
Summary of the dissertation for the purpose of obtaining academic degree
Doctor of Philosophy in Political Science HSE

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I. Research design

Research problem statement. The literature on political institutions in nondemocratic regimes has been developing since the early 2000s (Schedler 2013, p.5; Gehlbach, Sonin & Svolik 2016, p.566). Despite the fact that scholars have revealed that genuinely democratic political institutions matter in authoritarian regimes, although with different functions than in democracies (Magaloni 2006; Gandhi 2008; Schedler 2013), there are still gaps in understanding the role of some democratic electoral institutions in undemocratic settings. One such institution is the electoral system\(^1\). Why do some authoritarian regimes use electoral rules which, by their mechanical effects, almost do not give the opposition a chance to gain any parliamentary representation (Tan 2013), while others (Stroh 2010) apply more inclusive\(^2\) rules? What role does electoral engineering play in autocracies?

Data from Russian regional legislative elections since 2003 give an opportunity to answer these questions. According to the 2002 reform of Russia’s regional election law (hereafter – the 2002 electoral reform), since July 15, 2003 all regions have been obliged to elect no less than half of the members of their assemblies by proportional representation (PR)\(^3\). As a result, significant variation appeared in the following dimensions of regional electoral systems: methods for allocating list seats, legal electoral thresholds, and the shares of deputies that were to be elected by PR. Following the reform, profound changes have also occurred in the size of regional assemblies, a similarly important dimension of the electoral system. By Sep-

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\(^1\) The term electoral system is used here to signify a tool that determines how votes are converted into seats in the process of electing politicians into offices (Gallagher & Mitchell 2005, p.3; Farrell 2011, p.4).

\(^2\) By an inclusive electoral system I mean the set of rules which prevent a single party from gaining enormous advantages at the expense of other parties (Carey 2018, p.86).

\(^3\) This rule was in force until the end of 2013 when the federal center decided to cut the minimal share of PR deputies at regional elections to 25 per cent and allowed the two biggest Russian cities – Moscow and St. Petersburg – to elect their legislative bodies by a single-member plurality system (SMP).
tember 2016, the total number of changes in the aforementioned dimensions of electoral systems amounted to more than 200.

The switch of the Russian regions to the new electoral rules coincided with the consolidation of the electoral authoritarian regime at the national level (Golosov 2011; Gel’man 2015; Gill 2016). At the same time, there remained disparities across the Russian regions with respect to a wide range of important dimensions, including political ones.

The thesis is aimed to answer the following research question: what factors influenced the results of electoral engineering in the Russian regions over the period between 2003 and 2016?

**Literature review.** The research is focused on the politics of electoral systems, the distinctive features of electoral process in authoritarian regimes, and the evolution of Russian electoral system along with the transformations of electoral systems in the Russian regions. Therefore, this study relied on three strands of research literature.

The first of these strands deals with the political effects of electoral systems (the electoral system as an independent variable) and electoral system changes (the electoral system as a dependent variable).

Electoral systems as effects or byproducts of political actors’ considerations first caught scholarly attention in the late 1950s (Grumm 1958), although research attention to the electoral system as a dependent variable intensified much later thanks to J. M. Colomer (2004, 2005, 2018), K. Benoit (2004, 2007), J. T. Andrews and R. W. Jackman (2005), S. Bowler, T. Donovan and J. A. Karp (2006), P. Norris (2011). The studies of electoral system reforms in European countries at the turn of the twentieth century have a separate place within this literature (Rokkan 1970; Boix 1999, 2010; Cusack, Iversen & Soskice 2007, 2010; Kreuzer 2010; Ahmed 2010). It was found that the rational calculations of political actors play a leading role among the factors influencing the design of electoral system.

The second strand of the literature addressed in the research deals with the distinctive features of electoral process in authoritarian regimes, where authoritarian practices are placed behind the institutional facades of representative democracy.

The electoral process in authoritarian regimes is usually interpreted from the electoral malpractice perspective. “The menu of manipulation” at the disposal of authoritarian incumbents is diverse: from prevention of certain parties and politicians from entering the electoral competition to electoral fraud (Schedler 2002). Electoral engineering is also on this “menu”.

