Electoral Sources of Authoritarian Resilience in Russia: Varieties of Electoral Malpractice, 2007-2016

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Abstract: Elections do not always serve as instruments of democracy, but can successfully sustain modern forms of authoritarianism by maintaining political cooptation, signaling the regime’s invincibility, distributing rent among elites, and maintaining linkages with territorial communities. Russia exemplifies electoral practices adapted to the needs of authoritarian survival. Recent institutional reforms reflect the regime’s constant adjustment to emerging challenges. This study traces the evolution of the role of elections in Russia for ruling elites, the opposition, and parties. It argues that the information-gathering and co-optation functions of elections help sustain authoritarian rule, whereas insufficient co-optation and failure to signal regime strength may lead to anti-regime mobilization and
weaken the regime. The study utilizes new data from an expert survey on electoral integrity and malpractice in Russia carried out immediately after the legislative elections to the State Duma in September 2016.

Successful uninterrupted election cycles – even rigged and substandard ones – are often expected to foster democratic rule through gradual learning and the embedding of the electoral game as the standard procedure for transitioning power. However, evidence from a number of political regimes suggests that this is not always the case. The post-Soviet space and Southeast Asia are two regions where repetitive elections over more than two decades have not strengthened democratic practices but rather seem to have solidified authoritarian regimes. Russia, for instance, holds regular national and subnational elections, yet a range of indicators clearly indicate that the political regime falls short of an electoral democracy.

The blossoming literature on electoral authoritarianism has already demonstrated that elections do not always serve as instruments of democracy, but can instead successfully sustain modern forms of authoritarianism. Some scholars claim that elections maintain political cooptation, while others draw attention to how elections may scare off the opposition by signaling the regime’s invincibility. Still others stress the role of authoritarian election in distributing rents among elites, or in maintaining linkages with territorial communities. Yet, few studies to date have explicitly examined the possible interplay of these functions and their dependence on the needs of a regime at any given point in time.

Our study addresses this gap by arguing that each autocracy relies on a strategically deployed toolbox of instruments, or “menu of manipulation.”

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to facilitate the exercise of political power over the ruled. The toolbox may include “lies, fear and economic prosperity,” as posited by Adam Przeworski. This involves restricting the flow of information; censorship; targeted or wholesale repression; and specific forms of upholding political legitimacy. On the one hand, elections make it easier for the incumbent to collect politically relevant information. On the other hand, they urge the ruling elites to minimize electoral uncertainty, specifically uncertainty about remaining in office, \textit{ex ante}. This leads incumbents and regime officials to tilt the electoral playing field through a variety of manipulations, from re-drafting electoral and party legislation to ballot stuffing or the intimidation of voters and opposition. Recent research has demonstrated that the role of elections varies dramatically \textit{from one form of authoritarianism to another}, reflecting its ambiguous role in triggering democratization. But does the role of elections also change over time and space \textit{within} a given autocracy?

The research question we pursue in this study is: what role do elections have in authoritarian regimes for \textbf{a}) the regime, \textbf{b}) the opposition, and \textbf{c}) the citizenry? More specifically, how can one understand the functional evolution of the role of elections in the context of electoral authoritarianism and shifts in the international environment?

We pursue this research question with a longitudinal case study of electoral malpractice in the Russian Federation from 2007 to 2016. Russia provides a vivid example of how electoral practices were adapted to the needs of authoritarian survival, sending signals to the real and potential opposition and maintaining political cooptation and rent distribution via electoral means. Moreover, the role and function of elections in upholding electoral authoritarianism has changed from one electoral cycle to another. The recent institutional reforms and the variety of electoral malpractice observed throughout electoral cycles reflect constant adjustment to emerging challenges on the part of the regime.

Previous research has argued that on the eve of national elections, the incumbent deals with a trade-off between the need to learn about the genuine level of popular support and the imperative to keep electoral uncertainty as low as possible. This is known as the Electoral Dictator’s \textit{Dilemma}. The incumbent chooses whether s/he seeks to send a signal


\cite{Malesky} and Schuler, “\textit{Nodding or Needling}.”
about his/her strength or, alternatively, obtain credible information about the compliance of regime subordinates, elites support, and potential pockets of political resistance.

In a contribution to this research, we argue that Russian elections have evolved from being a mere tool for coopting elites or opposition and gathering information about regime support and potential ruptures to being a means of sending signals about the regime’s strength and monitoring loyalty. We thereby consider another trade-off facing an incumbent, namely his/her rewarding strategies. Does s/he wish to please either his/her core constituency (members of the ruling coalition) or swing constituencies? In following existing game-theoretic reasoning, we argue that this depends on the political context and the size of the economic pie.13

In developing this argument, the study draws on a variety of empirical evidence—specifically mass and expert surveys, as well as comparative indicators of electoral integrity. In particular, the study takes advantage of new data on electoral integrity and malpractice in Russia from an expert survey carried out immediately after the legislative elections to the State Duma in September 2016,14 as well as a related survey of electoral integrity in Russian subnational elections.15 Drawing on these and other sources, we show that the role of elections varies depending on ruling elites’ perception of challenges and current needs.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 1 speaks to the theoretical debates over the role of elections under authoritarian regimes in the Russian context. Section 2 analyzes how the role of elections evolved between 2003 and 2016. Section 3 provides an overview of electoral malpractice and discusses how it is linked to the functional role of elections in an authoritarian regime. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the findings and discusses elections as a source of authoritarian legitimacy.

