ANALYSIS

How Putin Rules Russia's Nomenklatura

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Abstract

This analysis investigates Vladimir Putin's strategies for managing Russia's neo-nomenklatura, specifically analyzing deputy ministers and federal executive deputy body heads between 2018 and 2024. Drawing on a comprehensive dataset, we contend that Putin's rule relies on a combination of escalating fear, consistent career incentives, and pervasive socialization. Despite a marked increase in hard repression in 2024, our findings indicate the core mechanisms of elite recruitment, intra-systemic mobility, and post-dismissal integration have largely endured the initial years of the full-scale invasion. This mix of continuity and adaptability in personnel management is key to the regime's sustained resilience through the war.

Pavel Fradkov was appointed deputy minister of defense in June 2024, shortly after Minister of Defense Sergei Shoigu was replaced by Andrei Belousov. Like Belousov, whose father, Rem Belousov, worked as a Soviet economist at Gosplan and advised the Kosygin reforms, Fradkov comes from a notable nomenklatura family. In the 1980s, Pavel's father, Mikhail Fradkov, was a high-ranking official in the Soviet Union's foreign trade hierarchy. Under Putin, Mikhail Fradkov served as Prime Minister from 2004 to 2007 and as director of Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service SVR from 2007 to 2016. He now chairs the board of directors of one of Russia's largest arms manufacturers, Almaz-Antei. Piotr Fradkov, Pavel's brother, is the chairman of the state-owned Promsviazbank, the main lender of Russia's arms industry.

Pavel Fradkov is a good example of the hereditary nature of the post-Soviet Russian ruling class, which inherited political power and access to economic resources from the Soviet Union (Snegovaya and Petrov 2022; Marandici 2024). However, overemphasizing the presence of dynastic families obscures a potentially more fundamental feature of Putinism: the system of recruiting, replacing, and reproducing officials, which increasingly resembles a neo-nomenklatura system. As far back as the early 2000s, scholars pointed to the revival of cadre reserves as a reanimation of the Soviet nomenklatura appointment legacy (Huskey 2004; Kryshtanovskaya 2005). The relationship between cadre reserve membership and career promotion appeared to be weak. Additionally, the recruitment system and the context of post-Soviet Russia's political economy differed significantly from the Soviet personnel system.

Over time, more and more similarities to the classical nomenklatura system have emerged (Petrov 2011; Nisnevich 2014; Petrov 2024; Panfilova 2024). For instance, the seminal role played by the Communist Party and the KGB in overseeing appointments in the Soviet Union has largely been replaced by screening processes in the Presidential Administration and the FSB. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and wartime Putinism have expedited this trend, further blurring the differences. With Western personal sanctions targeting many officials and de facto bans on travel to "unfriendly" countries where these officials previously kept their property, the neo-nomenklatura is increasingly confined within the borders of the Russian Federation. Moreover, as the state's share of the economy increases through state-owned enterprises, state corporations, and public procurement, the role of the private sector in nomenklatura circulation diminishes further. In this analysis, we argue that understanding the transformation of how Putin rules the Russian nomenklatura is pivotal to understanding the resilience of wartime Russia.

The Dataset

To understand how Putin governs the Russian neo-nomenklatura, we focused on a specific group of state officials: deputy ministers and deputy heads of federal executive bodies, such as services and agencies. While these officials may not represent the highest echelon of Russia's ruling class, they play a pivotal role in state governance. They serve as a conduit, connecting ministers—political appointees with close ties to major elite groups—to the rank-and-file bureaucracy. The recent dismissals and appointments of deputy ministers in the aftermath of the dismissal of Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu in May 2024 serve as a salient example of the profound insights that can be gleaned from this stratum. Frequent reshuffles of these deputies could, for example, indicate a major regime destabilization. The data on dismissals and appointments of this fourth tier of the Russian bureaucracy were collected from pravo.gov.ru. The biographical information of these approximately 700

officials was retrieved from publicly available sources and coded—both automatically and manually—from May 2018 to May 2024, a period that corresponds to the entire fourth presidential term of Vladimir Putin. The aforementioned timespan encompasses two significant events: the government reshuffle in 2020, which entailed the dismissal of then-Prime Minister Dmitrii Medvedev and the appointment of Mikhail Mishustin, and the onset of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. This extensive dataset offers a distinctive perspective on personnel politics within a personalist autocracy. The dataset also sheds light on the impact of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine on nomenklatura recruitment in Russia, exploring whether or not the invasion had a significant influence on the recruitment process. The dataset is also forward-looking because many of these officials can be considered part of an emerging bureaucratic ruling class that will play a role in shaping politics in post-Putin Russia.

