Patterns of Competitiveness in Russian Gubernatorial Elections

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Abstract

Competitiveness in electoral authoritarian regimes is compromised by management of the electoral arena through various kinds of manipulation. This study links two dimensions of competitiveness, namely fairness and contestation. We analyze the regional heterogeneity of both dimensions for Russian gubernatorial elections held between 2012 and 2019. To assess competitiveness, we use crowd-sourced electoral observation reports and data from the Central Election Commission. Our analysis reveals significant regional variation in both dimensions. Nevertheless, opposition victories are rare and only occur in exceptional cases. Low levels of electoral malpractices seem to be a necessary but not sufficient condition for close election results. Windows of opportunity for the opposition arise only if the regime misperceives the closeness of the race and if the opposition nominates prominent candidates. Overall, these findings shed light on the complex factors influencing the competitiveness of elections in electoral authoritarian regimes like Russia.

Keywords Elections · Competitive authoritarianism · Competitiveness · Contestation · Fairness · Russia · Regional politics

Introduction

There is a broad consensus among political scientists that elections are a fundamental institution of democracy and a crucial area of study within political science (Farrell, 2012; Powell, 2000). However, the conduct of elections is not limited to democracies. In most states, leaders are nominally elected, but in non-democratic regimes, these elections are not necessarily a proper reflection of the people's preferences or

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a window of opportunity for opposition victory. Instead, non-democratic leaders utilize elections to pseudo-legitimize their regimes (Levitsky & Way, 2010), provide an arena of co-optation (Gerschewski, 2013), or gather information about the actual levels of popular support (Wintrobe, 2007). At the same time, autocrats definitely do not want to lose their power through elections and thus, typically control the electoral arena rigorously. Hence, the competitiveness of elections differs considerably between regime types (Hermet, 1978, p. 5).

Despite valid skepticism, elections in autocracies should not be dismissed as mere democratic façade. The conceptual differentiation between competitive and non-competitive elections highlights flawed electoral conduct, systematic discrimination against opposition, non-inclusiveness, or blatant electoral fraud in the latter. Despite this, uneven playing field, some elections in autocracies have been contested, led to regime changes, and opened windows of opportunity for liberalization or democratization (Howard & Roessler, 2006). In roughly a quarter of elections in competitive authoritarian regimes held between 1990 and 2011, the incumbent was ousted (Lueders & Croissant, 2014), and there are numerous examples of democratizations by elections, such as Croatia (2000), Macedonia (2007), or Romania (2004) (cf. Levitsky & Way, 2010: 21). These examples extenuate the strict distinction between democratic and autocratic elections and their functions.

There is a large body of research dealing with the functions and effects of nominally democratic and (semi-)competitive elections in autocracies (Gandhi & Lust-Okar, 2009). These elections (and authoritarianism generally) are usually addressed on the national level. From previous research on sub-national elections, we know that these elections are of high importance. Sub-national elections reveal not only regional support for the regime, but also spatial variation in the level of authoritarianism within a country (Saikkonen, 2016; Smyth & Turovsky, 2018). Furthermore, these elections may be utilized by the regime to delegate accountability to the regional level and increase support for the national level simultaneously (Szakonyi, 2011). Finally, victories of oppositional candidates at sub-national levels can strengthen the opposition in autocracies with possibly nation-wide consequences (Schakel & Romanova, 2022). Although there is a growing body on sub-national elections in autocracies in general, only very few studies address the aspect of competitiveness.

The aim of this article is to bridge this research gap by addressing two key questions. As little is known about variations between regional elections in autocracies, our first research interest is rather descriptive and explores this heterogeneity with a special emphasis on the elections' competitiveness. Based on a detailed picture of this variation, our second question investigates the circumstances under which regional elections in autocracies open windows of opportunities for opposition parties, potentially resulting in opposition victories. To address these questions, we analyze data from Russian gubernatorial elections held between 2012 and 2019.[1] Our study shows that, in the Russian context, low levels of electoral manipulation are

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[1] This analysis of elections in Russia between 2012 and 2019 should not be interpreted as representative of the more recent authoritarian turn in the country, which has seen significant changes in the political landscape, including increased repression.

necessary, but not sufficient for close election outcomes or opposition victory. The opposition has a chance of winning only when the regime underestimates the closeness of the race and when prominent oppositional candidates are nominated.

Russian gubernatorial elections are optimal cases for our purpose for various reasons. First, Russia is one of the most powerful and largest autocracies worldwide. Second, elections within the timeframe under investigation exhibit at least to some degree semi-competitiveness by allowing multiple parties and candidates to compete (Geddes, 2018). Third, in a similar spirit, Russia is a country of varying democracy levels. Following the collapse of the Soviet regime in the 1990s, the country experienced a period of democratization, which enabled institutional learning. However, under Putin's leadership, the country has experienced a reversal of this trend, particularly during his third and fourth term in office. Fourth, Russia is organized as a federal state, consequently, conducting elections below the national but above the local level. Finally, at least some of the Russian gubernatorial elections offer the window of opportunity as described above. Although the hegemonic party is able to create electoral institutions in their interest in order "to cement or protect their hold on power" (Golosov, 2016, p. 382), the regional variations are an important marker for national developments and may be "the most promising arena for change in the near future" (Teague, 2014, p. 57).[2]

The subject at hand links at least three relevant research areas in political science. First, the study of competitiveness in authoritarian elections adds to the growing body of literature on electoral authoritarianism. It highlights ways that unfair pre-conditions need to be considered in the assessment of competitiveness. Second, most studies on competitiveness and its consequences measure competitiveness on the national level. However, electoral races that are competitive on the national levels can be considerably lopsided on the lower level and vice versa (Blais & Lago, 2009). Third, Russian sub-national politics are a "burgeoning research topic" (Robbins & Rybalko, 2015, p. 25). The Russian asymmetric federalism has "created a rich and diverse tapestry of sub-national political regimes" (Ross & Panov, 2019, p. 359), which generates awareness of variations of democracy and autocracy on the sub-national level.

The article is structured in six sections. Following the introduction, we initially outline the concept of competitiveness from a theoretical point of view and identify two dimensions: fairness and contestation. Subsequently, we present the context of Russian gubernatorial elections and review previous literature. Data and variables are presented in the ensuing section. We analyze and discuss competitiveness in the context of gubernatorial elections in the results section based on explorative and quantitative analysis. Finally, the conclusion section highlights the implications for the research of electoral authoritarianism and points to further desiderata in the study of competitiveness in authoritarian regimes.

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[2] However, victories of nominally oppositional candidates should not be mistaken automatically for openings of the regime, as in many cases the regime is also able to control the (systemic) opposition.

Analytical Dimensions of Competitiveness in Non-Democratic Elections

The degree of electoral competitiveness is at the core of numerous seminal conceptions of democracy (e.g., Dahl, 1971; Schumpeter, 1950) and referred to in broad regime typologies (Cheibub et al., 1996, 2010; Przeworski & Limongi, 1997). Non-democratic regimes do not fundamentally rule out competitiveness. Among most of them, the regular conduct of nominally democratic, multi-party elections has become the norm. However, in these elections, the regimes typically manage competitiveness through control of the electoral arena.