Theory

According to Staffan Lindberg’s theory of democratization by elections,16 even rigged and substandard elections are ultimately conducive to the entrenchment of democracy. This function of elections is expected to operate as outlined by Robert Dahl: the costs of repression gradually increase, while the costs of toleration of political opposition decrease.17

15Pippa Norris, Ferran Martinez i Coma, Alessandro Nai, and Max Grömping. 2015. Perceptions of Electoral Integrity-Russia (PEI-Russia 1.0), At https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/8LYUAY.
16Lindberg, Democratization by Elections.
Authoritarian Resilience in Russia

The regime is expected to become trapped in the electoral game, forced to play by its declared rules. Elections, even flawed ones, purportedly change the balance of costs in a way that encourages democratic transition. Authoritarian regimes strive to avoid bone-crushing repression, as this comes with high reputational costs. It is easier for the regime to govern when it enjoys a good deal of genuine popular support.18 These periodic flawed multi-party and multi-candidate elections constitute a specific mode of democratization by elections. Lindberg,19 Hartlyn and McCoy,20 and Bunce and Wolchik21 provide empirical evidence from Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America and the post-Communist world that this theory holds true.

Morgenbesser and Pepinsky, meanwhile, raise doubts about the unconditional effect of repetitive elections, bringing the Southeast Asian cases of stable and enduring authoritarianism to the table. They claim that competitive multi-party elections constitute the outcome of a democratization process, rather than a cause.22 Furthermore, there are alternative mechanisms which prevent elections from fulfilling their liberalizing potential. These mechanisms are state strength – specifically its infrastructural capacity – and the widespread proliferation of neopatrimonial practices in maintaining political domination.23 A strong state equips the incumbent with a powerful bureaucratic machine that implements his or her policies, including the demand for a controlled and predictable electoral process. Neopatrimonialism, as a form of regular vote buying and clientelism, forces voters into making a choice in favor of short-term benefits instead of voting programmatically.24 As Morgenbesser and Pepinsky stipulate, these mechanisms are autonomous and operate independently of one another.25

The post-Soviet space, and Russia in particular, represents another island of authoritarian resilience, where repetitive multi-party and

19 Lindberg, Democratization by Elections, 329.
22 Morgenbesser and Pepinsky, States, Neopatrimonialism, and Elections.
25 Morgenbesser and Pepinsky, States, Neopatrimonialism, and Elections.
multi-candidate elections for more than two decades have largely failed to produce a democratizing effect.

Other arguments similarly cast doubt on the “democratization by elections” thesis. First, since the theory does not shed light on how many elections would suffice to produce pro-democratic outcomes, it is hard to falsify it empirically. Second, the approach relies heavily on the assumption that political institutions do, by definition, bind the incumbent and reinforce the rule of law. However, authoritarian regimes vary greatly in their level of institutionalization and their reinforcing capacity. Third, if elections inevitably lead to authoritarian subversion, why hold them at all? One may argue that pressure from the international community, coupled with the attitudes of foreign investors and the prestige of membership in an international organization, should provide incentives for the regime to introduce competitive elections and demonstrate – at least on the surface – high electoral integrity. But if there are no international incentives to please foreign investors, or if an incumbent is insulated from such pressures due to oil wealth or other geopolitical factors, and if elections can bring about unexpected anti-incumbent effects, one returns to the same question: Why hold elections at all?

This leads us to the proposition that elections neither force incumbents into adhering to the rules of fair competition nor serve as instruments of external legitimation. Rather, in view of the needs of authoritarian survival, this institution has been adapted to pursue other goals.

The burgeoning literature on authoritarian politics suggests that authoritarian institutions can serve to strengthen the regime’s resilience if they 1) decrease the level of uncertainty by gathering valuable information about the level of support for the regime, and 2) solve the “credible commitment” problem by co-opting potential rivals and monitoring political compliance. Following Malesky and Shuler’s framework, we argue that elections under authoritarianism serve this function because they reveal valuable information about the level of popular support and the loyalty of regime officials and subordinates. The incumbent faces the

29Gandhi and Przeworski, “Authoritarian Institutions...”
30Malesky and Schuler, “Nodding or Needling.”
Dictator’s Dilemma\textsuperscript{31} when there is an inherent deficit of credible information that makes the regime more vulnerable. On the one hand, holding competitive elections facilitates information-gathering. On the other hand, it increases the uncertainty of electoral victory. By compromising electoral integrity via \textit{ex ante} manipulations of electoral laws and registration procedures, as well as a skewed media landscape, and \textit{ex post} manipulations, such as electoral fraud, the ruling elites simultaneously aim to minimize the risk of losing office and maximize incoming information, while sending the strongest possible signal of regime strength and capacity to assure desired electoral outcomes.\textsuperscript{32} The level of fraud the regime chooses (to the extent that it can be controlled) indicates whether the regime aims to gather information and engage in power-sharing or flex its muscles and scare the opposition away.

Besides collecting information, regimes are interested in hedging their risks through co-optation and power-sharing.\textsuperscript{33} The regime can either invest in core supporters among elite groups or attract the leaders of the moderate or systemic opposition (swing supporters).\textsuperscript{34} Legislatures usually accomplish this by offering lucrative positions, access to spoils, contracts, and other forms of rent distribution.

Table 1 summarizes these theoretical considerations. The table shows the functional role of elections under authoritarianism, depending on the regime’s information-gathering policies and co-optation strategies. Rows and columns represent the two trade-offs that any incumbent faces: 1) how inclusive elections should be, i.e. whether there is an emphasis on incoming or outgoing information; and 2) who the main target of the electoral campaign is – swing constituencies or core supporters? The combination of these choices forms four functional roles of elections in autocracies, which in turn determine the type of electoral malpractice.

