

# No Success Without Approval: The Role of Administrative Resources in the Russian Electoral Process

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## Abstract

Based on interviews with political strategists, officials from regional administrations, and CEOs, this article describes the mechanism for using administrative resources in the electoral process in Russia. Administrative resources are the set of informal or semi-formal practices used by government officials to ensure a predetermined result in an election. These resources are deployed to keep power in the hands of the ruling elite at all levels. With the help of administrative resources, favorable electoral opportunities are created for “agreed” candidates and parties, while obstacles are placed in front of political competitors. The article presents an analysis of the repertoire of the administrative resources employed in the process of nominating candidates and during election campaigns is presented.

## Keywords

administrative resources, corruption, electoral integrity, informality, Russia

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## Introduction

Elections are an instrument of democratic governance, or at least they should be. The growing trend toward electoral authoritarianism is a major concern among scholars and practitioners worldwide (Levitsky & Way, 2010, 2020; Magaloni & Kricheli, 2010; Schedler, 2006). The vast majority of modern authoritarian regimes exist with a parliament and rely on a party that dominates the formal electoral contest (Boix, Svoboda, 2013; Svoboda, 2012). Authoritarian regimes use institutions traditionally associated with democracy, especially electoral institutions, to consolidate their power and prevent democratization (Brancati, 2014), as well as to “allow multiple parties to compete in elections, but [...] under patently unfair conditions” (Donno, 2013, p. 704). The idea of electoral authoritarianism is widely used to define the meaning of elections in authoritarian regimes, where elections are interpreted as a façade to legitimize the results of the vote within and beyond the country (Schedler, 2006). The use of the adjective rather than the noun—“pure” authoritarianism—is intended to suggest the difference from regions where there are no

elections at all, where parties are banned, or where there is a single ruling party. Political institutions and especially elections in dictatorial regimes have been of interest to many researchers, who have focused on Kuwait, Morocco, Ecuador (Gandhi, 2008), Mexico (Magaloni, 2006), and Singapore (Ong, 2015). The results of the studies suggest that elections are not just a façade, but a mechanism for bargaining among the ruling elites and the cooptation of

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those willing to serve the power, which ultimately strengthens the power, and not just as a decorative function (Gandhi, 2008).

What are the trajectories of dictatorial regimes and what role do elections play in them? To answer this question, the methodology of quantitative analysis is often used to estimate the probability that elections will change the trajectory of a country's development. For example, out of 50 elections held under competitive authoritarianism in the 1990s and early 2000s, 15 were found to have "liberalizing electoral outcomes" (Howard & Roessler, 2006). Of particular interest is the question of under what circumstances elections become a factor in "undermining" competitive authoritarianism. Such outcomes are associated with elite fragmentation within the ruling party, opposition consolidation, economic problems, and external international pressure (Howard & Roessler, 2006). Another study examined 177 presidential and parliamentary elections in electoral authoritarian regimes between 1990 and 2007. It showed that this model rarely transformed into electoral democracy, and the cases of such a transition are related to the presence of domestic opposition and pressure from international forces (Donno, 2013). In terms of protest activity, the probability of democratic transition as a result of civil resistance is greatly reduced if the security forces remain loyal to the ruler, as demonstrated in Belarus (Chin et al., 2023). The personal loyalty of law enforcement officials as the main principle of personnel policy leads to a decrease in their qualifications, but contributes to the preservation of power (Egorov & Sonin, 2011). Do elections threaten authoritarian regimes? Using data on 259 autocracies from 1946 to 2008, it has been shown that elections stabilize autocracies in the long run, but create risks of short-term instability (Knutsen et al., 2017).

In the short term, elections energize the opposition and can contribute to its consolidation. In the long run, however, elections consolidate power through opportunities for cooptation and repression. This effect is more pronounced in multiparty autocratic elections than in fully noncompetitive elections (Knutsen et al., 2017). Thus, the analysis of political transitions from the 1950s to 2006 has shown that there are opportunities for democratization under certain circumstances, but the transition from one type of dictatorship to another is more likely. Democracies rarely emerge from the wreckage of a one-party system, but more often from new variants of one-party dictatorships (Magaloni & Kricheli, 2010). This logic applies to contemporary Russia.

