality, if any, between the dismissals of 20 governors in 2017 and their regions’ positions in four prominent ratings drawn up by the government-affiliated and independent foundations and institutions in Russia. In undertaking the research, the following premises were adopted as the starting point. First, the recruitment and appointment of government officials based on clearly defined meritocratic principles has a positive impact on the quality of life for citizens in the respective region and vice versa. It has been found that “there is significant negative correlation between recruitment based on personal relations and the overall socio-economic situation in regions” (Nistotskaya, Khakhunova, & Dahlström, 2015, p. 20). Second, irrespective of the political regime and constitutional arrangements, the modern state cannot adequately resolve numerous problems without mobilizing (to various extents) civil society resources. These include expert advice, organizational support, positive feedback to enhance legitimacy and efficiency, etc. (Davies, Holm-Hansen, Kononenko, & Roiseland, 2016; Stuvoy, 2014). This is also true in the case of Russia.

The mechanism of performance evaluation of regional governors

To ensure implementation of policy goals across the country, it is crucial to put in place an adequate system of motivation for chief executives at all levels of government. To be effective, this system should contain an appropriate mechanism of performance assessment based on a comprehensive set of measurable indicators (Kusek & Rist, 2004) that generate an objective picture of the situation in the selected areas of observation.

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s and the formation of the modern Russian Federation, the system of strict federal control over the regions was demolished. However, it was not replaced by a unified, balanced, and effective system of relations between Moscow and the regions. The distribution of authority and duties between the federal and regional executive power agencies was not always clearly defined, which negatively affected the overall performance of the government and citizens’ trust in federal and regional authorities (Polishchuk & Syunyaev, 2013). The country lacked a normative base that could provide equal rights to all subjects of the federation in their relationship with the central government. Moreover, the weak central

government was not able to set up and enforce the same “rules of the game” for the whole state. As a result, some regions and their heads (governors, presidents, mayors) enjoyed a privileged status in their relations with Moscow compared to other subjects of the federation (Baranov et al., 2015).

In an attempt to restore the management capacity of the federal authority, the new president (elected in March 2000) established a system of federal districts in May 2000. Currently, there are eight federal districts in Russia, each incorporating 6 to 18 subjects of the federation. Each district is headed by a presidential envoy who is responsible for, inter alia, oversight of the executive leadership of the respective regions. Another measure to strengthen the “vertical hierarchy of authority” (enacted in 2004) provided for the replacement of the system of gubernatorial elections by the population of the respective subjects of the federation with the system of appointment of governors by the president (Frye, Reuter, & Szakonyi, 2014).

The system of a nationwide performance assessment of regional governors was introduced in the Russian Federation in 2007, together with other significant public sector innovations within the framework of a comprehensive reform package known as the “Administrative reform.” The reform was launched in 2003 and is still being implemented.

With appointments replacing elections, a mechanism for evaluating the performance of governors was set up in 2007 (Baranov et al., 2015; Buckley & Reuter, 2015; Buckley et al., 2016). That year, President Vladimir Putin issued Presidential Decree № 825 requesting that the Ministry of Regional Development of the Russian Federation define a set of criteria for assessing the socio-economic effectiveness of Russian regional chief executives. The same year is broadly viewed as the starting point of the first phase of the development of the performance evaluation system of the abovementioned officials. A system of detailed statistical reporting, including a list of respective criteria, had been developed to assess the governors’ performance. The system comprised 43 socio-economic indicators, among which were growth in gross regional product, percentage of the population living below the poverty line, per capita new housing construction, education expenditures per pupil, crime rates, reduction of bureaucratic hurdles to doing business, proportion of the population satisfied with the quality of services provided by regional and local administrations, etc. (Turovsky, 2010).

The newly introduced mechanism of performance measurement was intended to evaluate the extent of the success or failure of the governors’ activities using economic and social metrics reflecting the rate and quality of

development of the regions they managed. The collected data were based mainly on statistical information provided by the Federal State Statistics Service of the Russian Federation and were used to calculate the performance ratings of the regional governors.

The list of abovementioned criteria was regularly revised and expanded so that by 2010, it included 319 performance indicators (Bocharova, 2012). Starting in 2011, the mechanism of performance evaluation based on the indicators of regional socio-economic and demographic development was revised to also include public opinion of the overall performance of regional administrations.

