

## Excessive Loyalism and Russian Regional Governors: The Case of the Pension Reform 2018

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Alexander Libman / Judith Heckenthaler

**Excessive Loyalism and  
Russian Regional Governors  
The Case of the Pension Reform 2018**

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## **Excessive Loyalism and Russian Regional Governors: The Case of the Pension Reform 2018.**

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### **Abstract:**

The main focus of the scholarly literature on authoritarian regimes is on the dynamics of political control and power preservation and hence tools the incumbents use against potential opposition. This paper argues that another, and a highly important, challenge for many authoritarian regimes is the behavior of actors loyal to the regime, i.e., trying to act in line with the regime goals. These actors, while incorrectly guessing the objectives of the regime, or overshooting in terms of implementation of the regime goals, could cause actual harm to the regime. We offer a sketch of the theory of this phenomenon, which we refer to as ‘excessive loyalism’, as well as test a number of hypotheses concerning the origins of excessive loyalism using the example of the reaction of Russian regional governors to the highly unpopular pension reform of 2018.

### **Keywords:**

Excessive loyalism; Regional politics; Authoritarian regimes; Russia

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# **Excessive Loyalism and Russian Regional Governors The Case of the Pension Reform 2018**

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## Introduction

In 1959, one of the regions of Central Russia attracted particular attention of the leadership of the Soviet Union. Party secretary of the Ryazan Oblast, Aleksey Larionov, made a promise to the center (which at that moment of time was concerned about increasing the agricultural output in the country) to triple the output of meat the region was producing. The initial reaction of the center was highly positive: Larionov was awarded the order of Lenin (one of the highest awards of the Soviet Union) already prior to fulfilling his promise. However, ultimately the ‘Ryazan wonder’, as it was called in the contemporary propaganda, turned out to be a complete disaster. To fulfill his promise, Larionov ordered to slaughter substantial part of the cattle of the region. This led to a massive drop of meat production in 1960, peasants refused to work on *kolkhoz* fields because of their cattle having been confiscated, so that the overall agricultural production also declined. As a result, the situation in Ryazan contributed to the overall price increase for agricultural goods in the USSR (ultimately leading to violent protests) and was among official reasons for Khrushchev being removed from his office a couple of years later (Sushkov 2008).

In 2020, the spokeswoman of the Russian foreign ministry, Maria Zakharova, known for her extreme and colorful rhetoric, published a post on Facebook, containing a photo of the visit of the Serbian president Aleksandar Vučić to the US and alluding to the interrogation scene in the movie *Basic Instinct*. Vučić, who prior to this episode always presented himself as a supporter of developing political relations and cooperation with Russia, was enraged; he explicitly pointed out that during the visit to the US he tried, among other things, to protect Serbia’s special relations with Russia against American criticism.<sup>1</sup> As a result, Vladimir Putin was forced to apologize.<sup>2</sup> While Vučić continued to style himself as a loyal partner of Russia, the episode created unnecessary tensions – especially given the overall lack of possible partners Russia could rely upon in its international relations.

Both episodes share a common feature. Actions of regime loyalists (Aleksey Larionov and Maria Zakharova) ultimately produced a lot of harm for the regime. While the fact that authoritarian regimes frequently prefer less competent but loyal officials and lack of competence could turn out to be a serious risk for them is well established in the literature (Egorov and Sonin 2011, 2023), these two episodes could be an indication of a different phenomenon, which, although occasionally acknowledged in research on authoritarian regimes, has not been studied before in a systematic fashion: authoritarian regimes could regularly generate incentives for officials to ‘overshoot’ in trying to fulfill the goals of the regime, and, by going ‘too far’ as opposed to what regime actually wants them to do, actually cause harm to the regime (or at least disrupt its functioning). We will refer to this phenomenon as *excessive loyalty*.

The goal of this paper is to study possible determinants of excessive loyalty at the sub-national level among regional officials of an authoritarian regime. For this purpose, we will look at the case of the Russian Federation under Vladimir Putin and, more specifically, study a particularly risky and controversial reform Putin introduced in 2018: the increase of the retirement age. As we will show, Russian regional governors reacted to the reform in a very different way. Some preferred to limit their public support to the absolute minimum necessary required by the regime. Some, however, went beyond that, engaging in rhetoric of absolute support of the reform on moral grounds (what the regime itself never did and which in fact in no way fit the approach regime took to framing the reform). This rhetoric had the potential to damage the reputation of the governors themselves and exacerbate the rejection of the reform by the public. Our analysis suggests that excessive loyalty in this particular setting was primarily driven by

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/russian/54050972>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-54107387>

*attention seeking*: attempts of regional governors to attract attention of the federal center (potentially associated with further career advancement and with greater federal support).

The remaining part of the paper is organized as follows. The next section provides a brief discussion of the concept of excessive loyalism and its driving forces. Section 3 develops the main hypotheses of the study. Section 4 discusses why Russian sub-national regions can be used to study excessive loyalism. Section 5 describes the empirical case we use to investigate the excessive loyalism, presents the research strategy and our results. The final section concludes.

## **Excessive loyalism: A conceptual sketch**

### *Loyalist behavior and variation of loyalism*

The last decades have been a period of extensive research on authoritarian politics (Art 2012; Gehlbach et al. 2016; Egorov and Sonin 2020). It was a partial outcome of growing interests of researchers to this type of politics, but also a result of much better data availability for such autocracies as Russia and China. Today, we have a broad array of theories, which explain the rise and the fall of authoritarian regimes and are applicable to a variety of cases rather than to a specific region of the world (e.g., post-Socialist Eurasia or Latin America). At the same time, the models of authoritarianism follow a very specific logic and capture specific aspects of ‘authoritarian reality’ (Przeworski 2022; Lankina 2023). Among other things, researchers focus primarily on how authoritarian regimes manage to stay in power, combining repressions and propaganda as tools of suppression of possible dissent, and under which conditions autocrats are unable to do so. Wintrobe’s (1990) model of the dictator’s choice is a good illustration of this logic: somewhat simplified, it assumes that autocrats maximize their revenue (rents they extract from ruling) making sure that they spend sufficient amount of resources to ensure them staying in power. The literature has explored a variety of tools dictators can use to remain in power: from traditional repressions and propaganda to creating institutions as tools to ensure the credibility of commitments (Pepinsky 2014), manipulating public opinion in a way making traditional repressions unnecessary (Guriev and Treisman 2019) and expanding their coercion beyond their national borders (Tsourapas 2021).

This approach to studying authoritarianism, while extremely rich and insightful, seems to leave an important aspect of authoritarian stability outside the scope of analysis. Opposition and disloyal elites are obviously a big problem for autocrats, but an important threat to the regime occasionally comes from *loyalists*. Loyal elites and citizens can engage in activities, which not only do not really help autocrats, but also have the potential to harm those. This *excessive loyalism* is a topic, which should not be ignored if we aim to understand the logic of authoritarian stability and the functioning of authoritarian regimes. In what follows, we will provide a brief conceptual sketch of this idea, which is explored in the remaining part of the paper.