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\begin{tabular}{|c|c|}
\hline
\textbf{Role of Elections} & \textbf{Information Gathering} \\hline
\textbf{Inclusive} & \\ 
\textbf{Core Supporters} & \\ 
\hline
\end{tabular}
\caption{Functional Roles of Elections in Autocracies}
\end{table}

\textsuperscript{32}Magaloni, \textit{Voting for Autocracy}
\textsuperscript{34}“Systemic opposition” refers to political forces that differ from the incumbent, but express support for the ruling elites. They operate within the political establishment and are sometimes described as political satellites. On the other hand, the “non-systemic opposition” openly criticizes the group in power and operates outside of the political establishment. It lacks either formal recognition or informal links and aims to acquire political power. See Cameron Ross. 2015. \textit{Systemic and Non-Systemic Opposition in the Russian Federation: Civil Society Awakens}? Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Limited.
Emphasizing incoming information and betting on core supporters leads to an *internal rotation* model (Cell I), exemplified by the ruling party’s strategy in Singapore\(^{35}\) or in Mexico under the PRI.\(^{36}\) Eventually, this model requires a strong dominant party to recruit newcomers and provide predictable career prospects for its functionaries. This model requires restraint in the execution of manipulation strategies, so as to provide a genuine informational signal about the strength of the opposition. At the same time, because co-optation is focused on solidifying the existing support base, rather than attracting new supporters, it is not crucial to maintain a level playing field per se. Consequently, such elections are not associated with blatant *ex post* fraud and outright voter intimidation, because most of the arrangements have been made at the legislative level well before the elections (high *ex ante* manipulation).

The second model is the *signal of strength* (Cell II), emphasizing outgoing information about the regime’s strength. Excessive election fraud conveys a clear message that resistance is futile and is tailored to show popular support and the compliance of state officials.\(^{37}\) Again, the

power-sharing arrangements of legislative elections work primarily for the core supporters. These elections are usually marred with both *ex ante* as well as *ex post* fraud, and even intimidation of the opposition and voters. We claim that the Russian Duma elections of 2007 and 2011 fall into this category. Such a situation may also occur when the regime weakens under domestic or external pressure and resorts to fraudulent elections to compensate for the loss of legitimacy.

The third model (Cell III) represents a classical *power-sharing* election, where the regime seeks to appease the actual or potential opposition and strives to incorporate it into a larger coalition. Such elections occur following a credible threat from the opposition or when the regime cannot consolidate its power without attracting and pacifying swing constituencies. Most of the manipulation happens at the pre-electoral stage, but this model necessitates an overall lower level of both *ex ante* and *ex post* manipulation. In our view, the Russian 2003 legislative elections are a good example of power-sharing through gradual co-optation of the deputies for single-seat districts and regional blocs under the United Russia umbrella.38

Finally, some elections exacerbate the internal divisions within the opposition with respect to cooperation with the regime (Lust 2008). We coined the term *dividing elections* to describe this confluence of factors (Cell IV). Here, a signal of strength (outgoing information) is emphasized, while the moderate opposition is the core group targeted for co-optation. Therefore, blatant *ex post* fraud is likely to be utilized, whereas *ex ante* manipulations are expected to be lower, so as to give a number of moderate opposition groups the incentive to run a viable campaign. We suggest that the September 2016 Russian elections maximized the signaling function of authoritarian elections at the same time as dividing the opposition: Yabloko received less than 2 percent of the public vote, while Alexei Naval’ny failed to register his Party of Progress and establish any coalition that would unite various opposition groups. Such elections combine both skillful and “clumsy” manipulations.

In sum, we argue that the interaction of two choices faced by an authoritarian regime – whether it focuses on co-opting core supporters or swing supporters, and whether it wants to maximize incoming or outgoing information – determines the type of electoral malpractice that will be observed. Specifically, more *ex post* malpractice – including ballot stuffing, vote miscounting, vote buying, controlled voting, and intimidation – is expected when the regime seeks to signal its invincibility. There will be less *ex ante* malpractice – manipulations of electoral laws, party registration regulations, boundaries and media bias – when the regime seeks to

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loosen its grip and reinforce co-optation of the moderate opposition. In the next section, we explore how the role of Russian federal legislative elections has evolved over time from the power-sharing model to signaling electoral strength and dividing the opposition.

**Russian Elections: From Cooptation to Division**

Starting in the early 2000s, Vladimir Putin commenced an elaborate project designed to re-assemble the decentralized Russian state and restore the “power vertical” (*vertikal' vlasti*) system of executive government. Developing political parties was not a primary concern; crumbling state institutions and his uneasy relations with rebellious oligarchs took center stage. After the putsch attempted by communist hardliners in August 1991, the Communist party was legally banned until 1992, paving the way for alternative parties. Only in 2002-2003 were the first steps taken to revise the existing electoral system and party legislation.

The first law on political parties, adopted in 2001, regulated the party registration procedure, setting a minimum number of party members and regional branches. Party-system reform unfolded in line with the mission of strengthening parties and establishing firmer grounds for Russian democracy. The 2005 law on elections and referenda introduced a pure proportional representation system, which, according to several accounts, favors the institutionalization of parties and a party system. This law clearly favored those nationwide parties that had already earned their place in the sun in the 1990s. New legislation tightened the rules of registration by increasing the membership requirement from 10,000 to 45,000 in no less than half of Russian regions. Moreover, the electoral threshold rose from 5 percent to an unprecedentedly high 7 percent, and a ban on electoral coalitions was introduced. Similarly, the new regulations diminished the role of electoral observation. These changes sharply reduced the number of relevant political parties and eventually closed off the electoral arena to new challengers. As a result, in 2007, voters for the first time cast their ballots for a fully partisan State Duma, where United Russia (UR) secured a constitutional majority of 64.3 percent of the popular vote and 315 of 450 seats.

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Several observers consider the State Duma elections of 2007 the beginning of authoritarianism with a dominant party regime, akin to Mexico under the PRI or Malaysia under UMNO. Thomas Remington suggests that the Russian regime is “a regime in which the ruling party can afford to rely on patronage more than coercion, and meet its financial needs through rents from natural resource exports.” This type of regime “has an advantage over one in which the regime needs to finance its political needs by confiscation and predation.” At the same time, UR – in contrast to classical notions of a political party’s goals of governmental control – used “its enormous majority in parliament [to give] the president unchecked power to control the state, but in return received the right to use its power over regulatory and distributive legislation to reward its supporters and ensure its perpetuation in power.”