It is noteworthy that at that time, many observers and experts in the field (Reuter, 2015; Rochlitz, 2016; Zhuravskaya, 2010) pointed to a certain disconnect between the information generated by the performance assessment procedures from performance improving strategies and HR management decisions. They also pointed to the existence of informal criteria applied in the assessment of regional governors in addition to the formal ones. These informal requirements included the extent of political loyalty. It was manifested above all by the results of elections for the ruling United Russia Party in a region, and the demonstration of loyalty was viewed as a decisive factor in whether governors retained their jobs (Egorov & Sonin, 2011).

Gubernatorial elections were restored in 2012 by then President Dmitry Medvedev. However, the nomination of candidates continued to depend largely on the presidential administration, and a new signature-collecting requirement known as the “municipal filter” made it quite difficult for opposition candidates to register for elections without official backing (Goloso, 2014). In line with existing legislation, President Putin could dismiss regional heads and appoint “acting” governors, who then had to stand for election on united election day in September of the respective year. The initial mechanism of performance evaluation envisaged that regions and their respective governors would compete for the highest ratings. This would thus ensure re-appointment (re-election) of the heads of the subjects of the federation and additional “bonuses” to the regions. Such bonuses would come, for example, in the form of budgetary grants to those regions that received the highest rankings (Bocharova, 2012; Rochlitz, Kulpina, Remington, & Yakovlev, 2015).

However, such an approach clearly ignored distinct, and sometimes profound, differences among the regions in terms of their economic potential and dependence on external factors in their development. The system was too complicated, comprised too many indicators, and lacked clear-cut priorities. Consequently, in 2012, it was replaced by another system of performance measurement that was

generally more transparent and easier in application and considered the dynamics of the development of each of the subjects of the federation. This change allowed even the subjects of the federation with quite “modest” baseline characteristics in terms of available natural resources, demographic situations, and development of industry and transport infrastructures to have real opportunities to reach top levels of respective ratings.

On August 21, 2012, President Vladimir Putin signed Presidential Decree № 1199 “On Assessing the Performance of Executive Authorities in the Russian Federation Constituent Entities,” which comprised a new list of performance indicators. The decree marked the beginning of the second phase of the development and application of the mechanism of performance assessment of regional governors. The list comprised only 12 indicators that reflected regional socio-economic and demographic parameters of development, as well as resident opinion of the regional authorities’ performance, as shown in Table 1. To a large extent, it facilitated “calculations” in drawing up the respective ratings. The original objective was to make career prospects and the job security of governors depend on the economic and social development metrics of a respective region, as well as on the extent of public approval of the activities of regional elites.

Initially, the task of drawing up ratings of the governors based on the above indicators was assigned to the Ministry of Regional Development of the Russian Federation. However, in 2012, this task was outsourced to the Civil Society Development Foundation (CSDF), a non-government organization. The latter used different sources to collect the necessary data, including population surveys, official statistics, and expert evaluations (CSDF, 2014). Polls were conducted to determine levels of public satisfaction with education, healthcare,

Table 1. List of indicators of the performance evaluation of Russian governors, adopted on August 21, 2012, and amended on January 16, 2015.

1	Average life expectancy in the region
2	Amount of investment in fixed capital
3	Average annual unemployment
4	Volume of goods and services produced by small-size enterprises and individual entrepreneurs
5	Volume of tax and non-tax revenues in the consolidated regional budget
6	Number of inhabitants
7	Real cash income of the population
8	Proportion of newly constructed housing against gross housing stock
9	Percentage of secondary school graduates who have not passed the unified state exam
10	Assessment by citizens of the performance of the regional authorities
11	Average mortality rate
12	Proportion of homeless children in state care institutions of all types

Source: Decree of the President of the Russian Federation “On assessing the performance of executive authorities in the Russian Federation constituent entities,” (Presidential decree 1199, 2012) (<http://docs.cntd.ru/document/902364967>)

government service provision, and the performance of regional administrations.

Several significant developments in the overall system of governor performance assessment took place in 2017. The president made an unusually large number of appointments at the gubernatorial level, replacing 22 heads of the subjects of the federation over the course of one year (two on charges of corruption). This was the largest wave of governor dismissals in the last 10 years.