Broadly defined, electoral competitiveness refers to the fairness of the electoral contest (Birch, 2010, p. 1602; Huntington, 1991, p. 7) affecting the "actors' intersubjective perception" (Schedler, 2013, p. 206) of the uncertainty of the electoral outcome (Hyde & Marinov, 2012). This uncertainty implies that there exists some risk of electoral defeat for the dominant party (Kayser & Lindstädt, 2015). Although electoral competitiveness is commonly equated with contestation (Eichhorn & Linhart, 2021), the authoritarian management of competitiveness is based on restricting freedoms of voters and candidates throughout the entire electoral cycle. Therefore, the proposed definition integrates two dimensions of electoral competitiveness: fairness and contestation.

Fairness of the election can be violated in many ways. The respective instruments aim at the creation of an uneven playing field, which limits the de facto degree of competition, although elections may offer a pro-forma choice between various candidates or parties. The playing field is tilted through the regimes' systematic abuse of state institutions resulting in advantages for the ruling party and disadvantages for the opposition (Levitsky & Way, 2010; Schedler, 2013). Hence, assessing the skewness of the playing field refers to electoral quality and integrity and requires the review of international electoral standards (Norris, 2012) or normative notions of electoral choice (Schedler, 2013). The playing field is manipulated through electoral engineering, the creation of formal but unfair rules of the game (Mozaffar & Schedler, 2002) and informal breaches of democratic principles such as electoral fraud (Lehoucq, 2003; Schedler, 2002). These breaches vary in terms of severity and visibility (Schedler, 2013, p. 274). In the pre-electoral phase, instruments addressing voters include formal and informal disenfranchisement, selective mobilization, or vote buying. In regard to the candidates, the access to the electoral arena is controlled, and the opposition may be systematically excluded, divided, or denied access to media coverage during the campaign. On election day, state-controlled election monitoring, blocking communication technologies and information, stuffing the ballot box, or electoral violence to prevent voters from casting a ballot may be applied. After the election, votes can be miscounted, ballots get lost, or electoral results simply are not translated into offices (cf. Harvey, 2016; Lehoucq, 2003; Schedler, 2013, p. 84).

The second dimension of competitiveness, contestation, focuses more on election results than on procedures. Contestation implies not only the existence of oppositional parties or candidates but also their realistic chance of winning an election (Przeworski & Limongi, 1997). Insufficiently competitive elections are typically characterized by dominant parties or candidates, large vote gaps over the runners-up, and marginal vote shares for opposition competitors. The concept of contestation

may result in ambiguous evaluations of competitiveness. Wide electoral margins can also be indicators of popular support—as it is the case in fair elections. However, wide margins in the context of uneven playing fields rather signify the "incumbents' capacity to coerce and suppress the opposition" (Sjöberg, 2011, p. 19).

This suggests a certain interdependence of both dimensions. Indeed, the levelness of the playing field can be considered a precondition for considerable contestation, since unfair pre-conditions are likely to create electoral dominance and amplify the apparent mandate (Myagkov et al., 2009; Sjöberg, 2011). However, the link between fairness and contestation is not one-sided. Unfair pre-conditions and fraudulent activities may become decisive for the electoral outcome, especially in presumably close elections, and thus more widely used by autocratic incumbents (Lehoucq, 2003; Fortin-Rittberger, 2014; Sjöberg, 2011: 190). Indeed, former studies find empirical evidence for contestation causing fraud (Dawson, 2022; Schedler, 2013). Although close electoral races may encourage fraud, they also necessitate less fraud if the margin of victory of the opposition over the ruling party is slim: A few votes would be sufficient to secure the desired outcome (Myagkov et al., 2009, p. 77). In this case, however, the ruling party would need to accept slim electoral margins, which might not have the desired legitimization function.[3] We account for this endogeneity by investigating both fairness and contestation as components of competitiveness.

Furthermore, the interplay of these dimensions underscores the importance of analyzing electoral competitiveness at a sub-national level. Contestation is not necessarily evenly distributed among all regions of an autocracy, as evidenced by instances such as the election of oppositional candidates to regional (executive) offices (Begadze, 2022), or the occurrence of sub-national democratic backsliding (Polga-Hecimovich, 2022). Furthermore, autocratic regimes undermine regional contestation by strategic implementation of electoral manipulations (Friesen, 2019). At the same time, autocratic regimes have been shown to enhance transparency in their strongholds at the regional level, where fraud is unnecessary (Sjoberg, 2014).

The Russian Context

Elections in Russia were introduced in the Russian Empire in 1906. Indirect voting and exclusive suffrage, however, resulted in non-competitive elections. During Soviet times, suffrage became universal, but results were predictable. The first competitive elections were held in 1989 prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union. The early 1990s elections were characterized by "initially high optimism" (Pacek et al., 2009: 485) and high turnout, which had declined substantively by the mid-1990s.

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[3] For example, in Russia, Edinaya Rossiya puts emphasis on both, broad participation and large electoral margins to demonstrate sovereignty and broad support at the same time: "The initial goal for the 2018 presidential election had been based on the 70/70 formula—70% turnout and 70% for Putin" (Sakwa, 2018, p. 73).

Within Russian federalism, the relationship between the central government and the regions historically took "pendulum-like trajectory" (Sharafutdinova, 2010, p. 672) of alternating centralization and decentralization. The conduct of sub-national executive elections is an eminent example of this dynamic. Regional governors were elected directly from 1995 onwards. At the same time, regional autonomy was restricted through the dependency on the federal level in the distribution of scarce resources (Solnick, 1998). Regional autonomy was further limited after 2000, and ultimately gubernatorial elections were replaced by presidential appointment of governors in 2005. After protests in 2011/2012 (cf. Gel'man, 2015), gubernatorial elections were restored in Russian regions. In the majority of regions, governors are elected directly ever since.[4] If no candidate receives an absolute majority in the first round, a second round becomes necessary. Elections are commonly held simultaneously on unified voting days in fall, which has been shown in previous research to benefit the dominant party through spill-over effects from the national level to the regional level (Schakel & Romanova, 2022). Although there appears to be a push towards decentralization through the reinstatement of gubernatorial elections, it needs to be acknowledged that the federal government remains in control. This becomes evident by the control over candidate registration and the tendency to replace governors through appointments (which we discuss below). Nonetheless, gubernatorial elections are important to understand the nature of the regime.

Generally, research on elections in authoritarian regimes is biased towards the national level, and less is known about sub-national elections (Saikkonen, 2016, p. 428). This is also the case for the Russian Federation. The majority of research focuses on national elections (McAllister & White, 2017; Skovoroda & Lankina, 2017; Wilson, 2012). Spatial variation in these elections is accounted for by the usage of disaggregated data from regions (Clem & Craumer, 2000; Harvey, 2016; Obydenkova & Libman, 2013; Panov & Ross, 2019; Saikkonen, 2017), municipalities (Clem & Craumer, 2002; Goodnow et al., 2014), or electoral districts (Bader & van Ham, 2015; Lankina & Skovoroda, 2017). Especially in the field of area studies, numerous studies address regional elections in general (for Russia, for example: Golosov, 2014; Ross, 2014; Schakel & Romanova, 2022). However, only very few studies directly address (dimensions of) competitiveness on the sub-national level (Saikkonen, 2016; Schakel & Romanova, 2022). The state of research which is most central to our research question can be summarized as follows.