The literature on electoral engineering in autocracies is relatively scarce (Diaz-Cayeros & Magaloni 2001; Lust-Okar & Jamal 2002; Stroh 2010; Tan 2013; Higashijima & Chang 2016; Gandhi & Heller 2018), and, with rare exceptions (Higashijima & Chang 2016), is case oriented. In addition, there are studies explaining why some autocracies use widespread and blatant electoral manipulations in the course of the elections, while others rely on electoral manipulations to a lesser degree (Birch 2011; Simpser 2013; Rozenas 2016; Rundlett & Svolik 2016; Birch & van Ham 2017).
J. Gandhi and E. Lust-Okar (2009, p.412) point out that electoral engineering both in authoritarian regimes and democracies may be similar, at least in regard to the fact that ruling elites are interested in the rules which are beneficial for them and unfavourable for the opposition. Following this logic, electoral systems in autocracies should always be highly disproportional in order to skew the level playing field for the incumbent’s sake. At the same time, in addition to those authoritarian regimes in which electoral rules by their mechanical effects significantly limit the opposition’s chances of parliamentary representation (Tan 2013), there are autocracies which employ more inclusive systems (Stroh 2010). Despite some attempts to explain why autocracies use different electoral formulas – proportional or majoritarian (Higashijima & Chang 2016) – the question concerning the general logic of electoral engineering in electoral authoritarian regimes is still unanswered. The rules under which authoritarian elections are held are still understudied (Gandhi & Heller 2018, p.388).

The third strand of the literature relevant for the thesis concerns the study of Russian electoral system and the electoral systems in the Russian regions. There is plenty of works on the reforms of Russian electoral system (Remington & Smith 1996; McFaul 1999; White & McAllister 1999; Gel’man 1999; Moser & Thames 2001; Birch et al. 2002; Moraski 2007, 2009; Smyth, Lowry & Wilkening 2007; Wilson 2009; White & Kryshtanovskaya 2011; Sheinis 2014; Golosov 2017). Summing up their findings, one can conclude that electoral reforms were in force when the executive branch de facto headed by the president, striving for maximum control over the legislative process, was interested in such implementation and there were no other veto players able to block the passage of the law.

The literature on electoral reforms in the Russian regions is not so profound. The motivation of the Russian regions for choosing particular electoral rules in the 1990s was considered by B. Moraski (2006). Some
explanations of the Russian regions’ choice of certain electoral system dimensions after the 2002 electoral reform were presented by P. V. Panov (2004), L. V. Smorgunov (2006), E. A. Al’tova (2007), G. V. Golosov (2013). The principal finding in these works was that the executive authority, both federal and regional, played a leading role in the politics of electoral system at the level of Russian entities. In addition to the abovementioned works there are some studies which included the thick description of the regional electoral system transformations after the 2002 electoral reform (Kynev 2009, 2014; Lyubarev 2010; Kynev & Lyubarev 2011). It is worth noting that none of the works cited tried to propose an explanation to the general logic of electoral system engineering at the regional level.

The aim of this study is to identify the factors that influenced the results of electoral engineering in the Russian regions in the period of 2003-2016. To reach this aim the following objectives were put forward:

1) to analyse the literature on political effects of electoral systems and causes of electoral reforms in order to determine what political actors and under what circumstances could be interested in electoral engineering;
2) to extract from works on electoral manipulations in autocracies the incumbents’ preference model for some types of electoral manipulation over others;
3) to observe the studies on the Russian electoral system reforms and the reforms of electoral systems in the Russian regions as well as works on Russian political regime changes during the study period;
4) to select and describe the model for the empirical analysis, to propose some hypotheses about electoral engineering in the Russian regions based on this model, to construct the operational definitions for all variables employed in this study;
5) to check proposed hypotheses and to make conclusions regarding the factors of electoral engineering in the Russian regions.

Rational choice institutionalism was chosen as the **methodological foundation** of empirical research presented in this thesis. The **method of data analysis** employed in this study is ordered logistic regression.

**The units of analysis and the chronological framework of research.** The unit of the analysis presented in the empirical part of this thesis is the region. The lower timeframe of the research is December 2003, when the first regional elections under the new rules imposed by the 2002 electoral reform were held. The upper timeframe is September 2016. Starting from December 2003 all Russian regions held no less than two rounds of legislative elections. By the end of 2016 the third post-reform elections were held in 72 regions. The period between December 2003 and October 2008 is the first round of regional elections after the 2002 electoral reform, according to which no less than half of a regional parliament had to be elected using PR system. The period from March 2008 to September 2013 is the second round; and the period from December 2011 to September 2016 is defined here as to be the third round.

**Hypotheses. The main hypothesis of the study** is that electoral engineering was more evident in regions with relatively open political systems, where “tough” manipulations could cause the open discontent of ordinary citizens or the active protest of political opposition.

