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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Mochtak, M., & Holzer, J. (2017). Electoral violence in Putin's Russia: modern authoritarianism in practice. *Studies of Transition States and Societies*, 9(1), 35-52. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-62565-3>

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Electoral Violence in Putin's Russia: Modern Authoritarianism in Practice

Michal Mochtak*, Jan Holzer

Abstract

The paper identifies and analyses the acts of electoral violence that occurred during the 2011 parliamentary and 2012 presidential elections in the Russian Federation, and connects them with the practices of modern authoritarian regimes. The analytical tool employed is based on an electoral violence research framework, which provides insight into the negative dynamics of an electoral competition and its outcomes. The authors argue that electoral violence is used to advance the Russian authoritarian regime, which is a modern form of authoritarian rule. By analysing the post-electoral turmoil and the response of authorities to public demonstrations, we depict the regime's ability to adapt its position to maximise outcomes in the political conflict and opportunistically select the best tool to achieve its goals. We further argue that Russia, with its authoritarian tendencies, utilises confrontation dynamics during elections in order to allow the politicisation of various latent conflicts (interest- or value-oriented) that are impossible to solve in the everyday depoliticised routine of the undemocratic system.

Key words: Authoritarianism; new authoritarianism; election; violence; electoral violence; Putin's Russia;

Introduction

Political struggles of the Russian society have attracted political scientists, economists, sociologists and historians for decades, even centuries. Uprisings, revolutionary movements, dissent groups and opposition have influenced the form of political contest, its dynamics and violent intensity and defined the everyday patterns of political interaction. During the past 25 years, the Russian government has faced several such challenges. They have influenced the authorities' increasing political dominance, while at the same time adjusting to the current worldwide democratic discourse in which democracy is the best of available political models. Especially over the past 15 years, the regime of Vladimir Putin and his political supporters has shown how reliable the illiberal measures can be and what the effective strategies for political deception are – all these as part of a 'democracy' game that should be tolerated for the sake of plurality. The relevance of this dynamic – seen as symptomatic of the legitimisation of the ruling elites – often spills over into other dimensions of political life, including the priorities and interests in foreign affairs. Although some observers may interpret this issue as more important or relevant (especially in the context of the recent events in Syria or Ukraine), its true nature goes back to matters of the domestic power structure and its implications for the style of governance.

In 2008 and 2009, Freedom House (together with Radio Free Europe and Radio Free Asia) organised policy workshops focused on the behaviour of five authoritarian regimes (China, Iran, Pakistan, Russia, and Venezuela) that impede democratic development both within and beyond their borders. A group of scholars prepared a report on the rise of new forms of authoritarian rule that adjust their basic coercive strategies to form informal and semi-formal systems of oppression (e.g. intimidation, harassment, structural discrimination, extortion, self-censorship, etc.). Within this

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structure, political power was predominantly enforced non-violently, with systematic efforts to advance coercive practices through an alternative model of dominance (Freedom House, 2009). In 2014, the findings were amended with a warning that authoritarian regimes tend to revert to old strategies of coercion when necessary and if it serves long term goals (Roylance, 2014). Although acts such as martial law, curfews, mass arrests, and summary executions – the symptomatic features of 20th century authoritarian regimes – have been largely abandoned, force has started to be used selectively, often as part of a long-term strategy aimed against specific groups within the society. Russia is not an exception. Whether it is corporate raids against rivaling business entities (Rochlitz, 2014; Yakovlev, Sobolev & Kazun, 2014), the style of and motivation for prosecutions (Paneyakh, 2014), the strength and relevance of informal ties between regional prosecutors and judges (Schultz, Kozlov & Libman, 2014), or the activities of “uchastkovyye” (*участковые*) – the beat cops of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (McCarthy, 2014), the coercive measures are applied in a sophisticated manner and, more importantly, effectively, with attention paid to the selectivity of these measures.

The goal of the paper is to further support the aforementioned claim of advancing strategies using coercion as part of a sophisticated game of deception in modern authoritarianism regimes. To provide a valid argument for the ongoing debate about the phenomenon, the paper analyses the situation around the 2011 parliamentary and 2012 presidential elections in the Russian Federation while discussing the phenomenon of “new” or “modern” authoritarianism and its implication for the political realm of Russian politics. The paper focuses on political violence reported between December 2011 and May 2012 and tries to understand the dynamics of violent electoral interaction as part of the advanced strategies of authoritarian rule. We formally ask: *What are the patterns of electoral violence during the 2011 parliamentary and 2012 presidential elections under Putin’s authoritarian rule in Russia?*

Based on data collected from monitoring mission reports, blogs and news channels, we argue that electoral violence, in a broader sense, played an instrumental role in the 2011 and 2012 electoral protests and, as such, can be seen as a supplementary tool for modern authoritarian rule in the Russian Federation. This perspective sees electoral violence as an indicator of sophistication that is integral to the modus operandi of Putin’s regime. Although some authors initially argued that the protests put an end to the post-communist status quo (Barry, 2011; Shevtsova, 2012), recent developments have shown this to be incorrect (Robertson, 2013). Post-electoral protests after the 2011 parliamentary and 2012 presidential elections in the Russian Federation showed how under Putin modern authoritarianism works within the electoral arena as a controlled playground for rivaling entities (see more White, 2011). In this context, the regime widely utilises violence as a tool when needed, however, not to the extent of commonality that it is used by other more traditional forms of authoritarian regimes (Lawrence, 1998; Svolic, 2012). This is an extremely important pattern not only for Russia but for all sorts of regimes that try to imitate the deception game of managed or directed democracy – a trend observed in other Central and Eastern European countries as well as worldwide. This may be seen as an interesting behaviour modification pattern in which the regime no longer makes an obvious show of direct force to protect its exclusivity, but rather uses a modified strategy based on selectivity, limited visibility and often non-physical forms of coercion.