We define *loyalism* as *behavior consistent with the (implicit or explicit) goals of the regime*. A loyalist (in the elites, in the bureaucracy or in the society) acts in a way s/he believes the regime expects her to act. The reasons for this compliance could be different: they could include rational cost-benefit calculations, with actors believing that relative benefits of non-complying are smaller than those of complying, or true beliefs in the ideology and propaganda of the regime or at least in the right of the regime to rule (i.e., perception of the regime as legitimate, cf. Gerschewski 2018). In most regimes, one needs to distinguish between the loyalty to the regime vs. the loyalty to individual regime actors (which becomes important if the latter compete against each other or pursue different objectives). In personalist autocracies (which Russia belongs to), ultimately, loyalty to the regime implies loyalty to the leader of the regime

though. Importantly, one could draw a distinction between the behavior aiming to support the *survival* of the regime or the behavior aiming at implementing the (hypothetical) *will* of the regime. Some actors could try to ‘rescue the regime from itself’.<sup>3</sup> We will explicitly focus on the second aspect: executing the will of the regime. Essentially, loyalists, in the sense they are defined in this paper, guess what the regimes does want them to do, and do exactly that. Note, that the definition of loyalism we use in this paper is based on how an actor herself perceives her behavior: loyalists are those, who *themselves believe* that they are loyalists and not are ‘objectively’ loyal (or considered by the regime as loyal).<sup>4</sup>

Obviously, as there is a substantial variation in disloyalty (from open protests against the regime to partial compliance with its demands), there is also a variation in the extent of loyalism (as defined above). This variation is driven by two factors. On the one hand, as already notices above, loyalists act in line with the *perceived* goals of the regime, but these perceptions could differ across different actors. To some extent, it can be driven by the fact that regime itself is vague about its objectives, as a result, actors have to experiment trying to ‘guess’ the intention of the leader (Kershaw 1993).<sup>5</sup> Similarly, competence of the actors influences their perception of the goals of the regime: incompetent bureaucrats and policymakers may incorrectly assess what the regime expects then to do, while the more competent ones will identify the goals of the regime with greater precision.

On the other hand, the definition of loyalism we use in this paper allows for variation of *effort* of the actors. In some cases, regime simply expects the actors to refrain from certain actions (e.g., critique of the regime or open protests). In some cases, it goes beyond that: it expects actors to *do* certain things, associated with certain amount of effort.<sup>6</sup> In many cases, the regimes set some sort of ‘minimal’ requirements for effort needed to behave as a loyalist (these minimal requirements could differ: they could include participation in regime rituals, membership in particular organizations, engagement in certain type of rhetoric, participation in regime-led campaigns, financial contributions aggression against dissidents, or even enlisting in the military to fight the war of the regime). However, actors can engage in additional activities, which the regime does not prescribe, but which (in the opinion of the regime actors) go in the same direction. For example, if the regime expects the actors to refrain from criticizing governmental policy, they can for sure engage in the open praise of the governmental policy. Some actors would prefer to exercise additional effort, while others will exercise the minimal effort possible not to be disloyal.

Note that many regimes are rather imprecise about what constitutes the required minimum; therefore, the boundary between misperceiving the goals of the regime and overfulfilling the goals of the regime is a vague one. The specific definition of what is the required minimum depends upon political agenda of the regime. Thus, the rhetoric, which is necessary for survival of a person in North Korea, Turkmenistan or Stalinist USSR, can go beyond the regime’s expectations in the Putin’s Russia, and in this respect Russia in 2010, 2020 and in 2022 could also differ dramatically.<sup>7</sup> The boundary between what is absolutely necessary and what exceeds

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<sup>3</sup> Thus, during the coup attempt of August 1991, the State Committee on the State of Emergency (GKChP) tried to ensure the survival of the Communist regime in the USSR by deposing the head of the regime (Mikhail Gorbachev).

<sup>4</sup> Information asymmetry could lead to the regime perceiving loyalists as illoyal and vice versa. See also Gregory et al. 2011.

<sup>5</sup> The regime occasionally formulates and adjusts its goals based on this experimentation.

<sup>6</sup> Gerschewski (2023) distinguishes between two logics of authoritarian regimes: over-politicization and de-politicization. Regimes characterized by the latter would have relatively low demands for the loyal behavior (at least, for the population; bureaucrats and elites still have to implement policies of the regime, associated with certain amount of effort). Over-politicized regimes act differently: here loyal behavior can be associated with substantial effort.

<sup>7</sup> <https://re-russia.net/expertise/091/>



the expectations can shift as part of the evolution of the regime (and the regime actors themselves, by changing their behavior can contribute to this shift).

### *Excessive loyalism*

There exists a universe of potential loyalist behavioral patterns. The fundamental problem, which emerges in this case is that some of these loyalist patterns could actually lead to actors *preventing* the regime from achieving its goals or even *destabilizing* the regime. Regime actors can simply perceive the goals of the regime *differently* from the regime itself. In particular, *overfulfilling* the goals of the regime could actually be damaging for the regime. A policeman beating an opposition activist to death could think that this is what the political leadership wants him to do; the leadership, however, could believe that the best course of action would be to incite fear but not to eliminate the activist to avoid the emergence of political martyrs. In a sense, there exists the optimal effort of loyal actors, which fits the goals of the regime; the actors could, however, exceed this optimum, leading to the regime demise.

There are multiple reasons why some types of loyalist behavior could be a problem for the regime. First, they could waste resources the regime would otherwise need for different objectives. For example, in the Ryazan affair we quoted in the introduction, the propaganda goal of the regime was achieved at such enormous expense, that the costs ultimately were higher than benefits. Communist regimes in Russia and China provide multiple examples of catastrophic consequences of competition within bureaucracies, leading to enormous costs for the society (Gregory 2003; Fan et al. 2016). Second, actors could ignore the fact that exceeding the optimal effort they can turn the effects in its opposite. Extremely harsh repressions could trigger rather than limit protests; excessive propaganda could annoy the population rather than strengthen the regime (Huang 2018). Third, obvious differences in actions of the elites could signal their disunity and lead to in-fights, again weakening the regime (Zhu and Zhang 2017; Liu 2021). Fourth, regime actors could face a goal conflict (multiplicity of goals set by the regime) and, by investing too much effort in certain goals, fail to achieve other objectives. *Excessive loyalism* in the sense of this paper emerges precisely when the specific pattern of loyal behavior (again, one perceived by the actors as following the goals of the regime) actually damages the regime.

The existence of excessive loyalism creates a dilemma for the regime. On the one hand, the regime does not benefit from excessive loyalism (at best, it distracts officials from implementing the tasks of the regime, at worst, results in costly time-consuming activities damaging the regime). On the other hand, the regime cannot effectively punish excessive loyalists without creating risks of discouraging even ‘normal’ loyalist activity. Since the boundary of what is ‘excessive’ is imprecise, it is very difficult (and potentially impossible) to ‘calibrate’ the punishments to constrain only excessive loyalism. On top of that, regimes occasionally want to encourage their loyalists to be more active than the minimal requirement of ‘passing’ as loyal (e.g., participating or organizing pro-regime rallies or actively reporting on possible opposition) but only in a specific regime-sanctioned way. Creating incentives for this ‘compliant activism’ (Libman and Kozlov 2017) regime could unintentionally incentivize excessive loyalism as well.