In the subsequent sections, an inquiry will be made into the three instruments at Putin's disposal for the management of the nomenklatura and for striking a balance between loyalty and technocratic management of the Russian state, namely fear, incentives, and socialization.

Fear

As Russia progresses toward a "dictatorship of fear," it has become evident that repression is not only directed toward non-systemic opposition and other regime critics, but also increasingly applied to systemic actors, including elites and the nomenklatura. The full-scale invasion accelerated this trend, albeit in a phased manner that depended on the type of repression applied (soft or hard).

Soft repression was implemented from the early phase of the war. These measures comprised a series of substantial restrictions, including limitations on foreign travel and domestic movement within the Russian Federation. Senior officials were asked to hand over their diplomatic and private passports to security officers. Travel abroad was permitted exclusively to destinations not included on the government's list of unfriendly countries, contingent on prior approval from the Kremlin (Seddon 2023). Individuals not subject to such travel restrictions were routinely subjected to interrogation by the FSB upon their return from international travel (Kozlov 2023). The nomenklatura experienced a constant fear of surveillance by the security services, both in the office and during work and private meetings outside of government buildings. To protect their location, they often took measures such as turning off mobile phones or opting for a walk in a park over a cafe (Prokopenko 2025). Another comparatively soft repressive measure included the informal ban on stepping down from one's position of one's own volition. The actors in question were stuck in their current positions, bound by the Kremlin's desires. The security services exerted informal pressure to convey to officials intending to leave their positions that subsequent appointments in the state or private sectors would be impeded. It is important to note, however, that this does not imply that no officials were dismissed in the wake of the war's onset. Our dataset indicates that the monthly dismissal rates observed in 2022 and 2023 do not seem to deviate significantly from those recorded in previous years. The elevated turnover rate observed in 2020 and 2021 was predominantly attributable to the government reshuffle that occurred in January 2020, with Dmitrii Medvedev relinquishing his position to Mikhail Mishustin. The length of time in office for dismissed officials was similar after the war compared to before. Although a considerable number of dismissals were seemingly routine, the Kremlin also demonstrated through public channels that certain dismissals were a consequence of policy failures or disloyalty. In October 2022, Deputy Minister of Transport Aleksandr Sukhanov was dismissed shortly after explosions on the Crimean Bridge, a major security breach. Consequently, supervisory powers over the bridge were transferred from MinTrans to the FSB. In February 2024, Denis Guliaev, who served as Deputy Head of the Federal Service for the Control of Alcohol and Tobacco Markets (Rosalkogoltabakkontrol), was dismissed. Pro-Kremlin outlets have advanced the narrative that Guliaev's dismissal was a consequence of his alleged failure to disclose foreign property holdings.

Trends in the use of criminal proceedings as a form of **hard repression** remained relatively stable until 2023. According to our dataset, from 2018 to 2023, an average of slightly more than two criminal cases per year were initiated against deputy ministers and other deputy heads of federal executive bodies. However, in 2024 alone, 10 deputy heads were arrested on criminal charges, including three deputy Ministers of Defense (Timur Ivanov, Pavel Popov, and Dmitrii Bulgakov). As a general rule, criminal charges were brought against officials with a civilian background: not only do most officials have civilian backgrounds, but civilian officials are also much easier targets for law enforcement. While corruption was cited as the primary rationale for the initiation of criminal proceedings, the scope of this alleged corruption has been observed to shift from the civilian sector to the military domain. The war against Ukraine is personally important to Putin and his regime, so he has sought greater "efficiency." The war has created new, large-scale flows of rents into which key business elites from the Putin era have successfully inserted themselves. At the same time, the overall volume of rents has contracted and shifted into the sphere of military expendi-

tures. This has heightened conflicts among elites over access to these rents (Yakovlev 2025).