The study is divided into three sections that are contextually linked and define the structure of the paper. The general intention of the first part is to briefly present the theoretical background of the study of electoral violence and the phenomenon of “modern” or “new” authoritarianism, with pertinent analysis of the 2011 protests, as the outcome of disputes over parliamentary election results. The second section consists of a case study mapping the protests that took place all around the Russian Federation. These protests openly challenged the victory of United Russia in the 2011 legislative election. Events connected with the 2012 presidential victory of Vladimir Putin are included in the discussion, as are the protests that preceded his inauguration in May 2012. The third and final section merges the previous two in a simple analytical muster, which presents the analysis of patterns of electoral violence occurring in the aftermath of the opposition rallies. The conclusion points out the use of force used in the electoral arena, the selectivity of the measures and the sophistication of coercive strategies. Due to of the deformation of the media space, the

main data sources used are foreign monitoring missions, world newspapers, the official blogs of opposition leaders and/or involved protesters, and personal contacts with Russian activists.

Advancing modern authoritarianism

Modern authoritarian regimes can be seen as evolutionary subtypes of classical examples of authoritarian rule, with ties to 20th century models of non-democratic government. Although the concept builds on the dominant discourse of hybrid regimes, which has fuelled the research on transformation for the past 15 years, more importantly it innovates the traditional notion of authoritarian rule and goes back to its roots. This perspective frames the alleged (democratic) opening of a country as a period of unprecedented authoritarian crisis, where the weakness of the incumbent elite was falsely interpreted as democratisation. Insufficient resources, supportive allies, or reliable institutions with coercive capabilities caused autocracies to fall into severe crisis rather than initiate genuine transformation. The result was widespread “pluralism by default,” in which competition was a product of the inability to suppress emerging challenges rather than an outcome of genuine democratic change (Levitsky & Way, 2015).

We are talking about the revival of a form of authoritarian rule that implements innovative strategies and tactics in order to control the political arena more effectively. It relies on a combination of patriotism and legitimacy based on performance rather than ideology. These regimes are capable of reshaping the experience from their hybrid period, while innovating the sophistication of an old authoritarian style (Jiang, 2010). As concepts, competitive authoritarianism and electoral authoritarianism traditionally associated with the hybrid regimes of the 1990s and 2000s are not abandoned or dismissed here, but incorporated into the modern notion of authoritarian rule instead (Levitsky & Way, 2002, 2015; Schedler, 2006). The integration of elections and the quasi-plurality in the power structure of the ruling elite is especially important here. In this context, hybrid regimes are seen as transitional types that have evolved towards the non-democratic end of the “democracy-non-democracy” regime spectrum. The outcome is a ‘new’ or ‘modern’ authoritarianism, which usually results from the evolutionary loop of autocracy – (quasi) democracy/hybrid regime – and back. As such, modern authoritarian governments are not the same as the old ones. They have evolved and become more sophisticated, altering the old goals of their predecessors. The result is an advanced form of authoritarian rule, which, although it shares a lot of features with hybrid regimes, does not belong to a hybrid paradigm.

Although we talk about modern authoritarian regimes as something new, the question about the evolutionary change towards “modernity” has already been raised several times in the past. In fact, discussion about modern forms of non-democratic rule can be traced back to as early as the 1960s and 1970s (Huntington, 1968; Linz, 1970). The debate continued in the 1980s, when several authors pointed out changes in the political behaviour of authoritarian leaders, while highlighting the existing differences from the regimes of the 1950s and 1960s (Perlmutter, 1981). The observed transformation was later interlinked with discussions of a hybrid paradigm, which defined the grey area between democratic and non-democratic regimes and shifted the focus away from traditional forms of authoritarian dominance (Diamond, 2002; Levitsky & Way, 2010). With the latest developments in the field, scholars are again more open to old concepts that seem to remain relevant, although they are now mixed with the modern advancements that define authoritarian rule in the 21st century (Merloe, 2015; cf. Schedler, 2013; Walker, 2016).

The ability of authoritarian leaders to utilise democratic tools to achieve undemocratic goals (i.e., to maintain their undemocratic rule) may be perceived as one of the central components of the research on authoritarian regimes in the past twenty years (Schedler, 2006, 2013). In this context, the position of elections is broadly discussed as having legitimising capacities for principally undemocratic governance, which then influences the form of electoral competition and the overall character of the regime. In this setting, elections are often accompanied by conflicting expectations of the various actors (privileged as well as deprived), who enter the electoral arena with explicitly conflicting goals. The ruling elite, on the one hand, sees an election as an opportunity to politicise various latent conflicts (interest- or value-oriented) that are impossible to solve in the everyday depoliticised routine of the authoritarian rule. Opposition groups, on the other hand, traditionally perceive the electoral contest as an exceptional opportunity to challenge the ruling elites, while increasing the visibility of dissent. This principled conflict, one which exists in modified form in

most of the societies, affects the form of competition, its dynamics, as well as the outcomes of the authoritarian style of governance (Bartos & Wehr, 2002; see more in Kriesberg, 1998).

The term “authoritarian regime” traditionally refers to a model with limited, irresponsible, political pluralism; without elaborate and guiding ideology (but with distinctive mentalities); without intensive or extensive political mobilisation (except at some points in their development); and in which a leader (or occasionally a small group) exercises power within formally ill-defined limits that are actually quite predictable (Linz, 1970). Although the core idea of authoritarian rule remains the same, its modern form is further defined by the existence of sophisticated methods of coercion, controlled via limited economic openness, restricted pluralistic media, dominated political competition, scrutiny of civil society and managed rule of law (Cooley, 2015; Roylance, 2014).