According to Magaloni and Kricheli (2010), Russia first transitioned from the one-party system of the Soviet era to a democracy under Boris Yeltsin, and then transformed into a single-party dictatorship as a quasi-one-party regime under Vladimir Putin. In this sense, placing Russia in the league of countries with competitive authoritarianism is inaccurate, since the very notion emphasizes the potential for elections

to lead to unexpected outcomes. If the space for such outcomes is negligible, Russia can be classified as a hegemonic form of autocracy. However, there is no uniformity in the use of the conceptual apparatus as applied to Russia in the literature. Zavadskaya (2012), for example, included Russia in a sample of 78 countries (349 elections) and estimated the probability of "subversive" election outcomes in a situation of competitive authoritarianism from 1990 to 2011. "Subversive" election outcomes were both the loss of power and mass protests against the "planned" victory, which happened in Russia in the 2011 State Duma elections. Since then, Russia has been drifting towards a hegemonic format, increasing repression and reducing the space for unexpected election results. According to Golosov (2014), the transition from "defective democracy" to "electoral authoritarianism" took place between 2005 and 2007 (Golosov, 2014). The slide towards electoral authoritarianism became evident in 2007, when there was no electoral competition and no real opposition in the State Duma elections (Zavadskaya et al., 2017). However, this view is contradicted by Gelman, who believes that there was no movement towards democracy in Russia, and that the foundations of the authoritarian regime were laid under President Boris Yeltsin (Gelman, 2021).

During elections in Russia, there is no change of power; rather, the formal existence of the electoral process is demonstrated, which allows the Russian political system to be qualified as an "electoral autocracy" (Gelman, 2021) or as "democratic authoritarianism" (Brancati, 2014). This is not an exclusive feature of Russia, however. It is in electoral authoritarian regimes that the hypothesis of "tragic brilliance" as the ability to win elections when the economic situation deteriorates is confirmed (Golosov, 2016). In particular, in assessing the impact of the events in Crimea on the attitudes of Russians towards the authorities, it was shown that the blame for economic failures is placed solely on the government and the State Duma, and that President Putin is isolated from the state institutions in the mass consciousness. He benefits from patriotic feelings in a geopolitical context, and his figure is contrasted with officials and lawmakers who are made scapegoats for economic policy failures (Sirotkina & Zavadskaya, 2020). Elections in Russia are an adaptation of authoritarian leaders to democratic procedures. The menu of manipulations has gradually changed: the use of ex-ante manipulations has decreased, while the frequency of ex-post manipulations remains high (Zavadskaya et al., 2017). Elections in Russia have evolved from a way of co-opting different political forces to a demonstration of the regime's power. Instead of a democratizing effect, elections have become an instrument of authoritarian stability. Unfree elections are not a mechanism for transferring power, but the basis for legitimizing regimes (Levitsky & Way, 2020). However, this state of affairs is by no means a specific feature of Russia's "special way"; rather, it is a particular case of electoral autocracy with a strong

personalistic component (Golosov, 2016). Big data methodology, covering dozens of countries and hundreds of elections, makes it possible to quantify the impact of various factors on the likelihood that an election will produce an unexpected outcome for an authoritarian system.