Corruption has historically been a primary catalyst for the functioning of the Russian state apparatus. Since 2024, however, corruption charges have evolved into a tool utilized not solely for internal elite conflict, but also to send a clear signal that individuals engaging in excessive and unsanctioned rent-seeking activities within the national defense sector could face severe consequences. This trend is further substantiated by data on other officials across the public sector, as evidenced by a substantial surge in criminal proceedings following the start of Putin's fifth presidential term in May 2024 (Agentstvo 2024). The recent escalation in hard repression against the nomenklatura has reached a critical point, marked by the alleged suicide of Minister of Transport Roman Starovoit in early July 2025. Starovoit might have been facing imminent criminal charges for corruption in defense construction during his tenure as governor of Kursk, a fact that is particularly salient given Ukraine's invasion of the Kursk region in August 2024. The death of Starovoit, who was purportedly a protégé of the Rotenberg brothers and had been a deputy minister of transport in September–October 2018, sends an unambiguous signal that no individual in the federal executive is above reproach. Paradoxically, officials within the system perceived the suicide as a form of resistance: whereas the nomenklatura are traditionally expected to acquiesce to their fate and accept a prison sentence, suicide is one of the few ways to leave the nomenklatura system of personnel circulation (Rustamova and Liutova 2025).

Incentives

However, (wartime) dictators cannot rule by fear alone. They need to provide incentives to maintain the loyalty of the nomenklatura and bind them to the regime. Such incentives could include increased rent-seeking opportunities for those involved in wartime mobilization combined with decreased public scrutiny, as the publication of income declarations has been waived since December 2022 due to the war against Ukraine.

Below, we focus on career promotion in the Russian nomenklatura and what it reveals about wartime incentives for Russian officials. One important indicator we tracked was the job held by these officials before they were appointed as deputy ministers or deputy heads of other federal executive bodies. Each year, between 70 and 80% of appointed officials previously held another position in the federal executive branch. Often, this was a lower-ranking position, such as department head, within the same ministry or another executive body, where appointment as deputy minister was the next step in their career. However, lateral rotations also occur, in which officials are appointed to positions of similar administrative weight across the federal executive. The second and third most common previous jobs that officials held before being appointed deputy head were positions in the regional executive (10–15%), state companies (5–10%), and private businesses (below 5%). Other positions, such as those in academia, foundations, or parliament, played a negligible role. The composition of previous experience before appointment remained largely similar during the period under investigation (2018–2024). The only exception was in 2022, when recruitment from the federal executive fell below 60 percent, while recruitment from the regional executive rose above 25 percent. However, this was an anomaly that normalized in subsequent years. This essentially implies that the war has not disrupted the established recruitment system, which draws primarily from the federal and regional executives—a closed, institutionalized mechanism of upward career mobility. These more systematic, clockwork-like recruitment patterns in the nomenklatura increasingly contrast with the higher elite levels and the intensifying personalization of the regime, which values personal loyalty to Putin above all else. Some major rotations of 2024 vividly illustrate this: Aleksei Diumin (a former Putin bodyguard) became secretary of the State Council; Irina Podnosova (one of his university classmates) became chairwoman of the Supreme Court; Valerii Pikalev (another former bodyguard) became head of the Federal Customs Service; Anna Tsivileva (his first cousin once removed) was appointed state secretary of the Ministry of Defense; her husband, Sergei Tsivilev, became minister of energy; Dmitrii Patrushev, the son of Nikolai Patrushev, became deputy prime minister; and Boris Kovalchuk, son of Iurii Kovalchuk, became chairman of the Accounts Chamber.

The Russian top elite can be considered gerontocratic, as many of those in Putin's inner circle are over 70 years old, including public administrators and business tycoons. According to an early 2022 calculation, several age-related trends can be observed in the Russian nomenklatura (Savina 2022): the closer a state institution is to the president, the older its officials are on average, and the more pensioners it has. From 2012 to 2022, all state bodies except gubernatorial posts experienced an increase in average age, and there was lower turnover among officials in public bodies closer to the presidency. Thus, the average age of officials in the Security Council was 62 years old just before the beginning of the full-scale war. In the Presidential Administration, it was 58 years. Among ministers and heads of federal executive bodies, it was 54 years. Governors were 51 years old on average.

Our data show similar trends. Deputy heads tend to be younger than their superiors in ministries and other

federal executive bodies. Moreover, we confirm the trend that officials in executive bodies subordinate to the President are considerably older than those in bodies overseen by the Prime Minister. For instance, the average age was more than 53 years in the former and more than 44 years in the latter in 2020. However, there is one notable deviation from previous findings: According to our data, the average age of deputy heads decreased from approximately 49 years in 2018 to just over 46 years in 2023. Additionally, the difference between presidential and prime-ministerial executive bodies has narrowed over time. Whether this trend will persist from 2024 onwards, as the war drags on, remains to be seen. For our period of investigation, however, it appears that the nomenklatura recruitment system retained the potential for age-based upward mobility, though a glass ceiling undoubtedly exists for top positions in the ruling class.