In terms of limited economic openness, the regimes are usually open to the cultivation of business relations with the outside world. This creates a sense of freedom and prosperity, using standard PR strategies and tools. This model is, however, dominated by state-owned or controlled companies and allied tycoons that are allowed and encouraged to set and routinely modify the terms of economic activities for other members of the environment, including local entrepreneurs, foreign companies and investors (Rochlitz, 2014; Yakovlev et al., 2014).

It is accompanied by a favourable media environment, where formal state-controlled censorship is no longer effective or desirable, allowing the spread of more commercialised and generally entertaining content. These seemingly open channels are, however, under the direct or indirect control of the state of allied actors, who are capable of manipulating mainstream news coverage, if necessary, while attacking independent journalism as something on the margins of the information landscape (Guriev & Treisman, 2015; Pomerantsev, 2015).

Sophistication in commercial spheres also spills over into the political arena, where multiparty competition and elections are supported, discussed and often, at least rhetorically, nurtured. Although some of the actors are genuine representatives of plurality, modern authoritarian regimes often support the fabrication of political opponents, their co-option, or defanging, helping the ruling group to maintain political dominance and a monopoly on power (Schedler, 2006, 2013).

Similar strategies can be identified as being used on the non-governmental organisations, which, although they are legally allowed to operate, are kept under close scrutiny, forced to compete with state-sponsored groups (GONGOs) and restricted on the basis of various legal provisions. Generally, civic groups and organisations working on apolitical issues that do not interfere with the core political dominium of the ruling elites receive less attention than notorious trouble-maker critics like human rights activists, independent journalists and lawyers (Rutzen, 2015).

All these are combined with the previously discussed advancing coercion strategies, which abandoned massive use of force for a new selective approach to coercion (covering physical as well as psychological dimensions). As a result, most of the population rarely experiences any direct state brutality. Opponents and critics, on the other hand, often must face a combination of various strategies including legal action, harassment and physical attacks. In cases where extra-legal violence is used, state authorship is often either hidden or not acknowledged at all (Applebaum, 2015).

These strategy advancements can be observed in political, economic and social life, with a great deal of selectivity in terms of targets, tools, duration and motivation. It is an indication of the general ability of modern authoritarian leaders to react and to adapt to emerging challenges and promptly redefine their priorities and strategies if needed. These advancements are embodied in the nature of a modern authoritarian rule that is able to cooperate in the international arena and, even more importantly, to pretend to be a reliable partner at home as well as abroad. The strategy seems to follow Charles Baudelaire’s famous idea that “the devil’s finest trick is to persuade you that he does not exist” (Baudelaire & Milner, 1979).

Electoral violence and political conflict

Elections at their core are built around the elements of competition and conflict, a formal logic that presupposes a contest of ideas and preferences that takes place in a peaceful and deliberative

manner (Mocht'ak, 2015). If it is effective, the institution of voting mitigates incompatible objectives through the simple idea of fairness and, more importantly, supports an expectation that the outcome will be accepted by competing parties (Cederman, Gleditsch, & Hug, 2012, p. 5; Collier, 2009; IDEA, 2010, p. 8; Reilly, 2008, p. 159). If not, power may be seized by alternative means, including violence, which can affect a society for months and even years. We go as far as to say that the element of conflict present in the elections may generate a significant threat to political stability that is proportional to the risk of what may be lost or gained in the process of voting. What we today call *electoral-related violence* and *electoral violence* refers to a special subcategory of political violence defined by a specific interaction space – that of elections. Within this context, political violence becomes a form of (violent) behaviour directed at changing the system, policies, territories, government personnel or the government itself through the violent breach of electoral integrity (Honderich cited from Merkl, 1986, p. 20).

For the analytical purposes of this paper (as a working definition), electoral violence may be defined as acts or threats of coercion, intimidation or physical harm perpetrated in order to affect an electoral process or which arise in the context of electoral competition. This violence may be employed to influence the election process – such as with efforts to delay, disrupt or derail a poll – and/or to influence the outcomes – determining the winners of competitive races for political office or securing approval or disapproval of referendum questions (Fischer, 2002; Höglund, 2009; Jarstad & Sisk, 2008; UNDP, 2009, p. 4). In this context, electoral violence, much like the more general concept of violence, does not refer to mere physical attacks (Jackman, 2002; cf. WHO, 1996). It covers a broader category of violence including psychological coercion and sophisticated strategies of harassment. As such, the concept overlaps with the more general notion of violation of electoral integrity; yet they are not the same. While all incidents of electoral violence are examples of the violation of electoral integrity, not all violations of electoral integrity are electoral violence (Norris, 2014; Norris, Frank, & Martínez i Coma, 2015). With the increasing sophistication of authoritarian regimes, electoral violence also becomes more sophisticated and it often occurs as part of a broader coercive strategy (see more in Mochtak, 2016). In other words, the occurrence of violence is a part of planning, where the willingness to use force is well considered and excused (Chaturvedi, 2005, pp. 189–202; Lawrence, 1998, p. 182). Akhtara even uses the term “electoral tool” (2001, pp. 149–150).