United Russia, as it is, diverges from the classical notion of a dominant (hegemonic) party due to its limited domination over policy implementation. New Russian non-partisan elites made several attempts to form a suitable legislative vehicle to decrease the costs of bargaining with the State Duma. Presidential-parliamentary systems incentivize presidents to form a pro-presidential majority in the legislature, as long as there is no “separate survival” of executive and legislative branches that leads to frequent governmental changes and potential inter-branch conflicts. The majority party acts to diminish the inherent instability of a presidential-parliamentary system and maximize the decision-making process. In such cases, the president does not need to intervene in the legislative process and/or issue presidential decrees.

Among personalist authoritarian regimes, Russia has demonstrated the puzzling effect of having a fully partisan legislature that reflects the regime’s co-optative capacity and should have hedged the incumbent’s bets in the electoral game. However, large-scale post-election unrest in 2011-12 temporarily undermined this claim. The failure of political parties to contain potential discontent and the excessive closure of the electoral market that resulted in unexpected and undesired results for the incumbent in the 2011 elections, multiplied by the rise of a united opposition and spread by the mass media, amplified the mobilizing effect of these elections. Given the high barriers to entry introduced in 2005 and the

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43 Reuter and Remington, “Dominant Party Regimes and the Commitment Problem.”
46 The first attempts to create a party of power were made in 1993-1994: Choice of Russia (1993), Our Home is Russia (1995), and Unity (1999).
generally low status of legislative power across the country, parties failed to co-opt moderate activists, leaving this group open to more radical anti-regime opposition.

Following the electoral fiasco of 2011, the Russian government initiated a series of reforms allegedly designed to liberalize the electoral arena: lowering electoral barriers, facilitating the registration of political parties, and reducing the requirements for a party to be registered (in terms of number of regional branches, membership, and number of signatures).49 Lastly, the Kremlin decided to restore the old mixed electoral formula, whereby half the Duma is elected via proportional representation and the other half through single-member districts.

Figure 1 reports the official electoral results for the parliamentary parties: United Russia (UR), Communists (CPRF), Liberal Democrats (LDPR), and Just Russia (JR) and its predecessor Rodina (2003). UR’s electoral success in 2003 looks fairly modest compared with its overwhelming victory in 2007 – 37.6 percent to 64.3 percent. The elections of 2007 and 2011 produced largely disproportional results despite the new electoral formula. In 2011, the systemic opposition, especially Just Russia, improved its showing. However, the recent 2016 elections restored the configuration of 2007, though with stronger regional representation due to the 2012 electoral reform.

**Figure 1. The results of the Russian State Duma elections, 2003-2016**

![Bar chart showing the results of the Russian State Duma elections from 2003 to 2016]

**Source:** Central Election Commission (CEC)

To track the changes in the role of elections and compare theoretical figures, additional references are provided:

expectations, we use three sets of indicators: first, binary indicators based on the National Elections across Democracy and Autocracy (NELDA) and V-Dem (Varieties of Democracy) datasets; second, reports by international and domestic observer missions (see the full list in the Appendix, Table A); and third, the PEI (Perceptions of Electoral Integrity) indicators reported by the expert survey carried out by the Electoral Integrity Project. Relying on the electoral cycle approach developed by Norris, we distinguish various forms of electoral violations or malpractice that may occur at different stages of the electoral cycle, starting with the legal framework and extending to polling-day fraud and post-electoral violence and protests. NELDA and V-Dem indicators do not cover all types of violations in depth, but they nevertheless provide a general comparative picture of common types of malpractice over time.

In 2003, United Russia secured the parliamentary majority by co-opting independent candidates on the eve of elections and right after the electoral results had been announced. The 2003 and 2007 electoral contests preceded the consolidation of the electoral authoritarian regime in Russia. International observer missions – primarily the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) – have always reported electoral violations. Only the legislative elections of 2007 were not reported to be fraudulent. Considerable media bias in favor of the incumbent was reported in 2003, 2012 and 2016. Anticipation of fraud and concerns expressed by the opposition and civil society groups that elections would not be free and fair were particularly strong in 2004, 2011, 2012, and 2016. The political opposition was harassed during all electoral cycles in question. Meanwhile, the vote count sometimes favored the systemic opposition, namely in 2011, when United Russia lost its constitutional majority while Just Russia and the Communists somewhat improved their respective shares of seats in the State Duma (see Figure 1). On the eve of the 2011 elections, a group of oppositionists (including Boris Nemtsov and

52All Appendix material is available in the Journal Plus section of the Demokratizatsiya website: demokratizatsiya.pub/journalplus.php.
55An OSCE/ODIR mission did not observe the 2007 legislative elections. There are, however, other credible organizations that possess sufficient resources, expertise, and networks to provide us with reliable information on the quality of elections carried out in 2007, eg. Golos. See “ODIHR unable to observe Russian Duma elections.” OSCE. November 16:07, At http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/49175, accessed September 20, 2017.
As previously mentioned, the legislative elections of 2003 were the last elections under electoral democracy in Russia and preceded the consolidation of authoritarian rule. Therefore, it would be mistaken to consider these elections authoritarian. Nevertheless, international observers mentioned electoral violations on polling day and unfair conditions for opposition candidates. These elections laid the foundation for United Russia to strengthen its political positions. In the following section, the legislative elections of 2007, 2011, and 2016 are discussed in greater detail, with a view toward how events mesh with theoretical expectations.