The current paper is not intended to be an international comparative study; we focus only on Russia. Moreover, we focus only on one option from the entire menu of electoral manipulations: the use of administrative resources to selectively apply formal norms and procedures and maintain informal control over the electoral process. In contrast to the existing literature on administrative resources (Allina-Pisano, 2010; Ross, 2011; Wilson, 2005; Zavadskaya et al., 2017; Zimmer, 2005), our paper is based on testimonies from those who are responsible for creating and implementing these resources. With our paper, we are contributing to the growing literature on the lack of electoral integrity in general (Norris, 2014, 2015, 2017; Simpson, 2013)<sup>1</sup> and in Russia in particular (Frye et al., 2014; Golosov, 2014, 2016; Golosov and Turchenko, 2021; Gel'man, 2010, 2013; Smyth, 2006, 2020; Smyth and Turovsky, 2018; Szakonyi, 2020; Hale, 2016; Hale & Colton, 2017; Hutcheson, 2018, 2022; Reuter, 2021; Tkacheva & Turchenko, 2022), as well as to the study of informality—a research tool that allows us to look behind the façade of elections (Denisova-Schmidt, 2024; Ledeneva, 2018a, 2018b, 2024). This paper sheds light on the mechanisms of administrative resources in the process of nominating candidates and during their election campaigns. It is organized as follows: First, we briefly describe our research design and data (“Study Design and Empirical Data Set”). Next, we present our findings (“Nomination of Candidates” and “The Electoral Campaign”). In the final section, we address the limitations of our study and conclude (“Study Limitations and Conclusion”).

## Study Design and Empirical Data Set

The empirical basis of our study includes 75 in-depth interviews with people who have been directly involved in the electoral process over the past 10 years. This includes political strategists (from campaign managers to specialists in specific types of work) ( $N = 31$ ), representatives of regional and city administrations ( $N = 9$ ), deputies of regional parliaments and city councils ( $N = 11$ ), employees of the executive committees of regional branches of parties ( $N = 7$ ), members and chairmen of precinct election commissions ( $N = 5$ ), election lawyers ( $N = 3$ ), and CEOs ( $N = 9$ ). Interviews were conducted face-to-face and recorded. The duration of the interviews ranged from 40 to 160 minutes. The interview guide included blocks that were common for all groups of respondents as well as special sections that took into account the specifics of their activities. The semi-structured interviews allowed for variability in the wording and order of the questions. Our respondents<sup>2</sup> discussed

the role of administrative resources in the course of election campaigns solely from the standpoint of their own experience. In other words, we did not focus on politics as a space of competing ideas, bypassing disputes between liberals and conservatives, right and left, and instead discussed the practical side of the issue—the actions of the various players drawn into the electoral process, voluntarily or not. The interviews were collected from October 2018 to July 2019 in Moscow and the Moscow region, as well as in St Petersburg, the central part of Russia (Ulyanovsk), the Urals (Yekaterinburg), and Siberia (Kemerovo, Krasnoyarsk, Novosibirsk and the Novosibirsk region). By selecting these regions, we have considered the variations in how competitive elections are across these cities, which might affect how intensively administrative resources are used and/or what types among some other selection criteria (more in Barsukova & Denisova-Schmidt, 2022). There are regions with regimes that are more lenient towards using administrative resources, which creates windows of opportunity to participate in elections, at least for representatives of the systemic opposition. However, such competition, first, does not apply to gubernatorial elections, since personnel decisions are left to Moscow and, second, does not imply the loss of the dominant position by the party of power. Based on this data set, we have previously examined the mixing of business and politics and the stages of electoral integrity in post-Soviet Russia (Barsukova & Denisova-Schmidt, 2020, 2022, 2023).

## Nomination of Candidates

In the Russian Federation, there are two channels for nominating candidates to stand for elections: Candidates can be chosen from the party (“according to party lists”) or they can be independent candidates who stand of their own personal will (“single-mandate members” or the so-called “self-nominees”). In other words, either the party nominates a person or the person self-nominates with the support of citizens.

Party representatives receive mandates in proportion to the number of votes cast for the party (proportional electoral system). Independent candidates are elected by a majority of the votes cast for them in that constituency (majority system). The combination of these principles makes it possible to define the electoral system of the Russian Federation as mixed<sup>3</sup>.

The parties form party lists, according to which deputy mandates are distributed. There are those who wish to influence the distribution of “guaranteed spots” on these lists with the help of financial tranches. These can take the form of transfers to the party fund, its election fund, and/or bribes to those who can influence these decisions. The fee is higher for parties that have a greater chance of winning.