Timothy Sisk claims that electoral violence is a special kind of political violence that is utilised in order to achieve specific political ends. He develops the argument that the phenomenon is internally linked to other forms of electoral malpractice such as fraud or manipulation, but it is not the same. Sisk recognises different contexts in which this illicit behaviour may occur and points out that it is not an exclusive feature of democratising societies (Myagkov, Ordeshook, & Shakin, 2009; Norris et al., 2015; Sisk, 2008, pp. 6–7). The notion covers the entire spectrum of existing regime types, from democracies to non-democracies, stressing the fact that electoral violence may occur in any form, anywhere, and is not reserved only to deeply divided societies (e.g., the assassination of Pim Fortuyn in the Netherlands; violence in the Paris suburbs following the election of Nicholas Sarkozy as president in May 2007).

Kristine Höglund adds that electoral violence deserves to be studied as a phenomenon in itself. She distinguishes two strands of research that see electoral violence as a subset of activities in a larger political conflict or as the ultimate electoral fraud. In her interpretation, both approaches focus on the goal-oriented or instrumental character of violence (Hanham, 1959, p. 264; Höglund, 2009, pp. 415–416). Proper specification of the subcategory of political violence becomes a matter of characterising the actors, activities, timing, and motives. In particular, the dimensions of timing and motives distinguish these acts from other types of violence (e.g., terrorism and criminal acts) that have a prominent role in the discussion on political violence (Höglund, 2009, pp. 416–417).

In terms of motives, the ultimate goal of electoral violence is to influence the outcome of the vote in order to achieve more general aims (e.g. seizing power; preventing an opponent from winning; disturbing the organisation of the election). The motivation for using violence, though, is often deeper and refers back to causes more rooted in the society itself (ethnic divisions, land, political rivalry, economic stimulus, grievances, etc.). The second dimension that distinguishes electoral violence from other forms of collective violence is that of timing. Violence occurs throughout

the period of the electoral process, including the pre-election phase, polling day(s) and the post-election stage, which consists of counting and announcing the results of the election and the acceptance of these results (Höglund, 2009, pp. 415–416; Hoppen, 1994, p. 606).

A number of studies see electoral violence as a classic example of the manifestation of the political conflict associated with hybrid regimes and as a part of transformation processes (Dahl, 1971; Höglund, 2009; Huntington, 1968, 1991). In recent years, more authors have pointed out that electoral violence might also serve as a functional tool of electoral campaigning, used to affect the electoral results (Austin, 1995; Bekoe, 2012; Boone, 2011; Hickman, 2009; Höglund & Piyaathne, 2009; Klopp & Zuern, 2007; Laakso, 1999, 2007). These strategies are goal-oriented and are usually associated with the outcome of an electoral competition. Thad Dunning argues that electoral violence plays a balancing role in the power structure of political groups that seek – as has been noted – to establish or maintain a subjective equilibrium in political settings. In Dunning's argument, fighting and voting function as either strategic substitutes or as strategic complements. They serve as strategic substitutes in situations in which both alternatives may occur with dependence upon context (over which there is no control). By contrast, they serve as strategic complements when they play a more goal-oriented role in which both strategies are employed as tools to achieve defined objectives. Dunning says fighting may be a more attractive alternative when the opposing parties are more equally matched on electoral grounds, and electoral competition is perceived as the ultimate arena for resolving existing conflicts (Chacon, Robinson, & Torvik, 2011; Dunning, 2011, p. 328).

Putin's Russia: electoral violence as a strategic tool

We approach our case study with the argument that large anti-regime protests in Russia were extremely rare and the majority of those recorded tended to be relatively quiet and limited in terms of geography and issues (this does not mean, however, that they were violence-free) (Howard, 2003; Koeseel & Bunce, 2012; Robertson, 2011). This began to change a few years before the 2011 election, when protests occurred as part of a longer stirring change that evolved in the late 2000s. These protests prepared the ground for the 2011 and 2012 post-electoral events in many ways – in the form and style of the protests, in their political geography, and in the nature of the demands being made (Robertson, 2013).

As a matter of fact, the electoral events of the 2011–2012 period (covering the 2011 parliamentary elections and the 2012 presidential election; hereafter called the December–May events) were not accompanied by any expectation of major change in the existing, still vital power structures of the ruling regime (cf. Lansky & Suthers, 2013). The prevailing scepticism was a reflection of stability that Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev represented during the years preceding the December–May events. The first decade of the 21st century provided numerous reasons to label Russia an authoritarian regime, a state that was accompanied by a significant deterioration of political pluralism, democratic development and individual freedoms (McFaul, 2000; Robertson, 2011). Elections played an integral part of this setting and defined the very nature of the Russian regime (see concepts of competitive authoritarianism and electoral authoritarianism Levitsky & Way, 2002; Schedler, 2013). Even though limited democratic expectations were associated with Dmitry Medvedev's modernisation plans, they turned out to be utterly false and were soon after abandoned or even reversed (cf. Black & Johns, 2013).¹ This exaggerated academic optimism entirely ignored the fact that modernisation projects driven by Russian elites have historically been accompanied by authoritarian forms of enforcement – in more general terms, the *modus operandi* of an undemocratic rule (Allensworth, 1998; Sakwa, 2011, p. 151; Yanov, 1987).

In addition to the structural and historical conditions that might play an important role in describing the political features of incumbent elites, our analysis focuses more closely on the

¹ For more than 15 years at the top, Putin and Medvedev took part in a number of actions that restricted freedoms (attacks on independent media, restrictions towards NGOs, harassment and intimidation of critics), endangered regional and global security (war with Georgia; annexation of Crimea; supporting rebels in Ukraine) and centralised power in the hands of a few (control over national and local politics) (Goldman, 2008; cf. McAuley, 2015; Myers, 2015).

authoritarian measures of repression taken against the regime's opposition – in other words, state violence (as was already stated, violence does not refer solely to physical but also psychological coercion). This is accompanied by the efforts made by target groups to modify their activities and adjust their strategies in order to effectively challenge the incumbent structures. Even though repeated attempts to unify fragmented opposition groups did not prove successful, the effort to do so implies a very realistic evaluation of the capacities of a consolidated authoritarian regime on the one side versus the factionalism of the opposition and the anti-Putin front on the other (Aron, 2013; Lanskoj & Suthers, 2013).