Malpractice has been reported in each election since 1991 but varies regionally. Regions economically more dependent on the center and with higher shares of non-ethnic Russian inhabitants show higher rates of electoral malpractice (Bader & van Ham, 2015; Panov & Ross, 2013). Addressing voters, coercion, intimidation, and vote buying (Frye et al., 2019a), as well as systematic (de-)mobilization (McAllister & White, 2017) are common. Surveys found one in ten voters to report pressure to vote (McAllister & White, 2011), particularly when this pressure is exerted by employers, which has been

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[4] In the remainder of this article, we use the term governor to refer to the head of the executive in the region. In six republics in the North Caucasus, governors are elected indirectly by the regional parliaments. These elections are not part of our analysis.

proven to be an effective and common tactic (Frye et al., 2019b). However, voters tend to react negatively to workplace mobilization, whereas they may be less averse to institutional manipulations, such as candidate rejections (Szakonyi, 2022). Although earlier survey findings suggested that voters generally perceive electoral outcomes as largely fair (Wilson, 2012), this perception can change, even among core regime supporters, when presented with evidence of electoral fraud (Reuter & Szakonyi, 2021).

The interplay between the centralized regime and regional entities in the orchestration of malpractice can be conceptualized within the framework of a principal-agent relationship (Klimovich, 2023b; see also Kofanov et al., 2023). The regime as the principal has institutionalized its tactic of tilting the playing field through federal laws regulating the registration of candidates (cf. Szakonyi, 2022). Oppositional candidates often are denied access to the electoral arena. From its establishment in 2001 onwards, the Putin-loyal party Edinaya Rossiya (United Russia, ER) successfully hamstrung opposition (Gel'man, 2005). The regime's initial reaction to the 2011/2012 protest movements gave some cause for optimism, for example, the partial liberalization of the electoral law and relaxation of rules concerning party registration (Goode, 2013; Korgunyuk, 2017). In fact, in early 2013, 71 parties were officially registered in comparison to seven before the protests (Petrov et al., 2014). However, it did not result in a "rebirth of political opposition" (Gel'man, 2015, p. 178) but rather contributed to the existing controlled pluralism through artificial fragmentation (Golosov, 2014; Semenov, 2017). Hence, it resulted in a consolidation of the competitive authoritarian regime (Ross, 2014). The imbalance on the playing field arises not only from filtering but also from the fragmentation of the competition, achieved by strategically introducing weaker candidates to ostensibly challenge the preferred candidate. These candidates, often termed as "technical candidates," play a crucial role in this process (Bækken, 2015; Golosov, 2018; Smyth & Turovsky, 2018).

This type of controlled pluralism is rooted in a differentiation of systemic and non-systemic opposition. Systemic opposition might oppose certain policies but not the regime as such. In contrast, non-systemic opposition (democratically) opposes the institutions and procedures of the regime. However, the differentiation between systemic and non-systemic opposition is not always clear-cut. While some consider parties represented in the state Duma as systemic opposition and remaining parties as non-systemic (Sakwa, 2018; Semenov, 2017), others find the mere registration and participation as accommodation within the system and thus becoming part of this (Lassila, 2016; Turovsky, 2015). From this latter perspective, non-systemic opposition would rather refer to social movements or non-registered parties. Therefore, the usage of the label of opposition in the context of Russian elections should not be misunderstood as a label for democratic quality but rather as a structural descriptor of a biased race between the hegemonic party (ER) and the remaining parties. However, the fact that only system-loyal candidates are running for office should not mislead to the interpretation that election results would not matter for the autocrat (see below, in particular fn. 5).

The regime's tools for marginalization of non-systemic opposition are formally legalized obstruction of opposition parties (Konitzer, 2006) and their exclusion from the electoral arena (Bækken, 2015; Ross, 2011). The 2012 reform of electoral law introduced a presidential and a municipal filter setting high obstacles in the registration

procedures. For example, gubernatorial candidates need to collect signatures of 5 to 10% of the regional assembly members to compete in an election. The enforcement of these filters varies, and often technical reasons are cited when candidate registrations are denied (Smyth & Turovsky, 2018). In some cases, even minuscule errors, such as errors in the usage of diacritical signs are cited as a reason to deny registration (Ross, 2018). Thus, the regime can utilize this "legal-administrative framework to work as a de facto political filter" (Bækken, 2015, p. 69), which mitigates pressure from voters to competing parties (Korgunyuk, 2017). An analysis of candidates filtered in Russian mayoral elections has shown that these filters are by no means neutral. Candidates are filtered strategically if the regime is electorally vulnerable. Oppositional or independent candidates, as well as educated and well-resourced candidates, are filtered more frequently (Szakonyi, 2022). Furthermore, it was found that members of the non-systemic opposition are filtered more frequently (Ross, 2018). As a result, the regime creates procedural legitimation by allowing oppositional parties seemingly leading to party pluralism. In fact, "only those parties, that have struck a pre-electoral deal with the authorities can compete in the gubernatorial elections" (Turovsky, 2015, p. 123). At the same time, technical candidates are in some cases denied endorsement by regional assembly members, indicating that not in all cases the agents follow the principal's desires (Kovin & Semenov, 2022).

Tilting the electoral playing field, which hinders fairness, is directly linked to the contestation dimension. The described management of the electoral arena is utilized to produce regime-sustaining outcomes (Smyth & Turovsky, 2018) and secures electoral dominance of ER (Golosov, 2014; Ross, 2018). For example, in the 2011 parliamentary election, the regime responded to considerable electoral closeness on the local level with extra-legal mobilization efforts and ballot box stuffing (Harvey, 2016).[5] Although the regime was challenged by protests in 2011/2012 and despite some volatility at *Duma* elections (Panov & Ross, 2019), ER remains the dominant hegemonic party. However, its support is not equally strong across all regions (Obydenkova & Libman, 2013), and Moscow "cannot simply dictate to the regions how they should vote" (Panov & Ross, 2018, p. 110).[6] These regional differences are also apparent in terms of fraud. Especially, in Russia's ethnic republics, turnout values have been shown to be artificially inflated to support ER. Although in these regions the elections are a forgone conclusion, fraud is utilized to signal support and amplify the mandate (Myagkov et al., 2009; Sidorkin & Vorobyev, 2019).

Data and Operationalization

Since informal or hidden malpractice obscures the management of competitiveness, it causes measurement problems. Thus, the conceptual emphasis on contestation as the primary indicator of competitiveness is also reflected methodologically: most

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[5] Such behavior indicates that election results do play a role for the regime, although the systemic opposition is generally loyal to it.

[6] Sub-national variation of ER-dominance and contestation are mainly attributed to the availability of resource rents and economic concentration (Saikkonen, 2016).

analyses use the closeness of an election as a proxy for competitiveness. However, in addition to the conceptual limitation, the focus on contestation in autocracies introduces further methodological challenges. In the following, we discuss operationalizations for both dimensions of competitiveness.

Electoral data has been obtained from the Central Electoral Commission (CEC) of the Russian Federation (CEC of Russia, n.d.) and compiled in a novel dataset with variables related to (perceptions) electoral malpractice on the regional level.

Fairness

As outlined above, fairness is a broad concept since multiple kinds of malpractice can be used to manipulate the playing field. For our object of research, various data are available.