As a result, introducing excessive loyalism in our analysis calls for reassessment of the fundamental trade-offs authoritarian regimes deal with. While most of the literature looks at how authoritarian regime combats *disloyal activities* (and which cost-benefit calculus are associated with it), if excessive loyalism is present, the regime needs to *simultaneously* combat both expressions of insufficient *and* of excessive loyalty. It is a much more challenging task – depending upon how risky excessive loyalism actually is. For sure, regime punishes excessive

loyalism in some cases,<sup>8</sup> but it often happens ex-post and creates confusion in the minds of regime actors.

### *Excessive loyalism, signaling by the regime and mistakes of the regime*

So far, we left out of our analysis two important aspects, which complicate matters, when it comes to the excessive loyalism. First, it is possible (and, in fact, even likely) that the regime itself misperceives the consequences of its actions: problems of information transmission in authoritarian regimes regularly lead to them making mistakes damaging the regime stability (Treisman 2020). The process of regime learning (Hall 2023) and of learning of regime actors trying to find out the goals of the regime run parallel to each other. This gives rise to four hypothetical cases: (1) regime explicitly requests its bureaucrats and population to undertake certain measures, which would harm the regime stability and goals (because the regime made a mistake); (2) regime allows bureaucrats to act in an overly zealous way and does not disapprove of these actions (e.g., Khurshchev actually encouraging Larionov in spite of the doubts existing in the Soviet political leadership); (3) regime correctly assesses the goals, but regime actors (e.g., bureaucrats) make mistakes and (4) regime incorrectly assesses the goals and the current situation, while regime actors make the correct assessment. For us, cases (2) and (3) would qualify as excessive loyalism, because in both cases regime actors act in line with what they believe to be the goals of the regime, but their actions ultimately damage the regime. Case (1) does not qualify as excessive loyalism, because in this case the regime itself requires the regime actors to act in a certain way; similarly, case (4) is also not an example of excessive loyalism.

Second, there are examples, when over-fulfilling the minimal goals can actually be in the best interest of the regime. A good example is electoral manipulation: Gehlbach and Simpser (2015), for instance, show that for electoral authoritarian regimes it is attractive to engage in excessive manipulation of elections (i.e., more than the necessary minimum for remaining in control), because it leads to the bureaucrats believing in the stability of the system and remaining loyal to the regime. From this point of view, regime actually benefits from bureaucrats ‘producing’ the highest possible outcomes for the ruling party of the incumbent through electoral manipulation.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, competition across bureaucracies in an authoritarian regime can actually improve its performance: in China, for example, competing bureaucrats overfulfill the goals of the regime by investing more effort in economic growth (Libman and Rochlitz 2019). For us, this would not count as excessive loyalism, since there is no damage for the system. But the boundary could again turn out to be very thin. Electoral manipulation, implemented in a poor and aggressive way, could trigger mass protests and jeopardize the stability of the regime – as it happened, for example, in 2011-2012 in Russia. In this case, overfulfilling the goals of the regime could again become a problem.

Summing up, excessive loyalism in the framework of this paper emerges if the following conditions are present:

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<sup>8</sup> To provide a recent example: in October 2022, a moderator of RT, Anton Krasovskiy, openly called for killing Ukrainian children expressing hostility to Russia. This clearly went too far for Putin’s regime: Krasovskiy lost his job and became subject of criminal investigation by the authorities (<https://meduza.io/feature/2022/10/24/anton-krasovskiy-zayavil-v-efire-rt-chto-nuzhno-topit-i-zhech-russkih-detey-v-ukraine-kotorye-vystupayut-protiv-rossii>)

<sup>9</sup> Huang (2015) makes a similar argument for the governmental propaganda. For the counter-evidence on electoral fraud, see Ananyev and Poyker (2022). Rundlett and Svolic (2016) explain the excessive fraud by the principal-agent problems between bureaucrats and incumbents in the presence of imperfect information about the preferences of the population.

- Regime actors operate in line with their expectations of the regime's will (loyalist behavior);
- Regime actors (a) incorrectly perceive the goals of the regime or (b) exceed the minimal expectations of the regime (possibly, being encouraged by the regime itself) and
- As a result of their action, regime is less likely to achieve its goals (or the stability of the regime is jeopardized).

Excessive loyalism could be observed among different groups of actors of an authoritarian regime. Universities and researchers can, for example, demonstrate excessive loyalty to compete for resources allocated by the governments or to fight their opponents;<sup>10</sup> artists can praise the leader or the regime to get funding; and ordinary citizens can engage in excessive loyalism to try get better jobs. These types of excessive loyalism could be driven by different logics: different levels of information access and knowledge, rational considerations, or social pressure and cultural factors. The paper focuses on excessive loyalism among bureaucrats; in particular, sub-national bureaucracies in an authoritarian regime.

### **Explaining over-fulfillment of regime goals**

Of two potential drivers of excessive loyalism, one seems to be rather straightforward: the lack of information, fundamentally leading to unreasonable actions of the bureaucrats and politicians. The second explanation – excessive effort – requires additional explanations. For bureaucrats, it appears to be a natural strategy to minimize their effort, as long as it is tolerated by the regime. For politicians, some level of risk avoidance, especially in authoritarian regimes able to severely punish their subjects, is also likely to be a plausible scenario. Then why would we observe excessive effort of bureaucrats and politicians in an autocracy?<sup>11</sup> In what follows, we provide four competing explanations; the empirical analysis of the paper will concentrate on the first two of them.

*Loyalty signaling:* Dealing with a distrustful autocrat, signaling one's absolute loyalty becomes essential for the elites (and occasionally for ordinary citizens). Simply fulfilling the absolute minimum may not suffice for this goal: ultimately, potentially disloyal elites would also 'mask' their true intentions behind the loyalist rhetoric. To make sure that the regime really believes the signal, the actor needs to make it costly (and thus credible): one has to show to the regime that one is willing to go way beyond the regime's minimal requirements, even if it is associated with substantial costs to oneself (including losses to one's reputation)(e.g., Qian and Bai 2021). This could easily lead to excessive loyalism. Thus, Shih (2008) describes what he calls 'nauseating displays of loyalty' in China: even in an environment, where regime explicitly *discourages* its subjects from certain types of expression of loyalty, elite members can use them to demonstrate their absolute personal commitment to particular high-level actors. In the modern Russia, Dmitriy Medvedev, former liberal prime minister, became one of the hardliners after the war in Ukraine in 2022 started: his aggressive and frequently derogatory rhetoric goes way beyond what Putin uses and is likely to influence his reputation (especially among the more liberal parts of the elites and the society Medvedev in the past was seen to be part of) – however,

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<sup>10</sup> In Russia, for example, researchers (including those from sciences) occasionally start their PhD theses with a quote of a speech of Putin, totally unrelated to the content of investigation. While in the Soviet Union an informal norm existed requiring all PhD theses to start with the quotation of the CPSU decisions, in the modern Russia a similar norm is absent – still, quite a few researchers decide to start their work with a Putin quotation.