The exit fates of deputy heads are crucial because the opportunities that these subsequent jobs offer will also considerably shape the officials' behavior while they are still in office. Due to the hierarchical nature of the executive branch, not everyone can advance in their career and become a minister. It is therefore unsurprising that only 20 to 30% of dismissed deputy heads are appointed to another position in the federal executive branch. Equally, if not more, important are well-paid jobs in state corporations and state companies, with 20 to 30% of those dismissed moving on to such positions. Meanwhile, 10 to 20% move on to senior management positions in the private sector. For example, Iurii Tsvetkov was dismissed as deputy minister of transport in January 2021 and was later appointed deputy general director of Sovcomflot, Russia's largest and state-owned shipping company. Savva Shipov, who was deputy minister of economic development from 2016 to 2020, was subsequently appointed deputy general director of digital transformation at Uralchem, a private manufacturer of chemical products controlled at the time by business tycoon Dmitrii Mazepin. These are typical examples demonstrating that exiting the federal executive branch is not necessarily a demotion, but rather a legitimate career path within the current system. There are few indications that these revolving doors have closed due to the full-scale invasion. For instance, Rostelecom alone hired three former deputy ministers in 2023 and 2024 (the Ministry of Digital Development had the highest rate of turnover among deputy ministers in our dataset). Exits to regional government positions are more ambiguous with regard to career prospects, while other appointments to foundations, academia, parties, or parliaments are clear demotions. Between 10 and 20% of exit fates are coded as "unknown" annually, implying that we were unable to determine an official's subsequent position and that these officials were permanently removed from the nomenklatura circulation. If the number of "unknown" officials increased significantly after February 2022, it could mean that more officials were removed or left the nomenklatura as "soft defections" from the regime due to discontent with the war against Ukraine. Our evidence is inconclusive in this regard because it can sometimes take more than a year for officials to find another job in the system. It is clear, though, that those who consciously left this well-oiled system of nomenklatura rotation did so quietly, not in loud protest. Overall, however, we conclude that, at least through the end of Putin's fourth presidential term in spring 2024, the war has not considerably impacted the nomenklatura's exit options following dismissals from deputy positions.

Socialization

Another crucial mechanism by which the Russian regime forces officials to submit and adapt to environmental circumstances rather than actively shaping or contesting them is socialization. One aspect of the long-term socialization of the nomenklatura is Moscow-centrism. Between 70 and 80% of deputy heads appointed each year were previously based primarily in Moscow. This does not imply that they were all born or raised in Moscow, but rather that to advance in the federal executive branch, one must move to Moscow at an early stage, whether for a university degree or for a lower-ranking position in public administration. Regional networks certainly play a role in patronage appointments in the federal executive, but Moscow socialization is paramount. Beyond Moscow, "roving" officials with no firm regional base come in second with 5 to 10%, followed by St. Petersburg. Regions such as Tatarstan, Novosibirsk, and Saratov are not even systematically represented in appointments across the years.

This tendency is also evident in higher education. Virtually all deputy heads have at least one university degree, and those from Moscow-based institutions clearly dominate, becoming even more prominent with a second degree. For example, five times as many officials earned their first graduate degree from a Moscow institution as from a St. Petersburg one. A second degree from the Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration (RANEPA) is becoming increasingly vital for a career in the federal executive. Of the appointed officials in our dataset, 70 attended a second degree program at RANEPA. Moscow State University ranks second with approximately 20 degrees, followed by MGIMO, the State University of Management, and the Kutafin State Law University, at fewer than 10 degrees each. RANEPA is closely controlled by the First Deputy Head of the Presidential Administration, Sergei Kirienko, and plays a vital role in training civil servants for the presidential cadre reserve, as

well as in programs such as the Leaders of Russia competition, the School for Governors, and the "Time of Heroes" program. These continuing education programs and indoctrination with regard the war against Ukraine and to Russia's place in the world at RANEPA will be crucial in shaping the professional compass and worldview of Russian officials beyond the era of Putinism.