On the basis of 2011 post-electoral events, vivid attempts by opposition actors to overcome ideological, political and personal inconsistencies in order to compete against the ruling regime can be identified.² This can be seen through the lens of democratisation studies as a classic example of forming opposition groups to pursue a higher goal, as noted: a change in the status quo. But the question remains as to what kind of regime may be expected as the outcome of this crusade for reform. To put it politely, the answer is – unclear (Krastev & Holmes, 2012). According to Chaisty and Whitefield (2013), supporters of the protests were not stronger advocates of a democratic transition; on the contrary, they were more likely to support authoritarian leadership and ethno-nationalism (Enikolopov, Petrova, & Zhuravskaya, 2011; Golosov, 2011; see more elaboration on the topic in Richmond, 2009; Ross, 2011).

The 2011 electoral context was remarkably impacted by the loss of a major political force in the country – United Russia. Putin's party struggled to win even 50% of the vote, as compared to 64% in 2007 (Heritage & Boulton, 2011). The results also revealed the decreasing popularity of ruling elites who had failed to change the nature of Russian politics as promised a decade earlier (Fish, 2001). The analysis of why this took place goes beyond the objectives of this paper. However, it is essential to acknowledge the importance of contextual conditions affecting the roots of disobedience that followed the rigged elections. In other words, demonstrations and manifestation of disagreement were not an accident, but rather an outcome of deteriorating support for the regime that culminated in the winter of 2011/2012 (Enikolopov et al., 2011; Golosov, 2011; cf. Ross, 2011).

Polling day was scheduled for December 4, 2011. Political parties competed for 450 seats that were at stake for the State Duma, the lower chamber of the Russian parliament. The winning party, Putin's United Russia, obtained 49.31% of the vote, which translated to 238 seats (CIK, 2011). The OSCE found general compliance of the election process with OSCE commitments and other international standards for democratic elections, as well as with domestic legislation. However, the electoral monitoring mission also pointed out concerns with the quality of the process deteriorating considerably during the count.³ Polling day was affected by manipulation, including several serious indications of ballot box stuffing (OSCE, 2012b, pp. 1, 18). This conclusion is also supported by mathematical models showing that Russian legislative elections were rigged in favour of Putin's party, United Russia (Klimek, Yegorov, Hanel, & Thurner, 2012; Kobak, Shpilkin, & Pshenichnikov, 2012). Ballot stuffing not only changes the shape of the vote and the distribution of the turnout, but it also induces high levels of correlation between them. Unusually high vote counts tend to co-occur with unusually high turnout numbers (see more on detection of electoral fraud Myagkov et al., 2009, pp. 30–69). In response to the allegations of fraud, a number of mass demonstrations took place across the country, linked to frustrations with polling day inconsistencies. They received broad publicity, backed by mass online mobilisation (OSCE, 2012b, p. 19).

The first round of protests took place immediately upon the closing of the polls, resulting from strong dissatisfaction with the electoral process and open allegations of fraud. The regime responded as expected, with demonstrations in the immediate aftermath of the election seeing

² Protests that followed after the 2011 legislative election brought together all segments of society, including young urban professionals, pensioners, intellectuals, and representatives of the middle class; this represented a broad ideological spectrum, which ranged from liberal and communist to nationalist and monarchist (see more in Koesel & Bunce, 2012).

³ The final report of the OSCE electoral monitoring mission assessed the legal framework as relatively comprehensive with an adequate basis for the conduct of free and fair elections. However, structurally, the whole arena is open to interpretation, which led to its inconsistent application, often in favour of one party over the others (OSCE, 2012b, pp. 1–2).

more than 1000 arrests.⁴ Several key protest leaders such as the anti-corruption campaigner Alexei Navalny and opposition activist Ilya Yashin were imprisoned,⁵ and the media reported widespread crackdowns across the country (Amnesty International, 2011; BBC, 2011d; Schwirtz & Herszenhorn, 2011). An attempt to hold a smaller rally on Tuesday, December 6 was quickly broken up by riot police, while Putin's supporters were allowed to proceed. Police sources subsequently reported that 569 participants in the Triumphal Square rally were arrested that day, strongly contradicting the Russia's 'plurality' proclamation (BBC, 2011c).

The media reported that Dmitry Medvedev denied all accusations that the elections were flawed and called the contest "free, fair and democratic" (Euronews, 2011). The Central Electoral Commission, in accordance with the official statements of the government, defended the disputed vote and rejected calls for a fresh poll (RIA Novosti, 2011b). The official report of the OSCE monitoring mission has not changed its position at all (OSCE, 2012b). In reaction, a protest held on December 10 on an island near the Kremlin counted more than 50,000 people, who gathered to condemn the alleged ballot-rigging in the parliamentary elections (BBC, 2011c).⁶

If we take a closer look at the demonstration that day, on December 10, we see that it was unusual in many respects, with a significant increase in numbers and an initial rejection of violent means by protesters. Before the start of the marches, information about Putin's threats was disseminated, to warn people that law enforcement units would be deployed to crack down on illegal protests in Moscow and other Russian cities. Surprisingly, the authorities in Moscow granted permission for the protests, on the condition that they be moved from the central Revolution Square to Bolotnaya Square, an island south of the Kremlin, where access could be easily controlled. Police estimated the number of individuals gathered at 25,000, while organisers talked about 100,000 (BBC, 2011d). Protesters demanded the results be annulled and called for the resignation of the electoral commission chief Vladimir Churov. Subsequent appeals called for the investigation of electoral fraud and the immediate release of the protesters and political activists who had been arrested (RIA Novosti, 2011a).⁷ Surprisingly, the authorities did not strike back and the demonstrations all around the country were relatively peaceful and free of extensive acts of violence. Police squads that normally crack down fast and hard on any unauthorised gathering even allowed a few hundred leftist radicals to conduct an unsanctioned protest on Moscow's Revolution Square just outside the Red Square (The Guardian, 2011b).