<sup>11</sup> The research on competition in bureaucratic hierarchies or in planned economies, in fact, shows that in absence of an appropriate incentive structure, bureaucrats will try to perform just above the average, avoiding extreme overfulfillment of the central goals – fearing that it could trigger further, and much higher demands in the future. The excessive loyalism represents the opposite outcome, implying (potentially) massive overfulfillment of the central government's goal.

precisely the fact that this rhetoric *damages* his reputation could make the loyalty signal credible for Putin (for Medvedev, in the past perceived as a liberal, it would be especially important).<sup>12</sup>

The problem is that this type of behavior could damage not only the reputation and the career of individual bureaucrats but, potentially, the regime as a whole. The following dynamics could emerge: regime actors signal their unprecedented loyalty by undertaking costly action; this costly action, however, leads to a negative reaction on the side of the public and other important actors (possibly, international community), jeopardizing the regime as a whole (since the public does not distinguish between the actions of individual politicians and bureaucrats and the regime). The regime cannot punish this type of action, because by doing so it would punish precisely the loyal bureaucrats it actually wants to identify (Crabtree et al. 2020). The problem could be solved if there are other tools of identifying loyal bureaucrats and politicians (e.g., through informal networks of connections) (Li and Zhang 2018), yet especially in large and complex bureaucracies the practical usefulness of this tool is likely to be limited.

*Attention seeking:* Another reason to go beyond what the regime requires potentially is present even if there are no doubts about the loyalty of elite members. In authoritarian regimes, it is essential to draw regime's attention to oneself, if one is engaged in competition for rents and privileges. This requires not only fulfilling but overfulfilling the requirements of the regime. This already could lead to the excessive loyalism, if there is uncertainty about the regime's goals; however, there is yet another factor, which plays an important role in this case: as Egorov and Sonin (2011) show, bureaucracies do not reward competence and could be concerned if bureaucrats excel at their task, perceiving the officials as a threat to the regime. A solution could be to look for attention-seeking strategies, which would not trigger concerns of the leadership, but still attract its attention. For example, one could engage in aggressive rhetoric pointing out one's loyalty to the regime, propaganda or increase repression pressure against the possible opposition – and by surpassing the 'optimal effort' point, officials will engage in excessive loyalism.

The more important the regime leadership is for allocation benefits and privileges and the larger the polity is, the more relevant attention seeking could become. Essentially, the most important good in many authoritarian regimes is the *access to* and the *attention of* the political leader: competition for attention could lead to excessive loyalism. In this case, the regime has better tools at its disposal to combat the excessive loyalism: there are no reasons to refrain from punishing the most attention-seeking bureaucrats, if they achieve attention by acting against the regime's best interest. The problem is that in highly centralized and complex regimes, there may simply be no alternative to attention-seeking – the resources are highly limited and allocation necessarily requires the support of the political leadership. Under these conditions, officials will still continue to seek attention of political leaders, even at the risk of being punished if this attention-seeking will have negative consequences for the regime and for the bureaucrats themselves.

*Ideological agenda:* Political actors in authoritarian countries can be driven by more than simple rent-seeking. Their action can be devised to influence the policies of the regime in line with their own political (possibly, ideological) agenda. Under these conditions, overfulfilling the requirements of the regime. First, it could increase the chances of the regime to adopt the policy alternative proposed by a particular group by attracting attention to it. Second, open expressions of loyalty combined with aggressive ideological rhetoric could 'tie the hands' of the regime unable to openly distance itself from a particular (clearly loyal) group and thus forced to accept at least part of its agenda. In a sense, the group is 'creating facts on the ground' the regime is unable to distance itself from (at least, not with the necessary level of clarity to

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<sup>12</sup> <https://meduza.io/feature/2023/06/26/chto-proizoshlo-s-dmitriem-medvedevym>

avoid that the behavior of this group was imitated by other elite actors). This could damage the regime; but it will ultimately have no choice but to accept the new reality.

*Cultural norm:* In the extreme case, overfulfillment of the requirements of authoritarian regimes could result not from rational actions of bureaucrats but as a result of cultural norms existing in the society or in the bureaucracy. If the political regime stimulates competition among bureaucracies, at some point of time, bureaucrats could get used to their promotion being tied not just to fulfilling the demands of the regime but to overfulfilling them; the same could happen if the regime encourages the culture of a ‘compliant activism’. This would make even limited uncertainty regarding the goals of the regime (which is almost unavoidable) a fruitful ground for the development of the excessive loyalism. The best way to avoid this outcome is to explicitly constrain the competition in a bureaucracy, discouraging the overfulfillment of bureaucratic goals; but it is also a problematic outcome for the regime.

One can notice that many of these factors could exist in democracies as well, and in fact, we do not argue that democracies do not suffer from excessive loyalism. However, bottom-up accountability to the voters would limit the types of behavior we described above. Voters would most likely punish politicians concentrated on demonstrating loyalty to the incumbent or seeking attention of the incumbent at the expense of performance; they would also punish politicians creating *preconditions* for excessive loyalism by, for example, concentrating on loyalty (rather than performance) while selecting officials. In autocracies, where bottom-up accountability is absent or much weaker, loyalty signaling and attention seeking could become predominant patterns of behavior among bureaucrats and lower-ranked politicians.

Excessive loyalism originating from misinterpreting the goals of the regime is also more likely to be present in autocracies than in democracies. As already mentioned, autocrats prefer to appoint bureaucrats and to promote politicians with low level of competence. In addition to the already mentioned argument (the risks originating from competent officials potentially taking over), incompetence could also be attractive as a foundation for a strategy of blame-shifting (Williamson 2023). By demonstrating the incompetence of its officials, the incumbent can present herself as the only competent and successful decision-maker. However, incompetent officials will also misunderstand the goals of the regime, making excessive loyalism more likely.

### **Russian regions and excessive loyalism**

The previous section demonstrated that officials in an authoritarian regime could in fact have incentives to overfulfill the goals set by the regime, and that this overfulfillment could lead to excessive loyalism. However, given the intransparency of authoritarian communication, how do we identify the overfulfillment? Ultimately, we can only speculate about the goals autocrats communicate to their officials. In this paper, we argue that sub-national data in many authoritarian regimes could offer an attractive possibility for ‘measuring’ overfulfillment (and thus potentially excessive loyalism) by looking at the *variation* of political activities of individual sub-national leaders.

Sub-national data offer two important advantages in terms of the analysis. First, sub-national leaders frequently have to deal with similar policy challenges resulting from the central government’s decision. There is always a variation in the quality of performance of regional administrations, driven by region-specific characteristics and by the competence of the regional governors. It appears plausible that at least some regional administrations could try to overperform others, and this could lead to excessive loyalism. Central governments occasionally consciously orchestrate competition of regions for over-fulfilling federal

directives.<sup>13</sup> However, in some cases these political tournaments emerge not because the central government starts it but because regions perceive themselves to be in a position of competing with each other to demonstrate loyalty and to attract attention of the center. Second, especially in large countries, remote regions may receive less attention of the central government simply because the latter would be overloaded with other tasks. Under these conditions, regional elites would be particularly interested in attention-seeking through overfulfillment of their tasks or other forms of activity potentially leading to excessive loyalism.