Another aspect of this socialization is the "localization" of the nomenklatura and the decreased potential for foreign influence on domestic recruitment patterns. Higher education is also very indicative of this. Fewer than five percent of appointed deputy heads graduated from a Western university each year. Clearly, a degree from a Russian university is essential for a nomenklatura career. Until early 2024, however, there were no indications that degrees from Western institutions were used as a pretext for purges. In fact, there are several notable examples of officials with foreign credentials who have played an instrumental role in safeguarding Russia's wartime governance. The recent appointment of Andrei Nikitin, former Novgorod governor and MBA graduate of the Stockholm School of Economics, as deputy minister of transport in February 2025 and then minister of transport in July 2025 is a case in point. Although Nikitin takes a technocratic approach to governance, he and his family have business ties to Arkady Rotenberg, as well as to a close friend of Putin's daughter Ekaterina Tikhonova (Basmanov 2025). Other nomenklatura in this category include deputy energy minister Pavel Sorokin, who has a finance degree from the University of London. In 2023, the *Wall Street Journal* called Sorokin Russia's "secret weapon" for blunting the impact of Western sanctions on Russian oil (Faucon 2023). Deputy minister of finance Aleksei Sazonov has an Executive MBA from Oxford Saïd Business School and is responsible for tax and customs policy, while Aleksandr Maslennikov (Geneva Institute of International and Development Studies), a close ally of presidential aide and chief advisor of Putin on the economy Maksim Oreshkin, was appointed deputy secretary of Russia's Security Council in March 2025. Thus far, it appears that a foreign degree is not detrimental to one's career if the official applies their acquired knowledge and networks for the benefit of the Russian regime.

As for Western personal sanctions, these punitive measures do little to influence the career trajectories of the Russian nomenklatura. The targeted measures are incoherently applied across the four sanctioning entities—the US, the UK, the EU, and Ukraine—that we analyzed, and the vast majority of deputy heads in our dataset are not sanctioned at all. Our analyses demonstrate no observable effect on various outcomes, such as the promotion or tenure of officials in the federal executive. This suggests that, as far as our data go, Western personal sanctions are irrelevant. They neither incite Russian officials to turn against Putin because of the costs of the war nor are they "badges of honor" that boost the career chances of aspiring officials.

A "New Elite"?

In late February 2024, Vladimir Putin declared that veterans of the "Special Military Operation" are Russia's real elite and should assume leadership roles in the Russian government. In response, the "Time of Heroes" training program was launched in March 2024. As our dataset ends in May of that year, we are unable to report here on the program's effectiveness. However, other observers suggest that the appointments participants received do not support the idea that veterans could become a "new elite" (Erlich 2025; Novaya Gazeta Europe 2024). In the first round, only 83 of 44,000 applicants were selected, and their subsequent career patterns suggest they are more likely to be appointed in the regions than in the federal nomenklatura. One example is Olga Koludarova, the deputy minister of education, who managed to leapfrog one level in the administrative hierarchy thanks to her time as minister of education and science in the Russia-occupied "Donetsk People's Republic" from 2022 to 2024. Among her "achievements" in that role were the Russification and forced transfer of Ukrainian children. Another example is Igor Iurgin, a "Hero of Russia" and finalist of the "Time of Heroes" program who was appointed head of the department responsible for state policy in the spheres of upbringing, continuing education, and children's recreation. This position is one level below the rank of federal deputy minister of education.

These "SVO veterans" received appointments in the sphere of indoctrination for good reason. One of the key indicators of the regime's resilience will be whether veterans who were chosen for promotion primarily because of their unequivocal loyalty to Putin and the war effort are also appointed to positions that usually require technocratic expertise. Moreover, it is important to keep in mind that the proportion of deputy ministers and deputy heads of executive bodies appointed annually with a civilian background has remained fairly stable, at roughly 80%. Therefore, for a "new" executive elite to emerge, the scale of appointments of "SVO veterans" would need to increase significantly. Overall, however, the current nomenklatura is not interested in incorporating a "new elite" into their ranks, as their career paths differ greatly from those pre-2022. Rather, members of the nomenklatura aim to reap as much benefit as possible from wartime economics while maintaining their established status.