Along with this hypothesis, the study tests the following hypotheses towards the factors of electoral engineering in the Russian regions as well:

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4 Except Crimea and Sevastopol which are excluded from the analysis.
5 On September 10, 2017, and September 9, 2018 the third post-reform elections were held in 11 regions.
6 On October 8, 2006, March 11, 2007, and December 2, 2007 the second post-reform parliamentary elections in Sverdlovsk and Volgograd oblasti, and the Republic of Mordovia, respectively, were held. Despite the fact that these elections belonged to the second round, it seems to be more precisely to speak about the second round of regional elections under the new rules since March 2008 when the second elections starting from 2003 were held in seven regions.
7 On March 2, 2008 the third elections in Sverdlovsk oblast’ were held.
8 By tough manipulations electoral fraud or voter intimidation are meant (Birch 2011, p.41–51).
– electoral engineering during the first and the second rounds of regional legislative elections after the 2002 electoral reform depended on the federal center’s\textsuperscript{9} activity;

– electoral engineering was less evident in regions headed by governors\textsuperscript{10} who had resources allowing them to mobilize for United Russia a wide network of loyal agents of electoral manipulations at the local level;

– evident electoral engineering could be a strategy for those governors whose length of tenure in office was short;

– electoral engineering could have been evident in those regions where United Russia faced a solid representation of other parties during the previous regional parliamentary elections held under the new rules.

**Data selection.** In order to construct the independent variables that served as the empirical referents of the research hypotheses, information extracted from expert ratings, national censuses, and electronic databases was used. The Carnegie Moscow Center’s rating of regional democratic development, created by Russian scholars Petrov and Titkov (2013), as well as the information from “The Social Atlas of Russian Regions”, prepared by the same authors according to the same principles, were chosen to operationalize the openness of regional political regimes. Data on the percentages of ethnic non-Russians and country population in a given region were taken from 2002 and 2010 Russian national censuses. Data for the constructing of the effective number of parliamentary parties (ENPS) were obtained from the official webpage of the Central Electoral Commission of Russia and the publications of A. Kynev (2009, 2014).

To construct the dependent variable of the analysis reflecting the degree of electoral engineering intensity in a given region, an index was developed by summing up values representing the main dimensions of a giv-

\textsuperscript{9} The term *federal center* is used to denote the Russian president and his administration in a general way.

\textsuperscript{10} The term *governor* is used here to refer to regional chief executives.
en regional electoral system, i.e., assembly size, the share of PR deputies, legal electoral threshold, and method for allocating list seats. Information on the size of regional assemblies was obtained from the texts of the regional constitutions and statutes published by Garant-Servis. Texts of regional electoral laws and abovementioned Garant-Servis database were used for collecting information on the peculiarities of regional electoral laws, namely, the share of PR deputies, legal electoral thresholds, and methods for allocating list seats.

**Statements to be defended:**

1. The federal center was the main actor that influenced electoral engineering at the regional level during the first and the second rounds of regional legislative elections after the 2002 electoral reform. Its main goal consisted in creating electoral rules favorable to United Russia. Neither United Russia, nor regional governors influenced the regional electoral systems’ transformations during that period. The federal center ceased to influence electoral engineering during the third round of post-reform regional elections after having reduced the maximum possible legal electoral threshold from 7 to 5 per cent.

2. During the third round of regional legislative elections when the federal center stepped back from active electoral system engineering at the regional level, regional executives stepped forward. The governors’ influence on electoral engineering was particularly visible in regions with relatively open political systems, where civil society institutions are alive, political pluralism exists, and the level of protest activity is high. Using in these regions “tough” electoral manipulations at the expense of electoral engineering for the sake of United Russia could cause the open discontent of ordinary citizens or the active protest of opposition what would indicate a governor’s inability to keep regional political process under control.
3. During the third round of regional legislative elections, the level of electoral engineering was significantly lower in those regions headed by governors who had resources for mobilizing local actors to engage in “tough” manipulations in favor of United Russia (who possessed the resources of ethnic political machines), and, therefore, did not need any “supplementary” activity, such as electoral engineering, to aid United Russia in gaining the seats necessary to ensure its parliamentary majority.

4. The link between electoral engineering and United Russia’s supposed activity aimed at the consolidation of its representation in regional assemblies was not supported in the study. This result, along with the finding that electoral engineering did not depend on the strategy of those governors who have not been ruling by a given region for a long time, makes the consideration of the “structural” factors facilitating the governors to rely on one type of electoral manipulation at the expense of another, to be principal in explaining electoral engineering at the level of Russian regions.