Russian regions appear to be a plausible case for studying excessive loyalism. Russian Federation consists of more than 80 regions, some receiving a lot of attention of the central government (due to their size, economic importance or possible risks coming from these regions) and some regularly falling out of sight of the center. There are two reasons for the regions to compete for the federal attention. First, the highly centralized design of the Russian federalism makes access to federal funds an extremely attractive objective for regional leaders. Even resource rich regions of Russia are ultimately dependent on the federal transfers, since a major part of the resource rent is taxed away by the center (Alexeev and Chernavskiy 2015). While some of the federal grants are formula-based, there is a large discretionary component (and even larger discretion is associated with allocation of funds through central government's general budgetary spending and spending of large state-owned corporations) (Sharafutdinova and Turovsky 2017; Vasilyeva and Libman 2020). Schultz and Libman (2015) show that Russian regions extract substantial benefits from simple visits of the president. Second, while in the 1990s the position of a regional governor was a 'terminal' one, i.e., the highest point in one's career, since early 2010s Russian government regularly promotes regional leaders to positions in the central administration (or moves them to other regions): in order to obtain these attractive promotion opportunities, the regions need to remain on the radar of the center.

In the same way, loyalty signaling is also of crucial importance for Russian regional governors. After the elections of the regional governors were abolished in 2004, the ultimate decision about the appointment of regional heads is in the hands of the central government; even although in 2012 elections were reintroduced in most regions, de-facto the Kremlin retained full control over who is appointed governor (Blakkisrud 2015; Kynev 2020). On top of that, since mid-2010s (and at least prior to the start of the full-scale war against Ukraine in 2022), regional governors and other sub-national officials became frequent targets of criminal prosecution based on corruption charges (Sharafutdinova 2016; Petrov 2021; Buckley et al. 2022). The attacks against governors are often arbitrary. All regional leaders should perceive themselves to be at the mercy of the central government at any moment of time. Thus, regional governors need to prove to the center that they are particularly loyal. At the same time, the success of a regional governor as an administrator massively depends on her ability to mount sufficient support from the public and from the regional elites. A 'toxic' regional governor would find it much more difficult to achieve the goals the central government defines and thus has higher chances to lose her position. These are precisely the necessary prerequisites for a particular form of excessive loyalism: regional governors can try to make their signal of loyalty credible by making their expressions of loyalty 'nauseating', i.e., possibly leading to rejection by the general public.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Examples are political tournaments in China (which we have already mentioned in the previous part of the paper), with regional officials competing to achieve the highest growth rates (Li and Zhou 2005; Xiong 2018) or competition of Russian regional governors aiming at producing the best election results for the federal candidates in their region (Reuter and Robertson 2015) through various sorts of manipulations (Bader and van Ham 2015; Kofanov et al. 2023). Kalinin (2022) specifically treats electoral manipulation in Russia as a tool of loyalty signaling.

<sup>14</sup> Of course, not all regional governors would engage in such type of activity. An equally important strategy could be to avoid seeking exceptional attention of the center and to try to avoid unnecessary risks; as we will show in what follows, at least in the empirical case we study, quite a few governors opted for this strategy.

More generally, the overfulfillment and incorrect identification of regime's goals, potentially leading to excessive loyalism, could be seen as an example of the general problem of information asymmetry and coordination in political hierarchies in authoritarian regimes. A large literature shows that subnational governments and the federal government in autocracies frequently face the problem of misalignment of their actions and decisions, driven by imperfect communication and signaling, looking in particular at the Russian case (Rundlett and Svulik 2016; Saikkonen 2021; Harvey 2022; Klimovich 2023). Excessive loyalism studied in this paper could be a specific manifestation of these coordination problems.

The existing research shows that there is some variation of policies (Libman 2016; Sharafutdinova and Steinbuks 2017) and of public rhetoric (Baturu and Mikhailov 2014) of regional governors even under Putin's centralized regime, which would allow us to identify possible excessive loyalism by comparing reactions of regions to the same central initiative. While in the 1990s there was some variation of Russian governors in terms of their political attitudes and party affiliation (Lussier 2002), in the 2010s it disappeared almost entirely: absolute majority of the governors came from Putin's party United Russia and hardly had any clear ideological positions except the ones dictated to them by the center. Thus, the one of the sources of excessive loyalism we discussed in the theoretical chapter – the ideological differences – is unlikely to matter for Russia (with some minor exceptions). The culture of overcompliance of political goals, while very well could exist in Russia (as a Communist legacy), is unlikely to explain the differences between individual regions, and especially their governors (who are de-facto selected by the center). Attention seeking and loyalty signaling, on the other hand, are, as we have shown, at least potentially relevant for governors' behavior. And indeed, there are examples of what very much resembles excessive loyalism by some of the governors, which went way beyond what the central government was doing in terms of their rhetoric or policy decisions.

Thus, in April 2014, amidst the developing Crimean crisis, one of the Russian regions (Northern Ossetia) publicly opened a *Museum of Crimes of the US and the NATO* in its capital. The museum included highly colorful posters and exhibits: thus, upon entering the museum, the visitors are confronted with a mannequin in the US Army uniform with red paint on its hands (symbolizing blood) holding copies of US dollar notes. The posters depict bones and skulls, and at the end of the exposition visitors are invited to take a vote between two choices: 'Freedom, Peace and Truth' and 'Policies of the US and the NATO' (beneath a portrait of Putin).<sup>15</sup> To provide a context, at that moment of time Putin himself typically referred to the US and the Western European leaders (certainly, somewhat ironically) as 'partners', and the Russian foreign ministry, while occasionally crossed the boundaries of what would be considered proper diplomatic behavior,<sup>16</sup> refrained from such explicit and simplified propaganda. The head of Northern Ossetia publicly endorsed the museum and called upon creating similar museums in all Russian regions. The museum's establishment was hardly noticed by anybody outside Northern Ossetia, but would hardly contribute to the goals of the Kremlin, which at that moment of time was still actively engaged in negotiations with the West trying to push its goals in Ukraine.

To sum up, excessive loyalism appears to be a likely phenomenon among Russian regional governors; in the next section, we will discuss an empirical case illustrating the importance of excessive loyalism in a more systematic fashion.

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<sup>15</sup> <https://rg.ru/2014/04/20/reg-skfo/konflikt.html>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.9tv.co.il/item/15861>

## Empirical case: Russian pension reform of 2018

### *Description of the case*

In order to study excessive loyalism among the Russian regional governors, we will look at a particular episode in the history of the Russian authoritarian regime the retirement age reform of 2018. Before 2018, Russia used a highly generous retirement age regulation, inherited from the 1920s (the introduction of the first social security system in the USSR). The retirement age was 60 years for men and 55 for women. The regulation, which was easy to maintain at the moment of its introduction (when Russian population was rapidly growing), became a serious challenge for the Russian budget in the 2010s, with ageing population and relatively small young cohorts (Mikhailova et al. 2019). As a result, in 2018 the Russian government decided to gradually increase the retirement age to 60 years for women and 65 for men.