Despite the general pattern of demonstration in the centre of Moscow, several arrests did occur, and the Interior Ministry reported 130 arrests at rallies across the country, most of them in the Khabarovsk area in the eastern part of Russia (see online monitoring by The Guardian, 2011b). There was also an allegation that the authorities in Moscow were restricting access to the internet and GSM networks during the demonstration on Bolotnaya Square to minimise online reporting of the event (ibid.). Gennady Onishchenko, the head of the Public Health Agency, warned protesters to stay home to avoid the risk of respiratory infections such as flu and SARS (Elder, 2011). In Kurgan, local authorities disbanded an unapproved demonstration involving 200 to 400 protesters. 3000 people marched in Yekaterinburg to chant 'Freedom for Political Prisoners' and 'Russia without Putin'. Several thousand protesters, who came to hear speeches calling for a rerun of the election and the resignation of Prime Minister Vladimir V. Putin, were counted in St. Petersburg's Pionerskaya Square. The demonstration in the centre of the second largest city was mostly peaceful but some protesters were dragged away by police elsewhere in the urban area (The Guardian, 2011b).

⁴ Another source brought news of approximately 800 arrests (BBC, 2011c).

⁵ Key members of the protest movement were sentenced to 15 days in jail on charges of obstructing police, arousing suspicions of the intended elimination of important individuals in the opposition (BBC, 2011c).

⁶ Demonstrations were also held abroad, mainly in central London, where the local Russian community protested against the crooked election (The Guardian, 2011a).

⁷ The list of demands presented during the demonstrations was: 1. Freedom for political prisoners; 2. Annulment of the election results; 3. The resignation of Vladimir Churov, head of the election commission, and an official investigation of vote fraud; 4. Registration of the opposition parties and new democratic legislation on parties and elections; 5. New democratic and open elections (The Guardian, 2011a).

The BBC carried news of university students, who had been pressured not to attend the marches with threats of imprisonment, expulsion from the University and military conscription (BBC, 2011d). Some had to attend special classes and were forced to take an exam on the rules of good behaviour in the city (Elder, 2011). The protest in Ulyanovsk was affected by a personal attack on Konstantin Troshin (Drugaya Rossiya party). Slava Yemelyanov (Yabloko party) was arrested and brought to the head of the city's Department of Internal Affairs, where he was interrogated (BBC, 2011a; The Guardian, 2011b).

Officials continued attempts to portray the protesters as traitors, following Putin's charge that Hillary Clinton, the former US Secretary of State, had prompted the show of discontent (BBC, 2011c). A policy of ostracizing may also be recognised among supporters of United Russia, who organised a demonstration on Manezh Square, whose primary goal was to show support for Putin and Medvedev. They presented themselves as lovers of Russia, who wanted to avoid revolutionary turmoil and public disorder (The Guardian, 2011a).

The next round of opposition protests, organised by the Solidarity movement and Yabloko (in cooperation with other parties, movements and NGOs), took place on Bolotnaya Square on December 17. Police said numbers did not match those of a week earlier, estimating only 1,500 people showed up, while eyewitnesses talked about 5,000 (Gazeta, 2011). On December 18, the Communist Party called for a demonstration held in Manezhnaya Square. Several thousand protesters showed up to express their opinion that the elections had been flawed, as well as to stand against opposition rallies trying to exploit the unrest for their own goals. The rally was peaceful (Herszenhorn, 2011).

The second big demonstration was held on December 24 in Academician Sakharov Avenue in Moscow.⁸ The atmosphere was mostly calm but riot police were present to 'ensure' public order (Barry & Schwartz, 2011). Official estimates by authorities placed the attendance at 28,000 people, while the opposition claimed 120,000. The Moscow Times estimated the number of people gathered ranged between 30,000 and 60,000 (see model in RIA Novosti, 2011c; The Moscow Times, 2011). When Alexei Navalny, the main activist figure of that period, appeared onstage as spokesman, he was greeted with an ovation and a demonstration of support. In his speech, he said enough people were gathering in the streets of Moscow to march on and overrun the Kremlin, but their commitment was to remain peaceful – at least for the moment (BBC, 2011b). Police and riot units had so far not reacted.

The last, mostly peaceful protest event that can be more or less linked to the 2011 legislative election was held on February 4, 2012. Authorities estimated 36,000 people had come to Bolotnaya Square, while organisers talked about 160,000 and Ria Novosti counted 53,000 protesters (RIA Novosti, 2012).⁹ Several speeches were held without any serious clashes or provocations. Over the following weeks, a couple of protests took place in St. Petersburg and Moscow but no significant violence was reported, despite the heavy presence of police in the streets.