Conclusion

In this analysis, we argued that Russia's autocrat rules the nomenklatura through fear, incentives, and social-

ization. In the fourth year of Russia's aggression against Ukraine, the Kremlin has considerably increased intra-elite repression as a constituent element of wartime Putinism, while changes in the other two instruments have been slower. Thus far, the 2020 government reshuffle has posed a greater threat to the survival in office of deputy ministers and other deputy heads of federal executive bodies than has the onset of the full-scale invasion in 2022. However, the longer the war continues, the more likely it is that the other two instruments—incentives and socialization—will also change. A massive redistribution of property and changes in state-business relations will likely affect patronage ties and, consequently, recruitment patterns in the executive branch. Regarding the increasing indoctrination of presidential cadre reserves, it will be important to observe how the requirement to openly demonstrate loyalty and share the fundamental ideological principles of wartime Putinism will affect technocratic competence. Long-term economic stagnation could lead to a disruption in the circulation of the nomenklatura as jobs in state companies, the state-dependent private sector, and the federal executive become less appealing. However, as long as an alternative center of power to Putin does not emerge, there is nowhere to defect in times of heightened regime crisis (Burkhardt 2022). As the Prigozhin mutiny demonstrated, the nomenklatura adopts a wait-and-see approach during such moments (Yakovlev et al. 2025). Therefore, as a social stratum, the nomenklatura will defend its privileges against all odds—including against a "new elite"—under and beyond Putinism.

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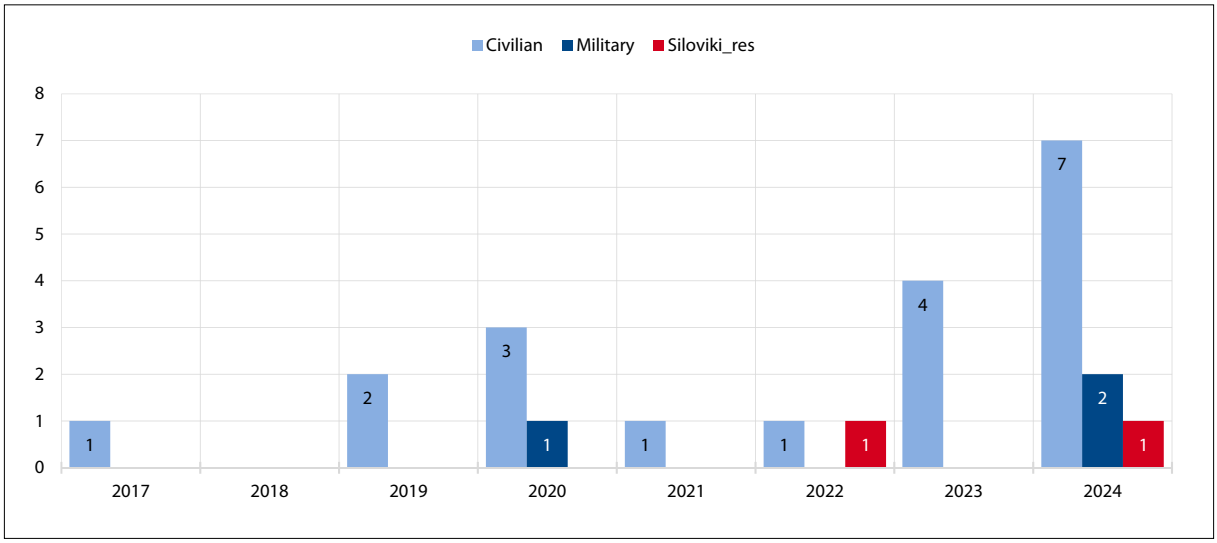
Figure 1: Elite Repression with Criminal Proceedings ("corruption")



Source: Data collected by the authors Burkhardt, Guseva, Mikhasev, Vaisberg and Zheleznova. Remarks: The year indicates when a criminal case was opened against an official, irrespective of whether the official was still in office or had already been dismissed. We categorized officials' backgrounds into four groups: civilian, military, security, and siloviki_res. "Civilian" refers to officials with a civilian background, while "military" refers to officials with a military background in the armed forces. "Security" refers to a background in any executive body that can be considered a legacy of the Soviet KGB, such as the FSB, SVR, FSO, or GUSP. The siloviki_res category captures officials from other force structures that do not have their roots in the Soviet KGB, such as the MVD, MChS, the Prosecutor General's Office, and the Investigative Committee. We expand upon the existing classifications of militocracy and siloviki in Russian politics for two reasons. First, we believe it is important to acknowledge the influence and legacy of the KGB on Russian politics. Second, the distinction between military and security officers is meaningful in a country at war, particularly with regard to the likelihood of a coup and other potential outcomes.