The decision was met with almost universal disapproval among the Russian population. The average life expectancy in 2018 reached 73 years; however, the life expectancy for men was much shorter than for women, with only 68 years, making the new retirement age almost identical to the expected age of death.<sup>17</sup> The old retirement age was by the Soviet government in the 1920s, so that generations of Russian citizens were socialized believing that 55 and 60 years is a ‘natural’ retirement age. A public opinion survey conducted by the Levada Center, an independent polling agency, in July 2018, showed that 89% of Russians expressed negative attitude towards retirement age increase for men and 90% for women. 87% believed that the old retirement age was an optimal one for men, 84% shared this opinion for women.<sup>18</sup> Surveys show that a large fraction of the Russian population believed that many people would die before reaching the new retirement age.<sup>19</sup> Pension reform resulted in mass protests, as well as led to a substantial decline of the approval ratings for Vladimir Putin (Logvinenko 2020).<sup>20</sup> Indeed, prior to the reform Putin repeatedly pointed out that the retirement age will not be increased,<sup>21</sup> - this made the public reaction to the reform particularly damaging for him.<sup>22</sup>

To protect Putin’s image, reform was from the very beginning implemented as an initiative of the Russian government (then run by the prime minister Medvedev). Putin, for as long as it was possible, avoided making any public statements about the reforms. At the same time, lower-level officials frequently found themselves in a position to somehow react on this highly unpopular measure. This included regional governors. While initially governors tried to avoid any statements about the reform, over time, most of them had to take a stance on it.<sup>23</sup> And, while almost none of the governors expressed direct criticism of the reform, there was still a substantial variation in the degree of support of the reform: some enthusiastically embraced it (in their public rhetoric), going even beyond what the Russian government stated about this initiative, while others preferred to keep a low profile.

The pension reform of 2018 thus appears to be a good case of studying excessive loyalism. It is a highly unpopular measure introduced by the central government regional administrations had to comment on. There was substantial variation in the degree of rhetorical support towards the reform. At the same time, it was an initiative of great importance for the center, and one

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<sup>17</sup> <https://www.gazeta.ru/business/2019/04/29/12329983.shtml>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.levada.ru/2018/07/05/pensionnaya-reforma-3/>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/619110>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-44582082>

<sup>21</sup> <https://tass.ru/info/5501212>

<sup>22</sup> From this point of view, the pensions reform was a *redistributive* policy decision, having some (potential) winners and a large group of (actual) losers. This increased the likelihood that high praise of the reform from the officials could become excessive loyalism: it would alienate or enrage the losers. This is very different from engaging in, for example, nationalist or patriotic rhetoric, at least hypothetically aiming at *uniting* large groups of people and therefore unlikely to cause substantial disapproval in the broad groups of the population.

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-44767648>



which would potentially allow the governors to show how much they support Putin and his regime. It thus could have been a setting, where governors could have tried to attract attention of the regime. Given the disapproval of the reform by the people, vocally supporting it (in an extreme way) would also serve a credible signal of governors' loyalty – openly positioning themselves in the line of fire and risking possible decline of their own popularity.

Our empirical analysis, therefore, asks the following question: which regional governors were particularly active in praising the pension reform, even in spite of knowing that it would lead to disapproval by the population of their regions? If we assume that the main motives for the governors' actions were attention seeking and loyalty signaling, we need to identify regional leaders, who were particularly likely to engage in either activity. We expect these indicators to correlate with excessive support of the pension reform.

### *Empirical strategy and results*

In what follows, we present the main elements of our empirical analysis. Our dependent variable is extracted from a report published by a Russian NGO *Fond Peterburgskaya Politika*, which in July 2018 graded all Russian regions on a scale from 0 to 5 depending on how strongly their governors and their legislative assemblies approved of the pension reform. While the score of zero corresponded to the regions where governors allowed themselves some cautious doubts about the reform, score of 5 indicated unambiguous support (Peterburgskaya Politika 2018). To provide an example, the head of the Republic of Altai (in Eastern Siberia), who received the score of 5, commented the pension reform in the following way:

Regarding the pension age. I enjoy working, I like it... As long as I have my hands and as long as my legs move – this is my human opinion, without any ideology. I will work as long as I will remain physically fit. ... Each of you present here wants to work as long as the health allows it, one should only welcome it! [all translations made by the authors]

The comment not only describes an increase of the retirement age as acceptable (or possibly necessary given the demographic structure and the economic circumstances) but also as the only *moral* way to act. One can easily imagine how appalling it would be for most Russian citizens given their attitude towards the pension reform. This also goes much further than the Russian government did in its rhetoric, highlighting the *necessity* of the reform (due to demographic change) and the *feasibility* of the reform (due to longer lifespan of Russians) rather than the *morality* of it. This stands in sharp contrast to how Putin (when he finally made a public statement on the reform) commented on it: for him the introduction of the reform was a necessary measure driven by the population decline of the 1990s<sup>24</sup> and was a way to ensure financial stability of the pension system and to protect future generations of pensioners.<sup>25</sup> Literally, in his address to the people, Putin provided the following justification for the pension reform:

It was obvious that by the end of the 2020s we will face serious demographic problems ... Now this small generation of those born in the 1990s is entering the working age. Therefore the load on the pension system is going up. ... Of course, it [the increase of the retirement age] is perceived by many as a painful decision. I understand it very well and I share this concern. But let us look at which other options do we have? Should we accept low income of the pensioners and wait until

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<sup>24</sup> Here, as a matter of fact, Putin indirectly shifted the blame on his predecessors ruling the country during the turbulent first decade after the collapse of the USSR; the criticism of this period is an important part of Putin's legitimization strategy (Belmonte and Rochlitz 2019; Malinova 2021, 2022).

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/29/08/2018/5b8663ba9a79477fda44b38a>

the pension system would ultimately break down? Shift an unpopular, but necessary decision on the shoulders of the next generation or, understanding what the country is going to face in 15-20 years, understanding the real situation, to act?<sup>26</sup>

Putin also calls upon the government to carefully check all concerns of the people. This is also what one finds in the rhetoric of some regional governors, partially preempting Putin's speech. Thus, the governor of Omsk, who received the score of zero, expressed his attitude towards the reform in a very different way than the head of Altai:

We need to listen to the opinion of the population and of the experts, and only then approach this high-profile topic.

While the comment does not openly criticize the reform, it acknowledges that it can be unpopular (and does not present critiques of the reform as immoral) and that further consultations are necessary to deal with the reform.

Figure 1 presents the distribution of the reactions on reform of the regional governors. One can see that the majority of those prefer to remain cautious: there is, however, a substantial minority (27 out of 79 in our sample), which decided to openly support the reform to various extents, thus putting themselves at risk in terms of possible public disapproval.