On November 14, 2017, President Putin approved new criteria for governor performance assessment by signing Presidential Decree (Ukaz) № 548. The list incorporated 24 key indicators, as shown in Table 2. More importantly, the decree assigned public opinion the highest priority in evaluating the performance of regional authorities (Sobesednik, 2017). This notable shift in the overall approach to governor performance assessment marked the start of the third phase in the development of the performance assessment mechanism of high-ranking regional officials.

Although the new criteria were officially announced on November 16, 2017, they had been used since early 2017 to conduct the governor performance evaluations (Kolomiets, 2017). The new list incorporated criteria that also reflected the extent of equity, social justice, and

Table 2. List of indicators of the performance evaluation of Russian governors, approved in November 2017.

1	Average life expectancy
2	Dynamics of average monthly wages
3	Ratio of average family income and costs of a fixed set of basic consumer goods and services
4	Percentage of population living below the poverty line
5	Coefficient of affordability of decent housing (number of years required for an average family of three persons to purchase a standard flat (54 sq. meters)
6	Percentage of newly arrived migrants (per 10,000 population)
7	Dynamics of birth rate
8	Crime rate
9	Quality and accessibility of communal services
10	Per capita gross regional product
11	Per capita volume of investment in fixed capital
12	Investment climate index
13	Ratio of average number of workers in small and medium enterprises to overall number of citizens in the region
14	Density of highways and roads meeting standard quality requirements
15	Per capita taxation revenue in the region
16	Ratio of the volume of state debt of the subject of the federation (region) to overall annual budgetary income of the region
17	Volume of outstanding payables under loans
18	Level of unemployment
19	Estimate by citizens of their and their children’s opportunities for self-realization
20	Extent of customer satisfaction with the quality of services in education, healthcare, and social protection
21	Percentage of citizens who have encountered cases of corruption
22	Assessment by citizens of the performance of regional authorities
23	Assessment by citizens of the effectiveness of the activities of the national government
24	Results of independent assessment of the quality of services provided by public sector organizations

Source: REGNUM News on November 16, 2017 (<https://regnum.ru/news/2345719.html>).

quality of life in each region. The latter comprise, inter alia, “estimate by citizens of their and their children’s opportunities for self-realization”; “average life expectancy”; “percentage of the population living below the poverty line”; “extent of customer satisfaction with the quality of services in education, healthcare, and social protection”; etc. However, the available documents do not disclose the weights that were given to each indicator.

Results

The new approach to regional governor performance evaluation

There are four major ratings in Russia that are considered (to a greater or lesser extent) in governor performance assessment and are most frequently referred to in mass media. These include the Rating of the Civil Society Development Foundation (CSDF), the National Rating prepared by the Center of Information Communications (CIC), the Kremlin Rating drawn up by the Center of the Development of Regional Policy (CDRP), and the Life Quality Rating compiled by the RIA Rating Agency. Among these four ratings, only the last is drafted by an institution (RIA Rating Agency) that was established and funded by the government. The rest are non-governmental organizations, which may, however, receive government funding for the realization of various projects.

Although the above ratings may differ in order of the priority and weight they give to various aspects of the situation in each region and performance of governors, they have at least one thing in common: they all take public and expert opinion into consideration and make their judgement regarding the position of each governor and region in the rating based on their achievements and failures. Moreover, most assessment parameters in these ratings are interrelated and interdependent and, therefore, reflect prevailing trends in the development of the region in the eyes of citizens and experts.

President Putin and the government declared in 2017 that public opinion should form the basis of any performance assessment of the highest executives in each subject of the federation (Stockinfocus, 2017). This signified a distinct new approach by the authorities in evaluation methodology. Since the opinion of citizens and experts is reflected in the four abovementioned ratings, it would be interesting to find out the extent to which major HR management decisions related to governor performance assessments (their reappointments or demotions) were correlated to the grades given in these ratings. In connection with this, the year 2017 is of interest since it witnessed the largest wave of governor dismissals since 2006. These broad-scale changes provide a convenient opportunity to

answer the following question: to what extent do these decisions reflect public and expert opinion?