First, to formally limit the candidates' access to the electoral arena, registration filters have been implemented in Russia. The CEC provides a comprehensive list of candidates for each election conducted in the Russian Federation. These lists also include data on candidates that were not registered. They differentiate two types of these candidates. The denial of registration refers to cases in which the electoral commission finds the candidate to not fulfil the legal requirements to compete. Compliance with electoral law during the registration procedure is often complex, if not impossible, for candidates. Changes frequently occur just shortly before an election (Bækken, 2015). In other cases, the candidate status was withdrawn after granting it initially. This may occur by request of the candidate or if the electoral commission cites legal or technical reasons. Withdrawals requested by candidates are often not voluntary but rather caused by extra-legal pressure, the anticipation of certain electoral failure, ongoing criminal investigations, or political bargains for alternative positions (Bækken, 2015; Smyth & Turovsky, 2018). As both denials and withdrawals of registrations result in politically filtering of the list of candidates, they are aggregated to the variable *candidates filtered*. Concerning the remaining field of candidates, we follow Turovsky's (2015) perspective (2015) and argue that the registration itself represents an accommodation within the system. Consequently, for the remainder of this article, we do not differentiate between systemic and non-systemic opposition, keeping the limitations of the label opposition in the Russian context in mind.

Second, voters are addressed informally by various means such as described in the previous two sections in order to change or falsify their choices. Quantifying electoral misconduct is challenging. Official electoral monitoring missions offer qualitative evaluations of electoral conduct, but regional differences are rarely available in quantitative data. Crowd-sourced data provides regional variations and highlights the civic perception of the fairness in the electoral arena, thus serving as a valuable alternative source (Bader, 2013). Consequently, we measure *perceived electoral malpractice* using data from Dvizheniye "Golos" (n.d.) (movement "voice"). Golos is a Russian nongovernmental organization primarily active in monitoring elections. To that end, Golos does not only deploy trained volunteers as election monitors but also sets up hotlines

and a website to facilitate civic election monitoring. The reports are moderated and aggregated for each election and published on their online "Karta narusheniy" (map of violations) (Skovoroda & Lankina, 2017). Despite regional variance in terms of community mobilization, support of ER, or competitiveness, the election monitoring efforts of Golos are equally known among supporters and non-supporters of ER and are widely trusted (Reuter & Szakonyi, 2021; Robertson, 2017). Thus, the data provides an operationalization of the civic perception of electoral malpractice—although the reports vary in severeness[7] and may also encompass administrative incompetency. For our analyses, we use the total number of all reports per gubernatorial election.[8]

Contestation

Emphasizing the outcome of the election, the standard measure of competitiveness is the *margin of victory* between the election winner and the runner-up, with larger margins indicating lower levels of competitiveness. Generally, this operationalization of competitiveness is debated concerning the moderating effect of district magnitude (Stockemer, 2015), party dominance (Ashworth et al., 2006; Bönisch et al., 2019), and transferability across electoral systems (Cox, 1988; Cox et al., 2020; Eichhorn & Linhart, 2021; Kayser & Lindstädt, 2015). As these moderating effects remain by and large constant in the context of Russian gubernatorial elections, our analysis is not concerned with said issues. However, the exclusion of (non-systemic) opposition undermines the validity of electoral margins. The margin of victory is only meaningful as a measure of competitiveness if voters have an actual choice between candidates. As explained earlier, autocratic regimes are able to control the electoral arena by restricting access or nominating technical candidates. Specifically, the inclusion of technical candidates poses a challenge to operationalize contestation solely through electoral margins. Despite the presence of only a nominal choice on the ballot, the margins quantify the gaps between different candidates and thus provide valuable information.

To address limitations of the margin of victory, we supplement it with the variable *opposition vote share*. We operationalize this variable as the cumulative vote share of all oppositional candidates. Independent candidates supported by ER[9] are

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[7] The reports encompass a broad range of possible violations, including abuse of administrative resources, campaign-related violations, election day irregularities, ballot-counting discrepancies, and instances of assault.

[8] Furthermore, previous studies found the distribution of reports of Golos correlated with forensic digit testing of electoral malpractice (Skovoroda & Lankina, 2017). Forensic testing the distribution of digits in gubernatorial elections to identify the fingerprints of electoral fraud is an alternative approach to identify regional patterns. However, these approaches are constrained to fraud on election day such as ballot box stuffing (Eichhorn, 2022).

[9] Independent candidates supported by ER are identified by the fact that against these independents, no ER candidate ran. This initial assessment is in many cases corroborated by the fact that the independent candidates were installed as acting governors prior to the election by presidential decree (e.g., Osipov in the Zabaykalsky Krai, and Voskrensensky in the Ivanovo Oblast, Babushkin in the Astrakhan Oblast) or are in fact members of ER that decided to run as independents (e.g., Dymin in the Tula Oblast, Rudenya in the Tver Oblast). The appointed governors are oftentimes non-residential to the region they are appointed to, increasing the agency of this governor towards the central government (Klimovich, 2023a).

not considered opposition in this operationalization. Unlike the margin of victory, this measure does not differentiate between the two strongest candidates but measures the strength of the opposition as a whole. Thus, this indicator sheds light on a facet of contestation, which is not reflected by the margin of victory. On the other hand, one limitation of this measure is evident: it does not distinguish between elections with a strong, united opposition and a fragmented opposition (e.g., due to technical candidates). In such cases, the aggregated vote shares might be relatively high, yet none of the candidates could harm the regime-loyal candidate.

To assess the fragmentation of the candidate field, we finally include the *effective number of candidates* (*ENC*) in our analysis. We calculate this variable analogous to the effective number of parties (Laakso & Taagepera, 1979) replacing parties' vote shares with candidates' vote shares. In cases with dominant and thus uncontested candidates, values only slightly exceed one. The more contested an election, the closer the indicator approaches (or even exceeds) the value of two. Party system fragmentation needs to be examined based on the regime type. In democracies, fragmented party systems and thus high *ENC* values are considered unfavorable. However, in autocracies, where most *ENC* values range between one and two, smaller values indicate lower levels of contestation and thus have to be interpreted as less desirable.

The operationalization of contestation becomes feasible only through the integration of these three indicators, as none of the indicators individually is meaningful in the context of controlled competition. However, certain blind spots remain. With our approach, we are not able to identify or exclude technical candidates. Instead, our emphasis lies in assessing their impact on fragmentation. This fragmentation, however, could also arise from conflicts within the opposition itself. Data for all variables is retrieved from the reported electoral results by the CEC.

Results

Between their reinstitution in 2012 and 2019, a total of 124 direct gubernatorial elections were conducted.[10] Out of these, four elections required a second round, as no candidate received the absolute majority of votes in the first round. The elections are distributed among 77 of the 83 regions of the Russian Federation.[11] However, the number of elections per region is not distributed equally. Most regions (45) held two elections since 2012. Twenty-eight regions are still in their first electoral cycle, and in two regions, three gubernatorial elections were already conducted.

For a better understanding of the analyses, it is important to note that ER generally dominated the gubernatorial elections. On average, ER candidates received a vote share of 73.6% (median 74.7%) in the first electoral round. Only in 15 elections,

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[10] In total 125 direct elections were held, but one was annulled (Sep. 2018, Primorsky Krai), therefore both rounds are not included in the analysis.

[11] In the remaining federal subjects, the head of the executive is not elected directly (cf. "The Russian Context").