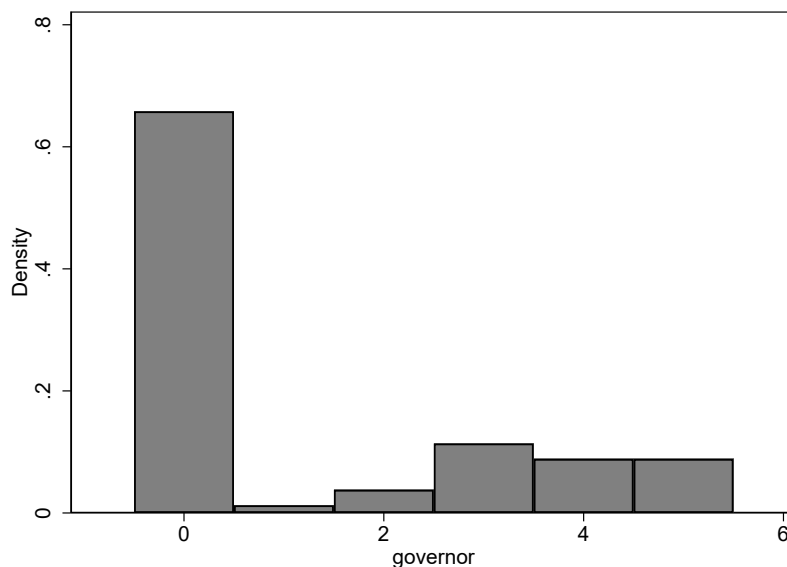


Figure 1: Rhetorical reaction of regional governors to the pension reform

We intend to estimate a series of regressions, where the dependent variable is the score of attitude of governors towards the pension reform, and use a set of various region-specific characteristics, which could potentially measure the likelihood of a region to engage in attention seeking or loyalty signaling as covariates.

We capture the inclination towards attention seeking using three variables: size of the regional population; distance from Moscow; as well as the revenue from extraction of mineral resources the regional economy receives (for the last variable, we use two modifications: absolute value and log transformation, since mineral resources are highly unequally distributed across the territory of Russia). All three variables capture, in essence, how 'important' the region is in the eyes of the central government, i.e., how likely it is to be 'forgotten' by the leadership in Moscow (and thus how likely the regional governors are to need attention seeking signals, e.g., in forms of excessive loyalty). Regions with small population are less relevant in terms of electoral performance; regions with small mineral resource rent are less important for the

<sup>26</sup> <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/page/258>

Russian economy; finally, distant regions are, generally speaking, less likely to attract attention given the enormous size of Russia. We therefore expect governors of small regions, distant regions, and regions without large resource rents to be more likely to engage in excessive rhetoric supporting pension reform.

For the loyalty signaling, seven variables are used, which are extracted from the biographies of the Russian regional governors.

- First, we construct a dummy equal to one for governors, who spent more than ten years in the region they governed. In the 1990s and in the 2000s, the regional ‘heavyweights’ kept control over their territories for many years. However, precisely these embedded regional leaders are those, which Putin is particularly concerned of. Throughout Putin’s rule, there were several waves of replacing the old governors (Reuter 2017); some of them, however, still stayed in power when the pension reform started. We hypothesize that governors, who spent a longer period in a region, will perceive themselves as being ‘at risk’ and therefore will be more likely to attempt to signal loyalty.
- Second, the same logic applies to older governors: they are also more likely to be replaced (if Putin decides to promote the new generation of young technocrats, see Ivanov and Petrov 2021) and therefore should also be more likely to engage in loyalty signaling.
- Third, we introduce a dummy for governors, who worked in the central administration prior to their appointment to the region. It is plausible that they have better connections, which to some extent ‘protect’ them from possible risks associated with the center (Schultz and Libman 2014).
- Fourth, we use a dummy equal to one for governors, who worked in the security services (FSB or KGB) in the past. The *siloviki* play an important role in the Russian politics (Treisman 2007; Yakovlev 2021), and it is plausible to claim that these governors will to some extent feel protected from the center and have larger chances to push for their policy agenda (Burkhardt and Libman 2018).
- Fifth, another biographical dummy measures whether the governor spent some time in her career working in a private sector. Given the inherent mistrust of Putin’s regime towards private entrepreneurs, as well as the fact that private business experience makes it easier for the prosecution to find reasons to initiate criminal charges against a governor (due to the typical practices of the Russian business operating at the boundary of the law), again, businessmen governors are likely to perceive being at risk to a larger extent than other politicians, and thus should be more likely to engage in loyalty signaling.
- Sixth, we construct a dummy for regions, which are run by pro tempore (*vremenno ispolnyaushchiy obyazannost, VRIO*) governors. According to the Russian law, all elections to regional governors take place once a year in September (the so-called single election day, *edinyi den’ golosovaniya*). As a result, the federal government frequently uses the following strategy: the old governor resigns several months prior to the single election day, and the successor enters the office as governor pro tempore, who, however, still has to stand for election. This allows the center to give the successor governor an opportunity to prove herself in the eyes of the regional population and to create connections in the regional elites, but also gives the center an opportunity to test whether the governor fits the region and has sufficient competences and qualifications. It is reasonable to expect these pro tempore governors to be less secure of their position and thus more interested in signaling loyalty.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Occasionally, incumbents also resign prior to the election day and stay in the VRIO capacity until the single election day. This is done if they, for example, want to conduct elections one year earlier, to increase the likelihood that reelection runs without any problems (Goloso and Tkacheva 2018).

- Finally, since mid-2010s Russian law requires all officials to publish their tax returns containing information on their income. While it is doubtful insofar these tax returns are accurate, Libman et al. (2016) point out that governors, who have larger *official* income similarly make it easier for the prosecution to attack them. Furthermore, they could be perceived as less trustworthy by the regime. This could cause them to engage in more active loyalty signaling as well.

In a nutshell, excessive loyalism should be more frequent among older governors, governors with larger official declared income, businessmen governors. VRIO governors and governors, who have spent a longer period of time in the region, and less frequent among governors with central connections and with the security service experience.

Our dataset includes 79 regions of Russia: we exclude Chechnya (due to its special status, resulting in very different patterns of excessive loyalism than in the rest of the country) and the so-called ‘autonomous okrugs’ (lower-level regions, for which some of the statistical data is absent), as well as occupied Crimea and Sevastopol. We estimate a series of regressions for each of the potential explanatory variables, starting with the reduced form specification (Lenz and Sahn 2021) and adding various region-specific control variables one by one. We control for income per capita in the region, urbanization, share of ethnic Russians in the region<sup>28</sup> as well as education level in the region (share of population with a university degree). These indicators provide a general characterization of the economic and political situation in the region. On top of that, we also control for the overall social spending in the region and the magnitude of the loan arrears of the regional enterprises. These indicators capture the extent to which the region already provided a social safety net for its population; if the regional population felt less secure prior to the pension reform, most likely, it increased the likelihood of tensions in the region after reform was introduced. The regressions are estimated using OLS.