Table 2. Russian legislative elections: changes in electoral malpractice from 2003 to 2016

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Electoral laws and procedures</th>
<th>Voter registration</th>
<th>Media coverage</th>
<th>Opposition (registration, intimidation)</th>
<th>Vote misconducting/fraud</th>
<th>Voter intimidation</th>
<th>Monitors barred or intimidated</th>
<th>Ex ante</th>
<th>Ex post</th>
<th>Δ Ex ante</th>
<th>Ex post</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>Inclusive</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low/medium</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Discriminatory</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High/low</td>
<td>Worsened</td>
<td>Worsened</td>
<td>Worsened</td>
<td>Worsened</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>Discriminatory</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>About the same</td>
<td>About the same</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>Inclusive</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Low/medium</td>
<td>Slightly improved</td>
<td>About the same</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Garry Kasparov (called for a boycott. Demokratizatsiya 25:4 (Fall 2017)
Sources: NELDA, IFES reports, V-Dem dataset v.7.1, PEI 2016 v.5.0; Russian legislature on political parties and elections from 1999 to 2012. Note: We used NELDA, V-DEM for coding 2003, 2007, and 2011 legislative elections, PEI assessments for the last 2016 elections, reports by international and domestic monitors (Golos, IFES, and IDEA reports) throughout the whole period in question. See the coding procedures in Appendix.

Table 2 shows a summary of electoral integrity assessments provided by a variety of primary and secondary sources (see description of the sources in Appendix, Tables A-D). We code the level of a certain malpractice as low or high if most of the indicators from NELDA and V-Dem datasets coincide and this assessment is supported by the reports. If there were any controversies, we code them as, for instance, “low/medium.” We group the assessments by various datasets around specific stages of the election cycle, starting with the legislative framework, procedures, and registration, and running through the polling day to the aftermath of elections. We identify the following types of ex ante malpractice: legislative manipulations of elections and political parties (e.g. electoral threshold and registration requirements), voter registration, media coverage, and treatment of the opposition (intimidation and preventing them from registering for an election). Ex post malpractice encompasses fraud, miscounting the vote, voter intimidation on polling day, and preventing monitors from observing elections.

We also indicate the legislature’s inclusivity or discrimination when it comes to political parties, as well as the degree to which legislative rules are respected by political actors. As we observe, there is little variation in terms of how these procedures are followed, but there are significant changes to legislation on elections and parties, including efforts to tighten the screws on the opposition. Ex post malpractice has worsened in terms of vote miscounting and monitors’ access to the polls. On the aggregate, ex ante malpractice has shifted from “low/medium” to “high” and back to “low/medium,” mostly due to the electoral and party reform of 2012, while the degree of ex post violations remains constantly high. Next, we explore the legislative elections that took place from 2003 to 2016 in greater depth.

The 2007 Elections: Creating a Dominant Party

The triumphant 2007 legislative elections were often referred to as a rehearsal for the presidential elections of 2008. Compared to previous elections, some monitors found these elections to be relatively clean.\footnote{“Russia Report: December 6, 2007.” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, December 6:07, At http://www.rferl.org/a/1347694.html, accessed May 1, 2017. A crucial factor that can also account for United Russia’s success is Vladimir Putin, who ran as number one on the party’s list.}
Most of the manipulation had been done before the elections: restrictive party legislation removed almost all existing political parties from electoral contestation and forced them to re-register. The introduction of proportional representation, coupled with an electoral threshold of 7 percent, had a net effect of discriminating against liberal parties – Yabloko and SPS, as well as the Agrarians and a number of left-wing spoiler parties.

The number of parliamentary parties dropped from 12 in 2003 to 4 in 2007. Following the adoption of the new restrictive legislation on political parties, the number of registered parties decreased from 44 at the beginning of the 2003 electoral campaign to 15 by the start of the 2007 legislative elections. In 2008, this figure fell to seven and remained stable until 2011. This dynamic clearly reflects the closure of competitive politics and electoral democracy in the country.

Whereas in 2003 United Russia had to make serious efforts to attract independent MPs, build up coalitions with regional strongmen and lure away representatives from rival parties, in 2007, it gained an outright electoral majority for the first time. Candidates from single-member districts (SMDs) were forced to accept United Russia party membership. These were the first federal elections after a wave of post-electoral protests in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan, as well as a series of failed anti-regime protests in Belarus, Armenia and Azerbaijan. In response to these challenges, the Russian regime introduced more restrictive regulation of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and financing of political parties, as well as imposing more censorship on TV. The electoral playing field was effectively purged of potential rivals before the elections took place through extensive ex ante manipulations. In effect, these elections saw the establishment of a full-blown electoral authoritarian regime in Russia.

The presence of political parties as authoritarian institutions is well documented. Dominant parties resolve the “credible commitment problem” between the political leader and his or her coalition by reducing the level of uncertainty, providing clearer and more predictable rules of

On the other hand, Putin has always maintained an association with United Russia and given the weakness of party politics in Russia, the formal affiliation hardly makes a lot of difference.


the game, and extending the planning time-frame. As such, the 2007 elections exemplify the Kremlin’s attempt to shore up core support and build up a coherent dominant party that would serve as a legislative vehicle to facilitate the passage of laws initiated by the executive. On the other hand, though “United Russia” dominates the electoral and legislative arenas, it is absent from the real policy-making and policy-implementation arenas, making it a half-built house.

These elections demonstrated the regime’s dominance and coherence without much co-optation, therefore signalling the regime’s strength (see Cell II of Table 1). The transition to proportional representation also marked the decay of the infamous regional governors’ political machines that had ultimately undermined the co-optative capacity of elections. After 2007, the Russian party system – which consisted of only four federal-level parties – finally closed up, remaining “frozen” and intact until the mass uprising of 2011. Overall, the 2007 election served to signal the regime’s strength, as the regime maximized both ex ante and ex post manipulations.