ER did not nominate a candidate. In eleven of these elections, independent candidates were registered and supported by ER. In these cases, the electoral dominance was transferred to the independent candidates, who on average received 74.0% of the votes (median 72.2%). In the four remaining elections, neither ER candidates nor ER-supported independent candidates competed for the governor's post.

The average vote shares of both ER and ER-loyal independent candidates indicate that losses of these contenders are quite rare events. Only in eight cases candidates of the opposition won the final round, and in all eight cases, the winner of the election was a member of a party represented in the state *Duma*. In four of these elections, neither ER nor ER-supported independent candidates competed.[12] Interestingly, within these four elections, the incumbent governor had been replaced by an interim governor from Moscow prior to the end of their term. These acting governors subsequently contested and won the elections. This sequence of events leads us to a reasonable assumption that these candidates had secured regime approval. A special case is the elections in the Republic of Khakassia in 2018. An ER candidate withdrew his candidacy, after the first round was won by the opposition, which consequently ran unopposed in the second round. In only three final electoral rounds, oppositional candidates won against ER or ER-supported independent candidates.[13]

Fairness

Our analysis on electoral malpractice shows the distribution of crowd-sourced reports per election and depending on the electoral context (Fig. 1). It is important, to reiterate that these reports depict the subjective perception of the electoral conduct and are not to be understood as an objective quantification. In total, Golos registered 4846 reports. On average, 37.6 reports were filed per election. The lower median value of 12 reports hints at a highly skewed distribution, which is confirmed in the left panel. In 19 elections, no reports of electoral malpractice were made, and in roughly 40 elections, the number of reports ranges between one and 10. At the same time, the figure illustrates about 10 cases with over 100 complaints concerning electoral malpractice. The maximum value is recorded during the 2013 elections in the city of Moscow reaching 470 reports.

The second panel in Fig. 1 illustrates the number of reports for different election outcomes: ER victory, victory of ER-supported independents, and oppositional victory. Similar to the overall distribution of reports, the number of reports within these groups is on average small. Interestingly, the cases featuring the highest perceptions of electoral malpractice can be found for elections where independents won. This may appear counterintuitive, as malpractice could be understood as an instrument to guarantee the victory of the own ER candidate (left column) or to try to prevent opposition parties' victories (right column). However, the context of oppositional victories needs to be considered. As described above, in most of the elections won

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[12] Oryol region 2014, 2018; Smolensk region 2015, Transbaikal region 2013.
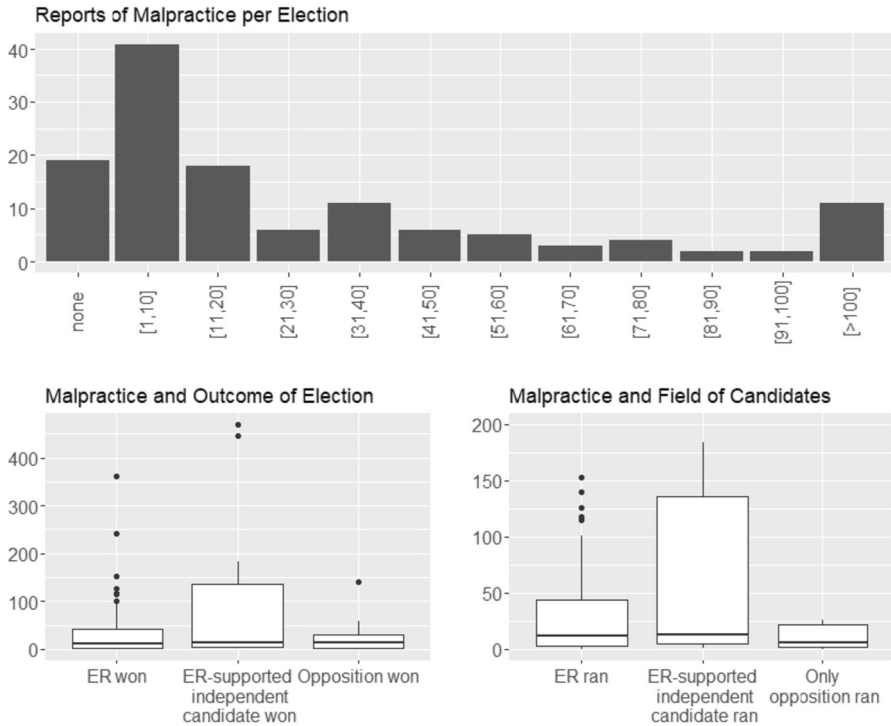[13] Vladimir region 2018, Khabarovsk region 2018, Irkutsk region 2015.

Fig. 1 Perceived electoral malpractice

by the opposition, ER or ER-supported independent candidates did not compete. Therefore, investing in malpractice does not offer any added value for the regime in such cases and potentially leads to a preference for selective candidate registration instead. On the other hand, to outpace opposition candidates, regime-loyal independent candidates might require more illegitimate support to win an election than ER partisans. If this holds true, intensifying the electoral manipulation in the respective elections is a rational choice by the regime. Despite the skewed distribution of elections won by ER-supported independents, however, differences in the levels of electoral malpractice among the three subgroups are not statistically significant.

On the third panel, the reports are grouped according to the composition of the field of candidates. Although the pattern is very similar to the second panel, we find significantly lower levels of electoral malpractice, if only opposition parties competed in an election ($t(24)=3.2$, $p=0.003$). This confirms the regime's disinterest in these elections, which are contested exclusively by the opposition. Unlike in the second panel, the right column in the third panel omits elections in which opposition candidates competed against ER-supported independents. Strikingly, it is precisely these cases that cause differences in statistical significance.

Regarding the supply side, a total of 566 candidates competed across all gubernatorial elections examined in this study. On average, 4.6 (median 5) candidates contested each election. Additionally, 301 candidates were denied registration, and
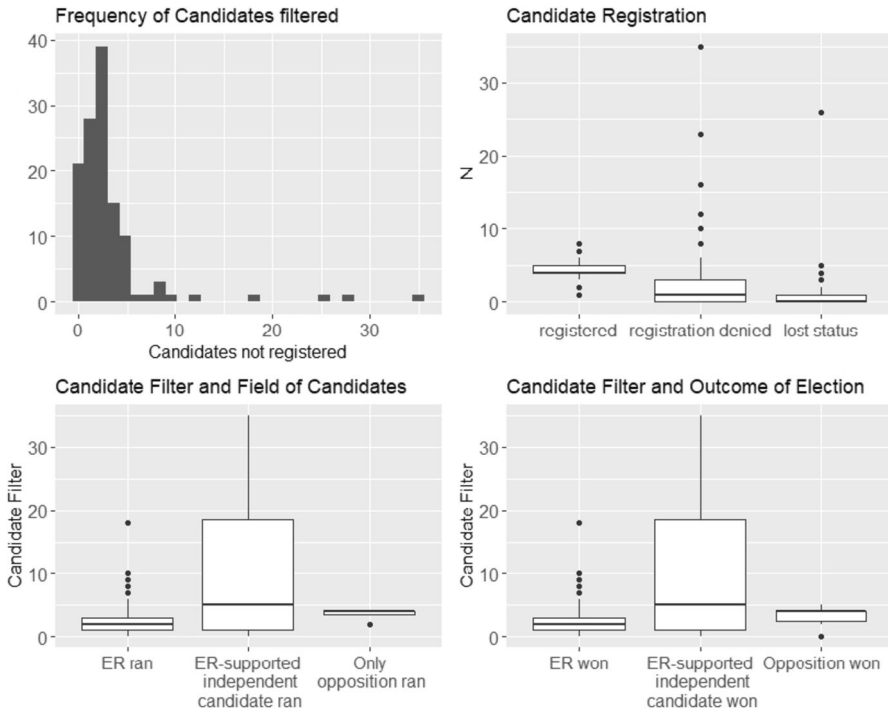
Fig. 2 Candidate filtering