A major shift could be seen after the re-election of Vladimir Putin as the president of the Russian Federation. The day before Putin's inauguration on May 6, 2012, 20,000 people protested in Moscow against the situation in the country. The police cracked down on the demonstration quickly, with more than 400 arrests and 80 people injured. The next day, a further 120 arrests were reported in Moscow. Websites of the liberal media came under DDoS attacks from unknown hackers (including the radio station Echo Moscow, Kommersant Daily, and TV channel Dozhd).¹⁰ Ilya Ponomarev, an opposition leader and member of the parliament, alleged that police units were provoking clashes, which then escalated in response to their violent provocation (Elder, 2012). The media server Lenta.ru published an analysis stating that Moscow had not seen such a violent confrontation in two decades (Lenta.ru, 2012). Gazeta.ru openly stated that the provocation by law enforcement units

⁸ The protests took also place in Vladivostok, Novosibirsk, Orenburg, Chelyabinsk, Saratov, Nizhny Novgorod and Saint Petersburg (BBC, 2011b).

⁹ Several protests were reported around the country that day, e. g., in St Petersburg, Kazan, Kaliningrad, Nizhniy Novgorod, Penza and Yaroslavl (RIA Novosti, 2012).

¹⁰ A DDoS attack is a cyber-attack which may be described as an attempt to render a machine or network resource unavailable to its intended users.

had been so evident that it was impossible to ignore an effort to radicalise the peaceful crowd of protesters so that they would counteract by force (Gazeta, 2012; OSCE, 2012a).

Patterns of electoral violence during the “December-May” events

The violent behaviour that occurred in the aftermath of the 2011 legislative and 2012 presidential elections has shown some interesting patterns worth analysing and processing further. First, we address the general question laid out in the introduction to this paper and subsequently open a discussion about its implications for Russian “sovereign democracy”. Let us begin with the fact that the electoral process was continuously disrupted by selective law enforcement measures that did not escalate according to a particular predefined structure but rather followed irregular dynamics that may be linked to the capacities of the authorities to adjust their coercive strategies to be effective but still cost efficient. This contextual dynamic was characterised by acts of violence clearly linked to the electoral arena, either through the protest rallies and mass mobilisation or as a part of law-enforcement counter-actions. As we defined electoral violence to more broadly include physical as well as psychological coercion, the case study identified interesting dynamics referring to the ability of the authorities to quickly adapt. The December-May events present evidence of electoral violence being applied as sophisticated coercive strategy, where the willingness to use force is well considered and excused based on available resources (Chaturvedi, 2005; Lawrence, 1998). In the case of Russia, we can truly talk about electoral violence as an “electoral tool” (Akhatar, 2001).

In this context, the political appeals put forward by the protest movements (such as slogans like “Russia without Putin” and “Freedom for Political Prisoners”) and the mix of harassment and coercive techniques by the central authorities indicate an obvious political conflict that occasionally escalates into open confrontation, including police brutality and arrests. It combines top-down and bottom-up logic controlled and operated by leaders in the Kremlin on one side and strategies utilised to challenge the credibility of authorities by the protesters on the other. These dynamics are defined by a bivalent logic directed at either changing policies and attitudes (the regime-driven perspective) and/or modifying the system, the people in government or the entire government (the mass-driven perspective) (Koesel & Bunce, 2012; Honderich cited from Merkl, 1986, p. 20).

If we take a closer look at the character of the event, we can easily elaborate on Timothy Sisk’s claim that electoral violence is internally linked to other forms of electoral malpractice (Sisk, 2008, pp. 6–7). The stuffing of the ballot boxes, intimidation and fraudulent behaviour that accompanied the electoral campaign and polling day itself may be presented as glaring examples (see discussion in Myagkov et al., 2009, pp. 71–137). Despite the presence of long-term factors that continuously influence resistance in the electoral arena, general dissatisfaction with the shortcomings of the election may be seen as the most relevant factor in clarifying the revolutionary-like turmoil. This says nothing about the actors or their motivation. It simply points out the initiating event that is perceived as the starting point for another round of ongoing ‘conflict’.

In terms of further understanding the post-election events, the unrest and subsequent struggles may be explained by the framework of electoral violence as a subset of activities in a larger political conflict (remote factor). It is combined with incidents of electoral fraud (proximate factor), which affected the immediate perception of electoral competition as unfair. Both approaches focus on the goal-oriented and instrumental nature of violence, presenting it as an excessive (law enforcement measures controlled by the ruling elites and the regime as a whole) and/or a latent but certainly revolutionary form of confrontation (e.g., the speech of Alexei Navalny and his reference to the application of force). The key factor in this mutual incompatibility lies primarily in political motivations, accompanied by factors like economic performance, corruption and ideological motivation (cf. Bartos & Wehr, 2002; see summary in Table 1).

Actors	Activities	Timing	Motives
representatives of the regime (elites)	law enforcement measures and physical attacks; arrests; intimidation; warnings; cyber-attacks;	post-electoral period	preserving and legitimizing political realm
opposition subjects and their leaders; participants in the rallies	protests; passive resistance; provocation (partially); verbal attacks	post-electoral period	contesting the existing political regime (long-term motives) and electoral results (short-term motives)

Table 1. Summarization of the main categories of electoral violence (according to Höglund, 2009)

The key finding of this analysis is the understanding of the role played by violence in the framework of pursuing defined objectives in the electoral arena and keeping them in place. In this context, the post-election struggles in Russia may be perceived through an instrumental lens as violent behaviour undertaken in order to achieve defined goals. Fighting and voting were utilised as complements, in an abusive, fraudulent manner. This can be seen in the dynamics that developed in the 2011 Russian legislative election; while the competition was sanctioned, the results were predetermined. Although there were suspicions and criticism was voiced, the election was proclaimed to be free and fair and there was literally no space allowed for the results to be legally challenged. Despite the fact that the regime struck out violently against some protesters calling for the elections to be re-held, violence was not massive and the ruling elites acted 'wisely' for the most part. To state it more clearly, on the one hand, the regime provided a controlled space for contestation, but it did not allow a critical threshold to be crossed that might have endangered the pivotal position of the power holders. Moreover, the regime did not employ massive coercive measures because the cost of using them would be too great, given the numbers participating. It does not mean, however, that the central authorities were passive or on the defence. Instead, the whole space was securely under control and the strategies applied (intimidation; harassment; arrests; physical violence; etc.) had localised and well-planned profiles.