The 2011 Elections: Revolt of the non-co-opted and unrepresented

The 2011 elections were unexpectedly followed by large-scale protests in big Russian cities, especially Moscow and St. Petersburg. These were the largest protests since the fall of the USSR. Protesters blamed the government for cheating and rigging the elections. The eve of the 2011 legislative elections saw a boom in alternative mass media, including private TV channels (e.g. Dozhd’ – [Rain]) and a number of political blogs, websites, newspapers, and media projects (e.g. The Citizen Poet). The advent of new political figures – Alexei Naval’ny with a prominent anti-corruption project, young Yabloko activists, and civil activists engaged in a variety of NIMBY activities – changed the political landscape. The presence and co-ordinating role of civic activists – Alexei Naval’ny, Yevgeniya Chirikova, Ksenia Sobchak, and Sergei Udaltsov – as well as politicians – Boris Nemtsov, Garry Kasparov, and Mikhail Kasyanov – proved to be essential for organizing at Chistye Prudy on polling day and later on Sakharov Avenue.

The regime’s initial strategy in this contest was similar to the one employed in 2007: signaling strength without power-sharing. However, this approach ignored the new wave of opposition, and largely failed to

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61 Jennifer Gandhi and Adam Przeworski, “Authoritarian Institutions…”
62 Reuter and Remington, “Dominant Party Regimes and the Commitment Problem…”
64 “Not-in-my-backyardism” (NIMBYism) or “cause activism” refers to mobilizations around a specific issue related to everyday life – leaking roofs, cutting down of a park, demolition of symbolic objects, etc.
accomplish its goals. The reason for this is found in the very solidification of the dominant party regime achieved in the previous election. If a party system closes up, diehard supporters of the regime push moderate supporters and more liberal politicians out of the large coalition. In effect, the mechanism of co-optation breaks down and political parties (or dominant parties) cease to prevent intra-elite ruptures. The process of gradual marginalization is particularly visible over time: when the Russian State Duma adopted more restrictive legislation on political parties and imposed a new electoral system, these changes led to a growing number of un-co-opted politicians who, having found themselves marginalized, joined the non-systemic opposition and attracted public attention to issues of electoral integrity. We therefore argue that the breakdown of co-optative capacity is key to understanding the surprising link between the partisan legislature and the post-electoral protests that took place in 2011.

Table 3. Distribution of political parties and organizations by type of opposition and ideological family

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ideological family</th>
<th>Loyal parties</th>
<th>Semi-loyal or systemic opposition (moderates)</th>
<th>Disloyal or non-systemic opposition (radicals)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Liberal</td>
<td>2003 – N/A</td>
<td>2003 – SPS, Yabloko</td>
<td>2003 – N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nationalist</td>
<td>2003 – People’s Party</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2003 – NBP**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2011 – LDPR</td>
<td></td>
<td>2011 – Party of progress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2011 – JR</td>
<td>2011 – CPRF, PoR</td>
<td>2011 - Left Front, RKR, AKM, RSD</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* The Party of Pensioners merged with Just Russia in 2006.
** NBP is illegal.


Table 3 provides an overview of the main opposition organizations
and their composition between 2003 (before the electoral reform) and 2012. It demonstrates the increase in the number of previously “acceptable” public figures who became largely marginal and non-systemic.

Starting in 2003, the last electoral cycle before the electoral and political party reform, the number of politicians with relatively liberal views who enjoyed access to state positions and resources – the so-called “systemic liberals” (sistemnye liberaly) – dropped dramatically. Table 3 shows the list of loyal, semi-loyal, and disloyal or non-systemic political forces that do not belong to incumbent parties, elucidating a conspicuous drift among liberals from systemic to non-systemic opposition. If in 2003 most of the liberal parties gravitated around a systemic opposition pole and constituted a significant part of the political establishment without any clearly ghettoized organizations, in 2011 most of the former liberal parties and their members – Solidarnost’, United Civic Front, Democratic Choice – found themselves among the non-systemic opposition. The presence of nationalist and leftist parties remained roughly the same in this period. The distribution of registered political parties and unregistered political organizations with a clear claim on power to the nationalist and leftist wings was somewhat even across three electoral cycles. Meanwhile, the distribution among liberal organizations and parties changed dramatically. Starting in 2007, the Kremlin instigated the creation of loyal party-satellites that aimed to split the liberal vote, including Civic Power and Bogdanov’s Democratic Party. In 2011, Prokhorov’s Right Cause became another pro-Kremlin liberal project. There has never been any sort of systemic nationalist party or organization, while there has always been a choice between left-wing organizations of all degrees of loyalty and disloyalty. Another attempt by the Kremlin to mobilize core supporters and – in some regions – to create a legitimate channel for alternative views, was the establishment of the All-Russia People’s Front (ONF). This umbrella organization aimed to garner support from those groups of citizens that did not associate themselves with any political party but expressed support for the regime in general.

Looking at the profile of opposition organizations and parties, there is also a pronounced trend toward higher numbers of former systemic liberals. In 2003, Yabloko and SPS (Union of the Right Forces) largely supported the new government. Three newly-elected members of parliament defected from Yabloko to United Russia. In 2004 came the first Dissenters’ Marches, spearheaded by Mikhail Kasjanov, who had served as the prime minister in the first Putin government (2000-2004), and Garry

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66 Loyal and semi-loyal opposition are referred to as systemic opposition, and disloyal opposition as non-systemic.

Kasparov, chess grandmaster and neophyte public activist, who organized the United Civic Front. Other organizations, such as Another Russia (Drugaia Rossiia) gathered around more radical political forces, including Eduard Limonov’s National-Bolsheviks (NBP). Dissenters’ Marches have been replaced by the Strategy 31 movement, commemorating Article 31 of the Russian Constitution, which stipulates freedom of assembly. In 2010-11, a number of civic organizations – Alexei Naval’ny’s Anti-Corruption Foundation (FBK) and Yevgeniya Chirikova’s Khimki Forest Defense gave fresh momentum to the opposition movement.