To test the argument, this paper used the four abovementioned ratings (based on public polls and the opinions of experts) drawn up prior to the broad-scale dismissals of governors in 2017 to identify the best (grade A), average (grade B), and worst (grade C) performing regional heads in this group. In doing so, the conducted analysis also takes into account the dynamics of the socio-economic parameters of each region and the performance of the respective governors.

As of January 1, 2018, the total number of subjects of the federation (and governors) was 85. Each rating allows us to define three main categories of regions and governors – those performing above average (grade A category), at the average level (grade B category), and below average (grade C category). The first and third groups are made up of 25 governors each and the second comprises 35 governors. Table 3 illustrates one of the major findings of the study. The data from four key ratings were analyzed to identify the number of regions (in the list of those 20 where the governor was demoted) with the aggregate index C, “below-average performance.”

The best possible total result for each region is four Grade As (above-average performance) and four pluses (positive dynamics). The worst possible total result is four Grade Cs (below-average performance) and four minuses (negative dynamics). The following regions (and governors) received the aggregate index C – “below-average performance”: (1) those with Grade Cs in all ratings and no more than two pluses (positive dynamics); (2) those with at least three Grade Cs and no more than one plus (positive dynamics); (3) those with four minuses (negative dynamics) and no more than one Grade A (above-average performance); (4) those with three minuses (negative dynamics), and no Grade As (above-average performance); and (5) those with at least two minuses (negative dynamics), at least two Grade Cs, no Grade As, and no Grade Bs with pluses (positive dynamics). The resulting aggregate index (C, B, or A) demonstrates the average performance of a governor during his/her time in office, also considering the dynamics of changes.

The aggregate indexes in the grid (Table 3), which accumulated data from four ratings, clearly indicate that only 9 out of the 20 regions (i.e., 45%) where governors lost their job fall into the “below-average performance” category (Grade C). In other words, the findings do not provide sufficient grounds to conclude that, at present, there is a strong correlation between a weak performance of regional leaders reflected in public and expert opinion and the probability of them losing their post or remaining in office for shorter than the originally planned term.

Table 3. The evaluation grid of the 20 regions* where governors lost their job in 2017, comprising the results of the four key ratings drawn up within the period of early 2016 to early 2017.

Subject of the federation (region)	Governors' (and their respective regions) performance ratings					Aggregate index
	CSDF rating (June 2016)	National rating (April 2016)	Kremlin rating (November 2016)	Life quality RIA rating (February 2017)		
1 Adygeya	B (+)	C (+)	C (+)	B (n)	B	
2 Buryatia	C (-)	C (n)	C (-)	C (n)	C	
3 Dagestan	A (-)	B (n)	C (-)	C (n)	B	
4 Ivanovo	B (-)	B (-)	B (n)	B (-)	C	
5 Karelia	C (-)	C (n)	C (-)	C (n)	C	
6 Krasnoyarsk	C (-)	C (n)	B (-)	B (+)	B	
7 Mariy El	C (-)	B (-)	B (+)	B (+)	B	
8 Nenets	B (-)	A (+)	A (-)	C (+)	B	
9 Nizhny Novgorod	C (-)	B (-)	C (-)	A (n)	B	
10 Novgorod	B (-)	B (n)	C (-)	B (-)	C	
11 Novosibirsk	C (-)	C (+)	B (-)	B (+)	B	
12 Omsk	C (-)	C (-)	A (n)	B (-)	B	
13 Oryol	C (-)	C (+)	B (n)	B (-)	B	
14 Perm	C (-)	C (-)	C (-)	B (-)	C	
15 Primorsky	B (-)	B (-)	C (-)	B (+)	C	
16 Pskov	B (-)	B (-)	C (n)	B (n)	B	
17 Ryazan	C (n)	C (-)	C (-)	A (-)	C	
18 Samara	B (-)	B (-)	C (-)	A (-)	C	
19 Udmurtia	C (-)	C (n)	C (-)	B (+)	C	
20 Voronezh	A (+)	A (-)	A (n)	A (n)	A	

* The table gives the names of the regions, not governors.

Sources: reports on the governors' efficiency rating (<http://civilfund.ru/mat/101>; <http://crp.ru/ratings>; <http://riarating.ru/regions>; <http://russia-rating.ru/info/13059.html>)

Grade: Grade A – above-average performance (governors in the first 25 places in each rating); Grade B – average performance (middle group from 26th to 60th place in each rating); Grade C – below-average performance (the last 25 governors in each rating).