further 98 candidates lost their candidacy after being initially registered. This means that more than 40% of prospective competitors have been filtered out. The first panel on Fig. 2 displays the distribution of filtered candidates per election, aggregating lost statuses and denied registrations. In only 21 elections, all prospective candidates were registered and able to compete in the election. In most cases, one or two candidates have been filtered. The highest number of candidates who were denied registration or lost their registration status occurred during the 2013 elections in Moscow city, where a total of 35 candidates were affected. On the second panel, we disaggregate the prospective candidates based on their final status in registered candidates, denied registrations, and lost statuses. The left boxplot displays the distribution of the number of candidates that eventually made it on the ballot. Most candidates competed in the 2019 election in the Republic of Bashkortostan (eight candidates). Only two candidates competed in the 2012 election in Bryansk Region. The center and right boxplots represent a disaggregation of the data summarized in the first panel. The number of registered candidates is on average greater than the number of denied registrations. In terms of filtering the candidates, the denial of registration is more common than the post hoc withdrawal of the candidate status.

The bottom panels of Fig. 2 disaggregate the number of filtered candidates depending on the field of candidates (left) and the outcome of the election (right). Candidates were filtered more selectively, if there was no ER candidate running in the election ($t(14.1) = 3.24$, $p = 0.041$) and prior to elections that did not result in

an ER victory ($t(16.2) = 2.20$, $p = 0.040$). There are no statistically significant differences between the number of filtered candidates for cases in which only the opposition ran or won and cases in which ER-supported independents ran or won. However, as for reported malpractice, the cases with the highest numbers of filtered candidates are observed in the columns related to ER-supported independents. If ER is not competing, it is central for the regime to avoid the perception of a power vacuum. Furthermore, in the absence of a dominant candidate, it is even more important to reduce the choice of candidates to benevolent independents. In contrast, if ER is competing, a larger number of oppositional candidates may be admitted to enhance oppositional fractionalization and imitate pluralism.

When considering both aspects of the fairness dimension, it becomes evident that a strategic blend of methods is employed to maintain a firm hold on power. The field of candidates is controlled selectively, especially in the absence of ER candidates. In these elections, in turn, less effort is put into electoral malpractice. If ER candidates are running, the regime relies on the popularity of the party and allows further candidates into the electoral arena. However, electoral losses or higher levels of contestation could damage the dominance. Electoral malpractice is utilized to avoid this situation.

Contestation

The graphs in Fig. 3 provide the basis for the discussion of the second dimension of competitiveness, namely contestation. The figure illustrates the distribution of margins of victory, the aggregated opposition's votes share, and the effective numbers of candidates (*ENC*). We organized Fig. 3 to directly indicate the relationship between these measures, as well. Furthermore, the plots differentiate between election outcomes (shade). As contestation in the second rounds differs structurally from the first rounds, we do not compare contestations across electoral rounds and display only the first rounds in Fig. 3. However, all observations that resulted in an opposition victory in the final round are labelled with the name of the region and election year. The shaded edging is in reference to the outcome of the second round.

The electoral dominance of ER is reflected by large electoral margins indicating uncontested elections for most cases. On average, the winner of a gubernatorial election is 59.6 (median 62.0) percentage points ahead of the runner-up. By using the global average in democracies (mean = 12.9) and competitive authoritarian regimes (37.3) as benchmarks (cf. Eichhorn & Linhart, 2021), we see that—despite considerable variation of these margins across the Russian Federation—many of the smaller margins found here also clearly surpass these benchmarks. Only in 18 first rounds of gubernatorial elections (14.5%), margins of victory are smaller than 37.3, and in mere two cases (1.6%), the margins go below 12.9.

The four elections won by the opposition unopposed by ER or ER-supported independents are marked by high margins, as well (mean 70.9, median 71.2). However, in all four cases, previously elected or appointed governors have been re-elected, benefitting not only from the advantages of incumbency but also from
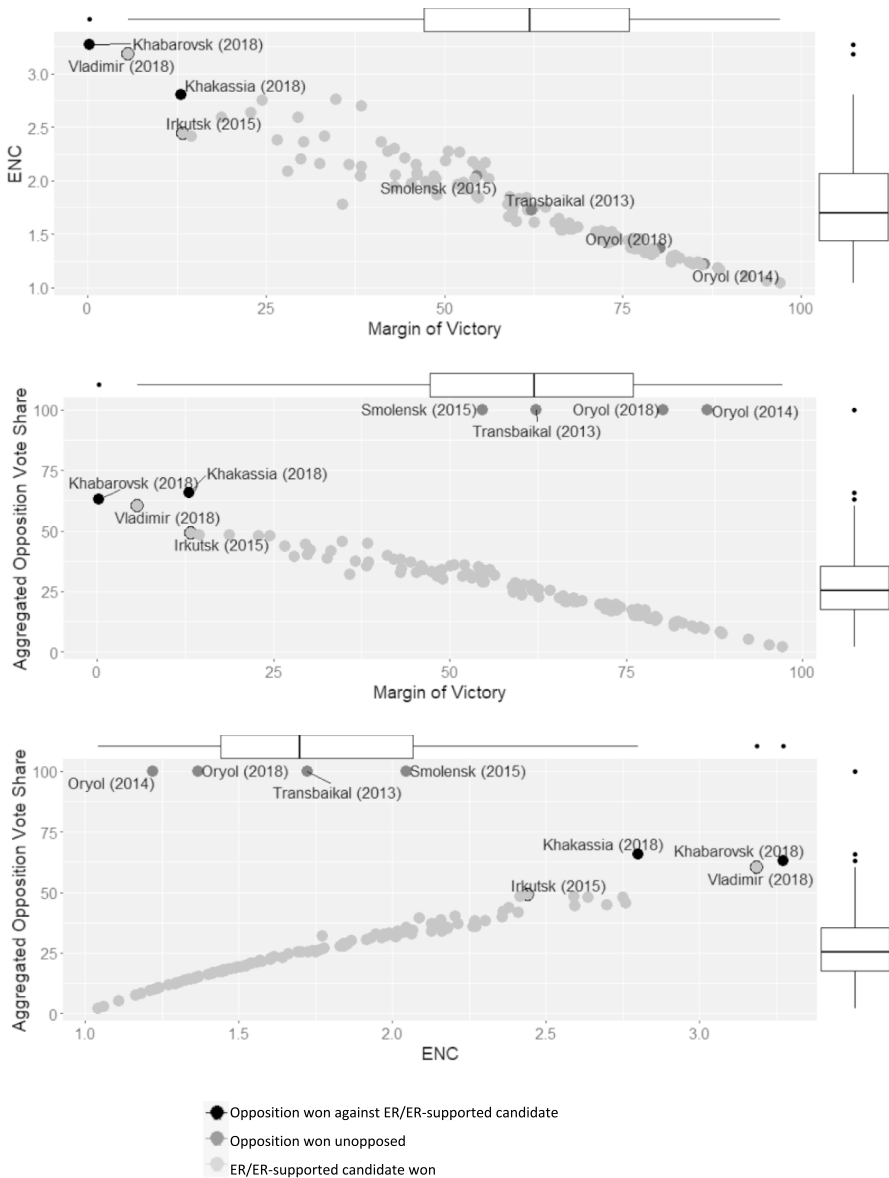
Fig. 3 Contestation and electoral outcome

support from the regime through their recent appointment. On the other hand, the elections won by oppositional candidates against ER- or ER-supported candidates have been the most contested. In two elections, oppositional candidates were able to obtain an absolute majority in the first round already. In two further elections, a second round was necessary. In all four cases, the margins in the first round

ranged between 0.2 and 13.4 percentage points (mean 8.1, median 9.3), thus significantly smaller than in the remaining cases ($t(4.8) = -14.9$, $p = 0.000$).