**Contribution to the subject field:**

1. This study examined electoral engineering in the Russian regions in general instead of particular dimensions of electoral systems. To do this the index reflecting the degree of electoral engineering was elaborated.

2. This study employed statistical strategy to examine the phenomenon of electoral engineering instead of case-oriented approach which is prevalent in the literature. To perform the analysis the conclusions of three close but almost non-overlapping strands of the literature devoted to electoral engineering in democracies, electoral manipulations in authoritarian regimes, and electoral engineering in particular autocracies were combined.

3. Based on obtained results it was demonstrated that electoral engineering in authoritarian settings may have a different logic than that in democracies; namely, the influence of political parties on electoral systems’ changes was not found (United Russia was in the core of the analysis).
4. The obtained results indicate that electoral engineering may be of importance in undemocratic political regimes under certain conditions; namely, when incumbents lack the resources to implement “tough” forms of electoral manipulations for securing their political power.

5. It was found that the factors of electoral engineering at the regional level could be outweighed by the federal center’s activity if it takes steps to transform regional electoral systems into being less inclusive.

Works published in journals approved by HSE (including journals both from WoS and Scopus lists):


**Works published elsewhere:**


The content and main findings of the aforementioned works are embedded into the thesis’s text.

**II. Analysis of data and findings**

As an example of electoral engineering this study includes a given region’s use of those electoral rules that are highly biased in favour of the “party of power”, United Russia. As a large party, United Russia would hold an advantage in small assemblies, small district magnitudes, high legal electoral thresholds and methods for allocating list seats based on small quotas (Colomer 2004, p.46).

To operationalise a phenomenon of “electoral engineering”, an index was developed by summing up values representing the main dimensions of a given regional electoral system, i.e., assembly size, the share of PR deputies, legal electoral threshold, and method for allocating list seats, depending on whether a given dimension would be beneficial to United Russia.

The index reflecting the degree of electoral engineering varies from 0 to 4, where higher values indicate a greater degree to which a system favours representation for United Russia.

The analysis is based on data from three regional electoral rounds, so regressions were built for each electoral round separately. The method of analysis employed in this study is ordered logistic regression.

As regression results indicate, the federal center was the only actor that influenced electoral engineering at the regional level during the first
round of regional legislative elections. The same effect was also in place during the second round.

The link between electoral engineering and any other actors, except the federal center, was not found during the first two rounds of regional elections: neither United Russia, nor governors influenced the regional electoral systems’ transformations, as the analysis has shown. The possible explanation for this could be that the federal center’s activity in creating electoral rules favourable to United Russia anticipated all incentives which could have stemmed from United Russia itself and the heads of regions. The latter two actors had nothing but to follow electoral changes promoted by the Kremlin. Moreover, during the first and the second electoral rounds restrictive electoral rules were employed even by those Russian regions where incumbent elites fully controlled political process in their domains.

A very different picture could be seen during the third round of regional elections compared to the first and the second. The federal center ceased to affect electoral engineering at regional level after having reduced the maximum possible legal electoral threshold from 7 to 5 per cent. Despite the fact that Russian regions were allowed to elect by PR two times fewer deputies in the course of the third round than in the first and the second, only a couple of regions used this provision. The explanation could be that governors feared to lose control over the legislative process due to the entrance of more SMP-deputies into regional parliaments.

At the same time, the requirement to reduce legal electoral thresholds was balanced out in some regions by adopting more restrictive seat allocation formulas, by reducing the assembly size and by rejection of a pure PR system. Heads of regions were the key principals in these “compensatory” politics, especially, those governors who faced structural limitations on their use of “tough” forms of manipulation (electoral fraud or voter intimidation) for United Russia’s benefit.
As statistical analysis has showed, electoral engineering was not dependent during all three rounds on a strategy of those regional governors who have not been ruling by a given region for a long time.

Finally, the results revealed that electoral engineering was unlikely to be related to United Russia’s incentives: the link between ENPS and the dependent variable was not found during all rounds of regional elections.

The findings of this study shed light on the logic of authoritarian electoral engineering. Based on obtained results, it could be supposed that the transformations of electoral systems may be of importance even in undemocratic political regimes. It could be the case under certain circumstances, namely, when authoritarian incumbents do not have opportunities to rely on “tough” electoral manipulations like electoral fraud or voter intimidation for assurance their political domination (or when these are quite scarce). Conversely, electoral engineering may not be of interest for those autocrats who have full discretion with respect to the wide range of tools for the manipulation of electoral outcomes.

**III. Reference list**