This practice is called “selling seats on party lists.” It is a mistake to think that whoever pays more will get a deputy

mandate, however. The value of a financial resource is limited by political expediency. The parties want to capitalize on their right to form party lists, but they should not be likened to merchants, always giving preference to the richest client. The party cannot afford to do this; the reputation of the client plays an important role. For example, athletes and artists can enter the lists for free, raising the prestige of the party through their popularity: *“Rates are individual. Rich sponsors will be charged more, and if a person is significant, some great athlete, then we will talk about other money, purely symbolic”* (male, 50, political strategist, former adviser to the governor).

Why is there a demand for selling seats? One of the reasons is that an alternative nomination as an independent candidate is practically doomed to failure without the support of administrative resources. The vulnerability of self-nominees<sup>4</sup> illustrates the value of the party list: *“Many entrepreneurs prefer not to run a campaign, but to give bribes for a place on the party list, because a campaign with all these signatures is like walking through a minefield, you can fly through at any stage”* (female, 51, political strategist, head of an NGO).

What is the difficulty of self-nomination without administrative support? The answer from practicing political strategists can be reduced to the words “collection of signatures.” Let us dwell on this in more detail: To protect against active citizens who have decided to serve society, the law provides for a formal procedure—the collection of signatures from citizens as a basis for self-nomination. In this way, a completely logical demand turns into a minefield for people who the authorities do not like. It is almost impossible to walk through it; protests in Moscow during the summer of 2019 were caused by the refusal by authorities to register some oppositionists as candidates for the city Duma. They were refused registration on the basis of errors in their signature sheets: *“Self-nomination is the most dangerous way to becoming a candidate. This is a very weak position, very vulnerable—they can be removed for anything”* (female, 43, political strategist).

One could argue that if the candidate does not make any mistakes, then everything will be fine. According to the official version, self-nominated candidates are divided into “neat” and “inaccurate” when collecting signatures. In reality, the criterion for this division is somewhat different: There are agreed and non-agreed candidates. Here, a routine technical procedure can become an effective tool for administrative control over the list of candidates. Political strategists regard this barrier as insurmountable for objectionable candidates to power: *“I immediately told my customer that we would try to move forward from the party. This made it possible to dispense with the collection of signatures, which is a very slippery and painful procedure”* (male, 37, political strategist).

It is not just that signatures are difficult to collect; their authenticity is checked by the election commission, which

can apply a varying standard. Undesirable applicants for a place in power are subject to a much more thorough test, while the signature lists of agreed candidates are not examined so carefully: *“We need to collect a lot of signatures in a very limited amount of time. And even if you collect these signatures, if they don’t want to register you, they will find mistakes”* (female, 42, political strategist, teacher).

This does not fit the ordinary consciousness: How can one find errors where they do not exist? Political strategists will answer this question with a gloomy smile: Is it worth destroying your ideas about an ideal world? *“In fact, any package of signatures can be compromised. It entirely depends on the election commissions, which are under the serious influence of administrative resources”* (male, 46, political strategist).

Cases can be quite funny. In one region, even the son of a deceased former governor was disallowed due to signatures: *“At the stage of nominating candidates, administrative resources rule unconditionally. In the elections to the ZSO [Legislative Assembly], they did not allow the son of the former governor, they cut off the signatures. His signatures were wiped clean, like in a pharmacy. But they didn’t let him in. These stories are quite commonplace. The stage of collecting signatures is one of the key ones”* (male, 42, member of the Public Chamber, head of media resources).