Another source of evidence corroborates our interpretation of the protests as a breakdown of co-optation. Data from the New Russia Barometer 2011 suggests that voters who felt underrepresented by any political party perceived elections as more fraudulent (see Table 4). The proportion of those critical of the integrity of the contest is much higher among those saying that there were parties or movements for which they would have cast their ballot if those parties had been allowed to run. 425 of 631 respondents agreed with the statement “among the parties and movements that were not allowed to participate in the election to the State Duma there was one for which I could have voted,” and 231 of those who would be willing to vote for a non-systemic opposition party believed that election had been dishonest.

Table 4. Perceptions of fraud by the extent to which voters feel represented

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perceptions of fraud</th>
<th>Certainly agree</th>
<th>Somewhat agree</th>
<th>Somewhat disagree</th>
<th>Certainly disagree</th>
<th>Don’t know</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Absolutely honest</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat honest</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>229</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat dishonest</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>253</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absolutely dishonest</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>223</td>
<td>202</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>638</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: New Russia Barometer 2011. Pearson’s $X^2=36.85$ (p=0.00)

Thus, poor co-optation resulting from the electoral and party reforms of 2005 led to an increased number of moderate opposition leaders who found themselves marginalized and ultimately spearheaded the protests. The coordinated actions of civil society groups –corruption fighters,
election monitors, and human rights watchdogs – coalesced with some members of opposition political parties or former members of the political establishment. The opposition succeeded in framing the election in terms of integrity – that there were significant concerns that elections would fall short of international standards and be stolen. The crucial element of the model was that voters and potential protesters needed to learn in advance what electoral violations looked like. This was achieved by the effective campaigning of opposition and civil society groups in the relatively free media.

In sum, the 2011 contest can be characterized as signaling strength (see Cell II of Table 1), since the regime used both ex ante and ex post manipulations.

The 2016 elections: Dividing the opposition

Authoritarian regimes – if they survive protests – tend to learn from their mistakes.68 Immediately after the first outburst of protests in December 2011, the government launched two reforms: of the electoral system and of the party system. These reforms aimed to restore the linkages with regional constituencies and reinvigorate governors’ machines. The new legislation on political parties allowed almost anyone to register his/her own party. This led to hundreds of registered political parties by the federal electoral campaign of 2016 and served to pacify the systemic opposition by offering them governorships in some regions. For instance, a communist headed the Orel oblast, a member of Just Russia became governor of Zavaikal’skii krai in 2013, and LDPR took Smolensk.

Observers described the 2016 federal campaign as a listless performance that sought not to awake protest voters in large cities but rather to mobilize either controlled constituencies (e.g. workers at large enterprises) or voters with predictable pro-regime preferences.69 This strategy, in addition to being a reaction to the 2011 protests, can be further explained by the dissipation of the “rally around the flag” effect created by the annexation of Crimea in March 2014, as well as by the increasing visibility of economic recession.

A measure of the integrity of the 2016 contest is provided by the “Perceptions of Electoral Integrity” (PEI) Index collected by the Electoral

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The measure is based on the assessments of 2,709 election experts, comparing 241 elections in 158 countries between 2012 and 2016. It aggregates 49 individual survey items to an overall integrity score between 0 (worst) and 100 (best). The 2016 Russian elections received a score of 44 (out of 100), which is lower than the global average of 55. Overall, this puts the contest in the category of elections with “low” integrity. By disaggregating the PEI Index into eleven sub-dimensions corresponding to various stages of the electoral cycle, we can detect the thematic areas where electoral malpractice is most common. Figure 2 contrasts the 2016 Russian election with the world average in the PEI Index and the eleven sub-dimensions of integrity.

Figure 2. Electoral malpractice in the State Duma elections 2016 compared to the global average

Pre-electoral (ex ante) malpractice proved to be more problematic than polling day integrity and other ex-post malpractice. Assessment of the voting process itself aligned closely with the global mean (Russia: 54; mean for autocracies 42; global mean 54), suggesting levels of election-day fraud that were no higher than average. Similarly, post-election
adjudication and acceptance of results compared roughly to the global mean (RUS: 64; autocracies: 41; global: 65). On the other hand, the work of the electoral authorities (RUS: 40; autocracies: 40; global: 61), the dimensions of electoral laws (RUS: 35; autocracies: 32; global: 53), and electoral procedures (RUS: 43; autocracies: 47; global: 65) were seen as highly problematic. All three dimensions are arenas of pre-electoral manipulation. When comparing the different dimensions of integrity in the Russian election, the lowest scores were received in the areas of vote counting (39), campaign finance (34), and media coverage (33). The tabulation of votes is clearly an aspect of ex post manipulation. These elections resemble the mean values of other authoritarian regimes, and only a few components reach the global mean values. Overall, the 2016 federal election proved to be utterly unfair and highly non-transparent.

Unfortunately, the corresponding values of the components cannot be compared across time, as the PEI Index is only available for the most recent contest. However, it still provides an overview of the variety of malpractice where ex ante manipulations play the most significant role even after allegedly liberalizing party legislation.

A final piece of evidence is provided by expert survey data considering the geographical distribution of electoral malpractice across Russian regions in 2015/16. These data reflect the integrity of regional gubernatorial and legislative elections in 2015 and 2016 based on 319 expert evaluations, using the same 49 survey items as the cross-national PEI survey. The data cover 28 subnational elections in 2015 and 39 contests in 2016. The 2016 subnational contests were held concurrently with the federal legislative election on September 18. While subnational elections certainly have their own dynamics, it is reasonable to assume a generally similar pattern in the strategy employed by the dominant party, especially given that United Russia and its gubernatorial candidates ran as the incumbent in almost all of the contests under study.