Plus/minus sign refers to the dynamics of performance compared to the previous year: (+) positive; (n) no change; (-) negative.

Since public and expert opinion is not a major factor threatening the governors' job security, this paper attempted to identify a possible linkage between governors' career prospects and the demonstrated electoral support of the ruling party by the population of their regions in federal and regional elections. For this end, this study collected data indicating the extent of the United Russia Party's success during the 2016 parliamentary elections in each of the 20 regions and compared the accumulated data with the average election result figures of the ruling party across the country (54.2%), as shown in Table 4.

These findings do not support the assertion that there is a strong correlation between the capacity of a governor to mobilize votes for the ruling party and his/her job security (at least in the year 2017). Seven out of the twenty (35%) regions showed better than average national results; nonetheless, their governors lost their jobs. Some of these governors performed exceptionally well, for example, in Dagestan, with almost 89% of the votes in favor of the ruling party. Only four regions on the list demonstrated downright weak election outcomes for the United Russia Party, that is, below 40%. Moreover, if regional election results are matched with average figures in the respective federal okrug (district), the number of regions on the list performing well in this respect would increase.

Table 4. Percentage of votes given to the United Russia party in the 2016 parliamentary elections in each of the selected 20 subjects of the federation (cross-country average is 54.2%).

Subjects of the federation	% of votes given to United Russia Party
1 Adygeya	59.4
2 Buryatia	43.3
3 Dagestan	88.9
4 Ivanovo	42.4
5 Karelia	37.3
6 Krasnoyarsk	40.4
7 Mariy El	46.7
8 Nenets	67.1
9 Nizhny Novgorod	58.1
10 Novgorod	40.1
11 Novosibirsk	38.3
12 Omsk	36.3
13 Oryol	47.9
14 Perm	42.7
15 Primorsky	39
16 Pskov	45.1
17 Ryazan	54.5
18 Samara	50.8
19 Udmurtia	55.5
20 Voronezh	58.7

Source: Results of the 2016 parliamentary elections (<https://vsevybory.ru/golosovanie-po-vyboram-v-gosudarstvennyu-dumu-2016/>)

The assessment of the mechanism of performance evaluation of regional governors conducted in 2007-2017

Undoubtedly, there were positive elements introduced in the system of regional governor performance evaluation during the years 2007–2017, namely: (1) many of the applied criteria were designed to “trace” the socially

meaningful impact of the activities of regional governors, in particular, the enforcement of the principles of equity, social justice, and ensuring a high “quality of life,” and, hence, reflected the interests of the majority of citizens in the respective regions; (2) the indicators used covered various aspects of the governors’ activities and were sufficiently comprehensive; (3) the collected data and ratings were open to the public, and the mechanism of collection was more transparent; (4) a large number of indicators reflected public and expert opinion concerning the performance of regional administrations; (5) information pertaining to the dynamics of the parameters of development and public opinion was included in the applied methodology in addition to the static registration of these parameters; and (6) there was wide engagement of NGOs in the process of compiling ratings assessing the performance of Russian regional administrations.

However, the newly developed system of governor performance evaluation approved in 2012, and then expanded and modified in 2017, also has room for criticism. First, it comprised criteria that either largely overlapped (e.g. life expectancy, mortality rate, and population growth) or reflected outcomes that depended to a larger degree on external factors that were, in most cases, beyond the control of the governors, for example, the level of unemployment in their regions. Second, the applied methodology envisaged that data would be collected to reflect one-year cycles of the development of a region, and this complicated the assessments made within smaller time intervals. Third, as a rule, the adopted lists of criteria of performance evaluation did not clarify what weight should be assigned to each indicator. Fourth, most measures and interventions undertaken by the governors and regional governments affected the targeted parameters and respective indicators only in the long run. As a rule, the indicators did not trace intermediate short-term results, yet rewards and punishments were linked to annual improvements. Fifth, some of the selected criteria to a considerable extent were tied to the outcomes of the activities of federal government agencies and institutions, with regional governments playing only a secondary role in the achievement of these results. Sixth, the 100% increase in the total number of performance criteria in 2017 was not properly justified, as there is a high probability it will complicate governor performance assessment. The application of too many indicators (e.g., 24 against 8–10) makes objective assessment more difficult, as there are always areas where the situation is better or worse.