Similarly, the aggregated oppositional vote share (mean = 28.8, median = 25.6) hints at low levels of contestation from the opposition. Exceptions are elections, in which the opposition ran unopposed and naturally received 100%. In elections won by ER or ER-supported independents, the opposition received on average an aggregated vote share of 25.3% (median = 23.9). In elections won by the opposition against ER or ER-supported independents, the aggregated oppositional vote share is on average 59.6% (median 61.7). The difference in aggregated oppositional vote shares between elections won by ER and contested elections won by systemic opposition is statistically significant ($t(3.5) = -8.9$, $p = 0.002$).

Lastly, the effective number of gubernatorial candidates (mean = 1.78, median = 1.70) confirms these low levels of contestation and illustrates the dominance of single candidates. In elections won by ER or ER-supported independent candidates, the *ENC* is on average slightly lower (mean = 1.77, median 1.69). In contested elections won by the opposition, the *ENC* is significantly larger than in the remaining elections (mean = 2.9, median = 3.0, $t(3.2) = 6.1$, $p = 0.007$), possibly hinting at some pluralism. However, keeping the aforementioned candidate filtering in mind, this pluralism is managed at best. This management is also reflected by the *ENC* in elections in which neither ER nor ER-supported candidates ran. In such cases, the *ENC* is even lower (mean = 1.59, median = 1.54).

The panels in Fig. 3 illustrate almost perfect correlations between these measures. Margins are low where the opposition's vote share is high and larger *ENC* values indicate at least some form of pluralism. These patterns are independent of the final election winner with one exception: Where opposition candidates won unopposed, the 100% opposition vote shares strongly deviate from the correlation lines. More importantly, the few instances in which opposition candidates have beaten ER or ER-supported competitors are all associated with small margins of victory, comparably high vote shares for the opposition and a relatively pluralistic field of candidates.

Linking Fairness and Contestation

As outlined in the above, we conceptualize electoral competitiveness to comprise fairness and contestation. To better understand elections in non-democratic context, not only the consideration of both dimensions is crucial, but also their relationship. To assess this relationship, we show correlation values between the respective indicators in Table 1.

Returning briefly to the individual dimensions, Table 1 confirms the results from the visual inspection of Fig. 3. Within the contestation dimension, we find a high correlation between the margin of victory and the *ENC*. The correlations with the aggregated opposition vote share remain at a moderate level. In both cases, the elections won by opposition parties without contestation by ER or ER-supported candidates constitute influential outliers and diverge from the primary pattern. Omitting these observations results in high correlations with the margin of victory

Table 1 Correlation between dimensions of competitiveness

	Perceived electoral malpractice	Candidates filtered	Margin of victory	Effective number of candidates
Perceived electoral malpractice				
Candidates filtered	0.598***			
Margin of victory	−0.109	−0.138		
Effective number of candidates	0.120	0.152	−0.953***	
Opposition vote share	0.015	0.112	−0.589***	0.611***

Computed correlation used Pearson-method with listwise-deletion: $*p \leq 0.05$; $**p \leq 0.01$; $***p \leq 0.001$

($R = -0.98$) and the *ENC* ($R = 0.97$). For the fairness dimension, we find a moderately high correlation between the two indicators, malpractice reports and filtered candidates. Although the intra-dimension relationship for fairness is lower than for contestation, this correlation is statistically significant.

Interestingly, we find no statistically significant correlations across our dimensions (bottom left corner of Table 1), and the correlation coefficients are small. We ruled out non-linear relationships visually and by checking for correlations within grouped subsets of the data, yielding substantially similar results. However, splitting the data into the more and the less contested elections sheds light on the relationship. Precisely, we compare malpractice and candidate filtering between two levels of contestation. For illustrative purposes, we use the margin of victory[14] and the previously mentioned threshold of 37.3 to differentiate between at least somewhat contested and non-contested elections. In Table 2, the number of reports of electoral malpractice (grouped by 25; rows of the table) is disaggregated according to these levels of contestation (columns).

The measures of central tendency summarized in the bottom of the table provide an explanation for the lack of correlation. On average, more incidents of electoral malpractice have been reported for contested elections. However, the median for both contested and non-contested elections is similar hinting at the leverage of outliers in the former.[15] Furthermore, the smaller interquartile range for contested elections indicates a clustering of observations at smaller levels of electoral malpractice. This observation is confirmed by the disaggregated data at the top of the table. Only in two contested elections, more than 50 reports of malpractice were made.[16]

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[14] Since the margin of victory is highly correlated to the aggregated oppositional vote share and the *ENC*, interpretations can be transferred to all contestation variables.

[15] Indeed, the 2013 election in Moscow heavily influence the mean values. Omitting this observation results in a decrease of the mean value to 17.12.

[16] In addition to the 2013 election in Moscow, this is the 2015 election in the Irkutsk Oblast.

Table 2 Perceived electoral malpractice across two levels of contestation

Reports of electoral malpractice	Contested elections		Non-contested elections	
	(N)	(%)	(N)	(%)
0–25	14	(77.7)	68	(64.2)
26–50	2	(11.1)	15	(14.2)
51–75	0	(0.0)	10	(9.4)
76–100	0	(0.0)	5	(4.7)
100–125	1	(5.6)	2	(1.9)
126–150	0	(0.0)	1	(0.9)
> 150	1	(5.6)	5	(4.7)
Mean (SD)	*45.3 (11.5)*		*36.1 (11.5)*	
Median (IQR)	*11.5 (18.5)*		*11.5 (24.75)*	

In addition, for non-contested elections, we find most cases at the top of the table, but observations spread more across the whole range of values for malpractice. With the exceptions of the two cases mentioned in footnote 12, this distribution hints at fairness as a necessary but not sufficient condition for contestation. Higher levels of malpractice typically lead to uncontested elections, whereas lower levels can—but need not—result in contested elections.

The analogous analysis for filtered candidates is shown in Table 3. The column referring to contested elections includes one outlier (again the Moscow 2013 election), with all other cases being connected with comparably low levels of candidate filtering. In the group with the uncontested elections, the majority of the cases also are concentrated in the first two rows. However, in about 10% of cases, more than five candidates were filtered out. These patterns corroborate the interpretation of fairness as a necessary but not sufficient condition for contestation.