The logic is even more evident if we compare the events after the 2011 legislative election with the situation around the 2012 presidential election. Protests against the authoritarian rule of Vladimir Putin were hit violently with massive action intended to send a clear signal to those who would plan further protests. The regime utilised the *election* and *violence* as supplements to each other to maintain its major goal of keeping control of the political realm, as well as pursuing more practical objectives (such as the intimidation and elimination of political rivals; see Dunning, 2011). According to the logic, the decision to use or withhold violence was linked to an effort to organise 'smooth' presidential elections a few months later and not to provoke thousands of people in the streets, who gathered there in the end of 2011. After Vladimir Putin's re-election, a modified *carrot-and-stick* policy was instrumentally adjusted, and activities in opposition were no longer tolerated. In other words, when the victory of United Russia/Vladimir Putin was secured on both fronts (legislative and presidential), there was no need to pretend that acts of plurality were welcome. Moreover, the number of protesters was significantly lower, so the costs of counteraction were more reasonable. This allowed the authorities to apply the most effective strategy while controlling the costs. With this conclusion, an interesting question arises as to what sort of struggle we may expect when the support ratio in the election is more balanced and both camps are willing to use violence to protect their interests (Chacon et al., 2011; cf. Dunning, 2011; Przeworski, 1991).

Conclusion: Modern authoritarianism and electoral violence

The majority of research on internal Russian policy and its dynamics usually includes an attempt to categorise the current (and former) political regime of Vladimir Putin and to interpret its implications. Although several of these attempts have become quite influential, no authority is certain or willing enough to provide a clear and broadly accepted label (Krastev & Holmes, 2012). According to one group, the regime is either a variant of a hybrid regime, probably an illiberal democracy, electoral authoritarianism or competitive authoritarianism, which applies only to some of the democratic principles in a mostly undemocratic environment (primarily in terms of regular elections, albeit partially manipulated with an unbalanced model of power distribution biased to the executive – presidential – power, while displaying an absence of respect for a broad concept of civil rights; see concepts of electoral and competitive authoritarianism in Levitsky & Way, 2002; Schedler, 2006). Another group sees Russia as more or less traditionally authoritarian, criminalising its opponents, limiting the activities of civic society structures that are not under the control of the regime or renewing centralisation, which is supported by the mentality of majority of Russian society (Levitsky & Way, 2015; e.g., abolition of the act on selection of governors Ma, 2013). As we think about authoritarian regimes as a broad category coexisting with other regime types, we stress the importance of focusing on the tension between the level of shortcomings inherent in (non)liberal regimes and the “qualities” which typify non-democracies. While the first noted dimension may lead primarily to a sociological and/or cultural description and an analysis of the changes in less than perfect “democracies”, the emphasis on the (non)democratic dimension continues to focus on classically conceived institutional-political (regime) characteristics.

Our analysis sees both classic authoritarian regimes and democracies developing in tandem, much like twins, influencing each other and changing over time. When we talk about the evolution of authoritarian rule as part of an ongoing process of advancement that affects domestic as well as international affairs, we refer to the overall changes that all regimes undergo, although under different circumstances. The term modern authoritarianism covers these dynamics, recognising the change embodied in limited economic openness, restricted pluralistic media, dominated political competition, scrutiny of civil society and managed rule of law. It still follows the classic notion of authoritarian rule as defined by Linz but with several advancements – although the logic of authoritarian rule is the same, the style has changed. It further nicely resonates with the argument that Russia’s alleged (democratic) opening was in fact a period of unprecedented authoritarian crisis, wherein the weakness of the incumbent elite was falsely interpreted as democratisation. Insufficient resources and a lack of supportive allies and reliable institutions with coercive capabilities caused autocracies to fall into a severe crisis rather than initiating genuine transformation (Levitsky & Way, 2015).

Electoral violence as a part of post-electoral turmoil in the Russian Federation after the 2011 parliamentary and 2012 presidential elections provides supportive evidence for understanding the capacities of ruling elites and their potential to apply coercive measures as part of a selective strategy aimed at critics and opponents of the regime. Given the oscillation between the soft forms of coercion and the rigid defence of a well-rooted order, the character of electoral violence, its dynamics and outcomes all support the argument that violence can be used tacitly as part of a broader strategy in the electoral arena. As evidence shows, the central authorities in Russia have a wide range of approaches for how to react to emerging challenges and problems caused by imperfect control over public space. We can assume that electoral violence as a phenomenon accompanying tense electoral contest will reoccur together with political, economic and societal problems, which regularly affect electoral competition. In this context, “fighting” may be a more attractive alternative when opposing parties are more equally matched on electoral grounds and electoral competition is perceived as the ultimate arena for resolving existing conflicts (Chacon et al., 2011; Dunning, 2011, p. 328). This is all the more true when this range of opportunities includes both the ability to use internal policy to suppress any potential violent unrest and the foreign-policy ability to order imperial/military defence of alleged interests in the so-called proximate border region, as shown by the current developments in the Russia-Ukraine relationship.

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Acknowledgments

Text is an output of the grant project GA MU „Russia in the categories friend – enemy. Czech reflection“ (MUNI/M/0921/2015) and Jan Hus Foundation Scholarship