Table 1 reports the results for the attention seeking hypothesis, and Table 2 for loyalty signaling. The tables are constructed in the following way. Each row represents a particular regression, where we regress the outcome variable on one of the variables capturing attention seeking or loyalty signaling, as well as a set of other control variables. We do not report the coefficients of the controls (to make the presentation of the results tractable) but merely list the names of the control variables used in a specific regression. We report the coefficients of the main variables though. Thus, each entry shows to us the beta coefficient and the standard error of a variable measuring attention seeking or loyalty signaling controlling for a particular set of other variables (listed in the first cell of the specific row). For example, if one regresses the outcome variable on distance from Moscow and controls for income per capita, urbanization and education, the coefficient of distance from Moscow is 0.153.

The results of the Table 1 are unambiguous, and fit our expectations. Regions more distant from the federal capital, regions with small population and with small mineral resource rent are substantially more likely to vocally support the reform (the result for the mineral resource rent is not robust to the concave transformation and thus to possible outliers). Thus, the less attention the region receives generally, the more important it appears to its governor to act in a way standing out in the eyes of the center. For the loyalty signaling hypothesis, we find no confirmation – there is some (although not entirely robust) evidence though that governors with security service background were also less likely to engage in excessive loyalism, in line with our argumentation. The main results (for population and distance from Moscow) are mostly robust if we replace OLS by ordered logit and if we drop Moscow and St. Petersburg (as obvious outliers).

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<sup>28</sup> Ethnicity could influence the general political culture in the region and thus the rhetoric regional leadership typically engages in.

Table 1: Predictors of excessive loyalism, attention seeking

Control variables	Distance		Population		Mineral resource rent		Log mineral resource rent	
None	0.175	(0.077)**	-0.251	(0.085)***	-0.363	(0.139)**	0.004	(0.079)
Income per capita	0.201	(0.074)***	-0.297	(0.096)***	-0.39	(0.200)*	0.008	(0.093)
Income per capita, urbanization	0.164	(0.077)**	-0.245	(0.091)***	-0.317	(0.141)**	0.052	(0.087)
Income per capita, urbanization, education	0.153	(0.082)*	-0.25	(0.116)**	-0.309	(0.130)**	0.044	(0.089)
Income per capita, urbanization, education, share of ethnic Russians	0.166	(0.083)**	-0.286	(0.110)**	-0.269	(0.139)*	0.058	(0.093)
Income per capita, urbanization, education, share of ethnic Russians, social expenditures	0.165	(0.077)**	-0.076	(0.104)	-0.073	(0.121)	0.115	(0.098)
Income per capita, urbanization, education, share of ethnic Russians, loan arrears	0.158	(0.087)*	-0.371	(0.133)***	-0.219	(0.114)*	0.075	(0.096)

Note: robust standard errors in brackets. \*\*\* significance at 1% level, \*\* 5%, \* 10%. Control variables suppressed.

Table 2: Predictors of excessive loyalism, loyalty signaling

Control variables	VRIO		Age		Federal experience		Security service experience		Business experience		Official income		More than 10 years in office	
None	0.459	(0.503)	0.02	(0.024)	-0.704	(0.398)*	-1.276	(0.214)***	0.405	(0.425)	-0.006	(0.003)*	0.163	(0.415)
Income per capita	0.463	(0.511)	0.02	(0.024)	-0.711	(0.419)*	-1.281	(0.231)***	0.405	(0.430)	-0.006	(0.003)*	0.162	(0.418)
Income per capita, urbanization	0.554	(0.513)	0.021	(0.022)	-0.662	(0.403)	-0.592	(0.354)*	0.347	(0.423)	-0.004	(0.003)	-0.081	(0.428)
Income per capita, urbanization, education	0.509	(0.517)	0.024	(0.023)	-0.621	(0.401)	-0.428	(0.464)	0.348	(0.419)	-0.003	(0.003)	-0.025	(0.434)
Income per capita, urbanization, education, share of ethnic Russians	0.463	(0.515)	0.029	(0.022)	-0.563	(0.393)	-0.454	(0.459)	0.34	(0.417)	-0.003	(0.003)	0.002	(0.436)
Income per capita, urbanization, education, share of ethnic Russians, social expenditures	0.644	(0.491)	0.025	(0.022)	-0.627	(0.388)	-0.875	(0.425)**	0.868	(0.399)**	-0.003	(0.004)	-0.172	(0.416)
Income per capita, urbanization, education, share of ethnic Russians, loan arrears	0.425	(0.512)	0.032	(0.023)	-0.532	(0.392)	-0.539	(0.418)	0.305	(0.423)	-0.003	(0.003)	0.029	(0.438)

Note: robust standard errors in brackets. \*\*\* significance at 1% level, \*\* 5%, \* 10%. Control variables suppressed.

To conclude, pension reform of 2018 demonstrates that excessive loyalism can indeed play a certain role in determining the way Russian governors responded to the policy challenge pension reform constituted for them.

## Conclusion

It remains to summarize the main conclusions of this paper. Our goal was to draw attention to a phenomenon potentially highly important for authoritarian regimes, which, however, so far has received only limited scholarly attention: *excessive loyalism*, which emerges when loyal subjects of the regime go further than the regime itself (potentially) would like them to go. It could happen in form of extreme rhetoric undermining the public support or the international reputation of the regime or in terms of costly actions. Excessive loyalism could be a product of ideological conviction, of seeking attention of the political leadership, or emerge as a costly signal of loyalty.

Our empirical analysis of excessive loyalism focuses on a particular episode of the recent Russian political history: the pension reform of 2018. We use variation of rhetoric of regional governors about the reform and find that while most governors tried to avoid discussing this highly unpopular measure, there was a group of governors, which became active and vocal proponents of the reform. The rhetoric they used went much further than that of the government. We show that this excessive rhetoric was more likely to be present in the subset of governors ruling remote and small regions, which typically receive limited attention of the center – thus, it could follow the attention seeking logic.

The pension reform of 2018 had important implications for the Russian authoritarian regime, leading to public protests and to decline of Putin's approval ratings. In this study, we do not provide any direct evidence of excessive rhetoric of the governors contributing to the negative consequences of the reform for the regime; however, it appears plausible that extreme praise of the reform (especially if arguments of moral nature are used as its foundation) should annoy the population even more and exacerbate the general disapproval of the reform. Insensitive statements of various officials in Russia have regularly produced massive outcry.<sup>29</sup> It stands to reason that excessive statements about the pension reform had similar consequences. Further research should study whether these consequences indeed existed in the Russian regions in 2018.

As a final note, our analysis concerns a particular episode in the development of the Russian authoritarianism. Its evolution (and especially potentially major changes it experienced after 2022) shift the notion of overfulfillment of government's objectives: the war in Ukraine in particular shows how the regime constantly redefines the boundaries of the 'minimal' necessary pro-regime activism, which would still suffice to be treated as loyal. One therefore should be cautious to generalize our observations about specific patterns and forms of excessive loyalism reported in this paper for other periods of development of the Russian authoritarian regime. Still, excessive loyalism is likely to continue to matter in Russia, although its forms constantly change.

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