Within the framework of the adopted methodology, the new indicators of Russian governor performance approved in 2017 are, generally, relevant and justified, especially in terms of their practical application in assessing key aspects of the professional activities of top-level regional executives. However, in view of the

absence of a strong correlation between public opinion and trust (reflected in the major ratings) and governors’ chances of remaining in office or being promoted, the significance of these indicators in motivating governors to ensure steady economic growth, resolve acute socio-economic problems, and raise quality of life standards is seriously weakened.

Discussion and conclusions

The results of the study demonstrate that the new methodology of Russian governors’ performance evaluation, adopted in 2017, provides for the application of indicators that reflect the principles of equity, social justice, and “quality of life.” It is relevant and generally appropriate for the assessment of the activities of top-level regional executives. At the same time, the findings indicate that the declared shift in the methodology of performance evaluation of regional governors toward decisive weight, which should be given to public and expert opinion concerning the socio-economic situation in the respective region and the performance of its governor, has not been realized in practice yet.

Overall, the findings confirm the existing divergence between the formal and informal criteria used in the evaluation of the performance of regional top-level executives in Russia. The analysis conducted revealed that less than half (45%) of the governors demoted in 2017 belonged to the group displaying “below-average performance” (Grade C), as defined by the aggregate score of the four most prominent ratings drawn up by independent and government-affiliated agencies in Russia in late 2016 and early 2017. Similarly, the findings do not support the assertion that there is a strong correlation between the capacity of a governor to mobilize votes for the ruling party and his/her job security. This conclusion is valid at least for the year 2017.

The current practice of performance evaluation of the heads of the subjects of the federation has not yet been established as an integral part of the HR management system. This study found no statistically significant correlation between the evaluation based on the application of the new approach and criteria and the reappointment or demotion of governors. The information generated from the assessment procedure is disconnected from performance improvement strategies and, more importantly, from key HR management decisions. In this context, the role of the public and the expert community in delivering their opinion, which could affect HR management decisions with respect to the heads of the subjects of the federation, remains marginal.

The derived findings have practical implications. They demonstrate that governors in Russia do not receive clear signals indicating the main criteria of their performance evaluation. This means that they are, in a way, disoriented in terms of prioritizing their activities at best, or motivated to seek informal ties and connections to ensure career longevity at worst. Both scenarios are detrimental to the interests of the wider public and society. It also means that urgent steps should accordingly be taken to correct the current practices of HR management of top-level regional executives.

The findings of previous research have demonstrated that Russian authorities at the federal and regional levels are often in obvious need of the legitimacy they acquire from collaboration with representatives of civil society (Bindman, 2015). However, the outcomes of this collaboration do not always meet the expectations of citizens. Regular assessment of Russian governors' performance conducted by several NGOs yields data that are not really considered in HR management decisions. Preservation of this situation questions the necessity of the evaluation exercise as such since the latter's original main objective of improving governor performance cannot be achieved under these conditions. The task of creating an effective and client-oriented Russian governor performance evaluation system that combines the inputs of both state and non-governmental organizations and gives priority to evaluation criteria directly linked to the quality of life and social justice in the respective subjects of the federation needs to be geared toward the development of a lasting interface between all major stakeholders that is in line with the principles of collaborative governance.

Collaborative governance is increasingly viewed worldwide as a key instrument in facilitating the resolution of difficulties and constraints faced by public sector institutions (Jung, Mazmanian, & Tang, 2009; Kim, Kim, & Oberg, 2018; Park, Kim, & Rosenbloom, 2017). Its potential covers the entire spectrum of the policy-making process – from design to implementation and evaluation. Among many definitions of collaborative governance, preference goes to “a governing arrangement where one or more public agencies directly engage non-state stakeholders in a collective decision-making process” (Ansell & Gash, 2008, p. 544). The application of the principles of collaborative governance in the system of Russian governor performance evaluation and strengthening the role of non-governmental stakeholders in this system deserves special attention and further exploration, with due consideration given to the peculiarities of the situation in Russia. This may be regarded as a pressing issue for the continuation of the research launched by this study.

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