

Too Much Trust: Regional Party Leaders and Local Political Networks under Brezhnev*

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Abstract

Why did the campaign for “trust in cadres” (doverie k kadram) come to be so emblematic of the Brezhnev era? The article argues that following the failure of Khrushchev’s institutional experiments, Brezhnev turned to “trust”—ties grounded in ongoing personal relationships—as a means of lowering the Soviet system’s high transaction costs. Focusing on in-depth studies of three regions, Kabardino-Balkaria, Kirov, and Krasnodar, the article suggests that the leadership system in each shifted towards a pattern marked by modest but stable institutional constraints on regional leaders, a carefully calibrated system of seniority, and a set of order-enhancing norms that are referred to as “hierarchic ethics.” Mirroring the leadership arrangements in Moscow, this combination of regional institutional constraints and political norms was the most compatible with a pattern of informal devices for cooperation which would come under the label of “trust” (doverie). The article contends that while Soviet officials had always resorted to personal relationships in order to attain their official goals, the campaign for “trust in cadres” gave cover to such practices by in effect elevating them into a component part of the regime’s ideology. The article concludes by showing that these arrangements carried with them a variety of dangers, which are then described.

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