Given the necessary condition of a level playing field, the question at hand is as follows: what additional factors are sufficient to guarantee contested elections with opportunities for oppositional victories? We, therefore, supplement our analysis with an in-depth view on illustrative cases for both categories. On the one hand, we

Table 3 Candidate filtering across two levels of contestation

Candidates filtered	Contested elections		Non-contested elections	
	(N)	(%)	(N)	(%)
0–2	9	(50.0)	63	(59.4)
3–5	8	(44.4)	33	(31.1)
6–8	0	(0.0)	3	(2.8)
9–11	0	(0.0)	3	(2.8)
12–14	0	(0.0)	1	(0.9)
> 15	1	(5.6)	3	(2.8)
Mean (SD)	*3.9 (7.9)*		*4.3 (3.1)*	
Median (IQR)	*2.5 (2.0)*		*2.0 (3.0)*	

look at the 2018 elections in the regions of Chukotka and Magadan Oblast, both of which were perceived rather fair based on our operationalization but were uncontested. On the other hand, the 2018 elections (first rounds) in Khabarovsk Krai, Primorsky Krai, and Amur Oblast are cases where elections were perceived fair and contested.[17] These cases provide optimal cases for the explorative in-depth analysis, as the elections were held under similar circumstances (e.g., timing and region) but resulted in different outcomes.

A deeper look into these cases reveals two major differences between these groups of elections. The first regards the opposition strategy. In the non-contested elections, the oppositional candidates are rather unknown. In Chukotka, regional politicians from the backbench competed for the opposition. These candidates had previously not won direct elections but received party list mandates only. In Magadan Oblast, prior to the election, the competing oppositional candidates were not present in regional politics at all. In contrast, in the elections which became contested, the oppositional candidates were well-known regional politicians. In Amur Oblast, the parties nominated candidates which were already in high-ranking regional offices, such as Sergey Levitsky (Fair Russia), who was a regional deputy minister. Tatyana Rakutina (Communist Party) ran simultaneously in the gubernatorial elections and the by-elections to the state Duma. This strategy helped to maximize media exposure. In Primorsky Krai, the strongest opposition candidate was Andrey Ischenko (Communist Party), who previously won a direct mandate to the regional Duma. In Khabarovsk Krai, Sergei Furgal (LDPR) was the strongest opponent to the acting governor. He already competed in the previous gubernatorial elections and won a direct mandate to the state Duma. Such nomination practices signal to the voters that the opposition is willing to compete substantially and that its participation is not merely technical.

The second difference arises from a supposed similarity at first glance and once again highlights the interdependence between both dimensions of competitiveness. Keeping in mind that the oppositional room for maneuver on the electoral playing field is shaped by the regime, the regime's interventions can be interpreted as consequences of anticipated degrees of contestation. Regimes are incentivized to tilt the playing field if they fear that elections could become close without manipulation. Conversely, when elections are deemed secure for regime victory, they require minimal manipulation efforts.

Generally, the Far East regions provide by and large robust support for ER in national elections (Panov & Ross, 2018). Indeed, previous gubernatorial elections in Chukotka, Magadan Oblast, Khabarovsk Krai, and Primorsky Krai were won with strong electoral support for ER.[18] Consequently, the regime may not have considered

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[17] Holding further variables like the election year (2018) and the federal district (Russian Far East) constant allow us to better focus on substantial differences.

[18] In Amur Oblast, the situation was somehow more complicated, as the previous gubernatorial election was contested, and the severity of the situation was recognized. The governor was replaced before the election and the strongest candidate of the previous gubernatorial election, Ivan Abramov (LDPR), was co-opted and received a position as senator. Obviously, the regime misperceived this kind of manipulation outside the electoral arena in the narrower sense as sufficient.

extensive manipulation necessary. While this assessment held true for Chukotka and Magadan Oblast, the regime may have underestimated the potential contestation in Khabarovsk Krai and Primorsky Krai. This conjecture is supported by the second rounds in which malpractice strongly increased in both regions. In Khabarovsk Krai, ER campaigning was drastically expanded with the support of political strategists from Moscow. Additionally, Furgal was offered an alternative position which he declined and eventually won the election.[19] The elections in Primorsky Krai, where the oppositional candidate was leading, were completely annulled. These examples illustrate that manipulative tactics are not restricted to the pre-electoral phase and election day.

In summary, the link between fairness and contestation depends on the regime's ability to correctly assess the degree of contestation and the timing of this assessment. Therefore, close elections can be a result of a regime's misperception. In this context, it is essential to recognize that regimes might utilize post-election interventions to change the outcome in their favor, which reemphasizes the necessity to integrate both dimensions of competitiveness—contestation and fairness. This also demonstrates that electoral victories of the opposition can be windows of opportunity for democratization, but they are not guaranteed to do so.

Conclusion

In autocratic elections, authoritarian leaders or ruling parties can turn the odds in their favor through the utilization of administrative resources, constraining oppositional candidates from running in an election, electoral malpractice, or blatant electoral fraud. Russian gubernatorial elections are a prime example of these authoritarian endeavors. They are not only an interesting manifestation of authoritarian management of the electoral arena but also show large sub-national variation. Despite this variation, Russian gubernatorial elections between 2012 and 2019 rarely opened windows for oppositional victory. The regime keeps a tight hold on the electoral arena by controlling access and systematically using electoral malpractice to craft an uneven playing field which produces certain electoral outcomes. Even small margins in some elections therefore do not necessarily indicate regime openings.

In a broader context, the importance of the accentuation of dimensions of competitiveness refers to our basic understanding of competitive authoritarianism. Differentiations between competitive and hegemonic electoral authoritarianism frequently rely on the size of electoral margins. However, this is only one dimension of competitiveness which overlooks carefully crafted contestation through unfair

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[19] Two years subsequent to the election in Charabovsk, Furgal was arrested and sentenced to 22 years in prison. Likewise, the remaining governors who were successful against candidates from ER (see fn. 13) did not complete their full terms in office. Levchenko, who won the 2015 Irkutsk election, was removed from his position in 2019 and subsequently faced legal action for poaching. Sipyagin, who secured the 2018 election in the Vladimir region, stepped down from his role in 2021 and was appointed to a different position within the Duma.

pre-conditions and co-optation. However, this relationship is not deterministic, as the effectiveness of malpractice and miscalculated contestation intervene.

The results of this study complement existing studies on elections in authoritarian regimes and specifically on competitiveness in the sub-national context. Concerning authoritarianism on the sub-national level, our descriptive analysis reveals large variations of margins of victory and measures of electoral management indicating different types of authoritarianism (competitive and hegemonic). We highlight the importance of addressing the management of the electoral arena in this context. Further research is needed to unveil causal relationships between dimensions of competitiveness and regional institutional and socio-demographic factors.

A primary challenge is the scarcity of quantitative data on sub-national variations in the fairness dimension of competitiveness. Apart from the quantified reports of electoral malpractice, Golos also provides qualitative assessments of elections, which could enhance future case studies on regional variations of the relationship between competitiveness and fairness. The outcome-related measures of the contestation dimension allow even further disaggregation and provide opportunities for local and district variations of competitiveness which also may broaden our understanding of sub-national variations of authoritarianism. Further research is needed to fully understand the strategic choices of tilting the playing field and the links between different levels of elections. The dimensions of competitiveness are possibly related not only within an election, but also across electoral cycles or levels of elections.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest The authors declare no competing interests.

Informed Consent and Research Involving Human Participants and/or Animals Not applicable.

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