Based on the 319 expert assessments, a regional PEI Index was calculated; this is presented in Figure 3. There is considerable cross-regional variation in terms of electoral malpractice, ranging from very high integrity (Ulyanovsk, Pskov, Kirov) to “failed” elections, or contests with very low integrity (Tver, Chechnya, Astrakhan). Overall, eleven of 60 regions were evaluated as having elections of high or very high integrity, 24 were classified as having moderate electoral integrity, while elections in 25 regions were seen as either “flawed” (low integrity), or “failed” (very low integrity). Thus, at least a third of regions held elections that clearly fall short of international standards. Central Russia, North Caucasus and Far East demonstrate the lowest scores in electoral integrity, while Siberia

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73 Norris, Martinez i Coma, Nai, and Grömping, Perceptions of Electoral Integrity-Russia (PEI-Russia 1.0).
and the Urals scored slightly better (with the remarkable exception of Tyumenskaya oblast with its autonomous districts). The average PEI Index across all regions is 52 (out of 100), higher than the score for the 2016 federal election. Does this suggest that electoral manipulations were less pronounced in regional contests, or that the prevalent strategical considerations discussed in Table 1 do not hold for UR incumbents in subnational elections?

Yes and no. Paradoxically, higher scores in electoral integrity do not necessarily mean that elections were free and fair. It may instead indicate the successful demoralization of opposition parties due to overwhelming manipulation in previous contests. For instance, in closed regions, opposition parties and candidates many not even make the effort to run a media campaign or register for the elections, even though they are not hindered by any de jure prohibitions in this regard. Therefore, the elections per se may be held without registering ex ante or ex post violations according to the PEI survey. Nevertheless, they are utterly uncompetitive, because of the “abstention” of viable opposition. By contrast, in more competitive regions, one should observe more violations, indirectly indicating the regime’s inability to make all the arrangements that would prevent the opposition from running well in advance. Hence, the fight is carried out on polling day itself and registers as low electoral integrity. Unfortunately, these data are not available for previous election cycles, so we cannot draw any conclusions about the stability of this pattern, or whether indeed a “show of strength” strategy in previous contests may have been successful in demoralizing possible opposition candidates into abstaining.

Figure 3. Map of the Russian concurrent subnational elections in 2016

Source: PEI v.5.0, released May 2017
In sum, federal and subnational elections in 2015-2016 exemplified the regime’s capacity to divide the opposition by maximizing a signal of strength (**ex post** electoral fraud) while increasing its co-optative capacity (liberalized electoral rules, i.e. less **ex ante** manipulation). The new strategy allowed the party in power to dissipate the opposition and prevent it from forming a new coalition. Alexei Naval’ny’s Party of Progress was not registered, Yabloko refused to form a coalition with any party, and PARNAS was formally allowed to run, but failed to obtain the expected number of popular votes. The systemic opposition – Just Russia and CPRF – received their small share of votes. None of the opposition actors had the incentive to cooperate. Thus, the ruling elite successfully deployed legislative elections at the national and the subnational level as a dividing tool that completely undermined the opposition. Even ostensible improvements in electoral integrity – the installation of web cameras and electronic voting booths (KOIBs) or liberalization of party registration – point to increased capacity to engage in hidden manipulations more than real shifts toward electoral democracy. We observe less **ex ante** manipulation than 2011 (though it remains substantial), but the level of **ex post** fraud remains unchanged (see Table 1, Cell IV).

**Conclusion**

This study set out to explore the role of elections in authoritarian regimes, taking a functionalist approach and looking at elections through the lenses of the regime, the political opposition (systemic and non-systemic), and the citizenry. We argued that elections as political institutions co-evolve with political regimes. They serve as an indicator of regime oscillations and changes. The Russian political regime began its gradual slide into electoral authoritarianism in 2007, when the State Duma elections demonstrated the elimination of electoral competition and any viable political opposition. If the 2003 elections, still democratic, aimed to co-opt the opposition and consolidate the position of the party of power, the subsequent contest served to signal regime strength and scare the opposition away. After 2014, the regime transformed into a more closed and consolidated authoritarianism and the role of elections adjusted accordingly, from co-optation to signaling strength and dividing the opposition. This coincided with a shift in the “menu of manipulation” from an emphasis on **ex ante** manipulations (2003), to a reliance on both, **ex ante** manipulation and **ex post** fraud (2007 and 2011), to a de-emphasis of **ex ante** manipulation but still high incidence of **ex post** fraud (2016).

Russian regional machines had been incorporated into the “power vertical” by sustaining links with territorial constituencies. However, the electoral reform of 2005 eliminated several political parties and made the
entry barrier unsurmountable for potential challengers, thereby undermining the co-optative function of the party system. Political machines as party substitutes\(^7\) served as more effective co-optative tools than exclusive and weak national parties. Although some early attempts seemed successful – Just Russia made several moderate left-wing oppositionists defect in 2007 – the system remained frozen until 2011 and subsequently failed to adequately address newly ascendant interests. After the turmoil of 2011-12, the regime adjusted the electoral and party system in order to re-establish feedback channels on the ground and introduce specific forms of competition at the “United Russia” primaries. These mechanisms help involve swing opposition at the regional level and incorporate the strongest elements.

As previously, legislative elections commonly operate as a rehearsal for the presidential elections, allowing the regime to collect information about its popularity and/or the ability of local officials to deliver expected vote shares. However, presidential elections in both democracies and autocracies represent a zero-sum game with only one winner, where there is no room for co-optation and power-sharing. Moreover, these elections bear a largely non-partisan character and reflect on the strength of personalist power rather than other functions of authoritarian elections. Nevertheless, on the eve of the presidential campaign, the Kremlin has taken decisive steps to eliminate opposition candidates: Alexei Naval’ny lost the right to run for president due to the criminal case against him that led to a three-year suspended sentence. So far, the 2018 presidential elections are expected to be non-competitive and aim to demonstrate regime strength and popular unity around the president.

In sum, the role of Russian elections has evolved from information-gathering and co-optation to primarily signaling the regime’s strength and sporadically dividing and embarrassing the opposition. Instead of producing a democratizing effect, elections serve as a tool of authoritarian resilience. Nevertheless, as the analysis showed, this tool may fail, if deployed clumsily, and instead facilitate anti-regime mobilization, as occurred in December 2011.