The signature lists indicate the signer’s address and passport data. How can any maneuvers be performed in such an uncomplicated space? Let us give the floor to political technologists:

There are many ways. For example, they begin to compare your lists with the database of the MVD [Ministry of Internal Affairs] from three years ago. Someone has already moved there, died, and you will be removed from the race for false signatures. Or more simply: You have some kind of blot here, which means that something has been faked here. They find fault with everything. (male, 52, political strategist, sociologist)

It’s very easy to cut off signatures by playing with the [Russian] letters “e” and “ë.”<sup>5</sup> For example, you knew all your life that you were Fëdorov, so you wrote it on the sheet. But in the database, you are listed with the letter “e” [Fedorov]. Or you write “g. Omsk,” and on the passport it says “gor. Omsk.”<sup>6</sup> That’s it! You have been caught in an error. If they want, of course, to catch you. If the green light is turned on for you from above, then you can write whatever you like. (male, 46, political strategist, journalist)

As a general rule, signature information should appear correctly, just as it does on the passport. This thesis once again gives rise to the illusion of victory over the system: You just need to strictly copy the letters from the passport data. But this is not a guarantee of success if a command comes from above:

I personally saw how, in Yakutia, they massively demolished the self-nominees that came from small villages. There is an iron law that political strategists use: as [written] on the passport—[that is,] correctly. And there was perturbation. Once upon a time, there was one large city of Neryungri with a bunch of adjacent territories. And people had an entry on their passports—the city of Neryungri, the village of Berkakit. Now there is the city of Neryungri, and all the villages are assigned to the Neryungri district. Accordingly, people wrote down what they have in their passports, and specially trained people proved through the court that now it's different, which means the record is not correct. There was a massive demolition there; all unnecessary self-nominees were removed. (male, 46, political strategist, journalist)

This case is made particularly piquant by the fact that these independent candidates were initially registered and their signature lists were recognized by the election commission as valid. Then the command came from above to remove them. But how can this be done if the candidates already have the registration decision from the election commission in their hands? If desired, any problem can be solved: The Electoral Commission filed a lawsuit against itself with a request to declare its own decision invalid.

The arsenal of means to prevent participation in elections, of course, is wider than the verification of signatures. For example, candidates can be prevented from registering by creating bogus queues at election commissions. A hired extra enters the office and stays there for a long time, followed by another and another. When the real candidate's turn finally approaches, the representative from the election commission announces that the working day is over. This is repeated the next day. All complaints break against the shield of administrative cover.

At the informal level, it is as though there is a sign "Welcome, or no strangers allowed." The nomination situation leads some political strategists to make sharp, unambiguous statements:

There are no real alternative candidates. (male, 60, political consultant, founder and head of a consulting agency)

There is no nomination without "approval." (male, 59, entrepreneur, sponsor)

At the very first stage—at the stage of nomination—the strongest block is the use of administrative resources. Anyone can be prevented; anyone can be removed. Because the commissions are professionally sharpened to cut whoever they need. In the absence of independent courts, it is practically impossible to overcome this. (male, 50, political strategist, former adviser to the governor)

Those candidates, whose victory is planned, however, can collect signatures in the most favorable manner. Sometimes administrative services do it for them:

We all knew that on the third floor of the regional administration building, they allocated an office, put girls there who, in different handwriting, changing pens, filled out signature sheets according to the database that they were given. (male, 59, employee of the regional administration)

Agreed candidates need formal rivals, otherwise elections will not take place. It is possible for administrative resources to dilute the list of candidates chosen for victory with extras and then the unexpected can happen: In the absence of a "none of the above" column, random ("no name") people can collect protest votes and win. The administrative clearing of the political field sometimes leads to the victory of candidates who did not intend to be elected and only agreed to participate in the elections to simulate competitiveness.

The question of why people accept the role of extra has a simple answer: The authorities can thank you in one form or another.

Since there should be a picture of competitive elections, they say to someone: You must participate in the elections, we will then give you a position for this, we will open the damper for your business. Most often, those who agree have some kind of interest of their own. Interest cannot be won, but a hidden interest in something else. (female, 39, political strategist)

Realizing that administrative resources thin out the candidates for participation in elections even at the registration stage, political strategists argue that in order to participate and, moreover, win in an election campaign, it is necessary to fit the alignment planned by the authorities. Here, we are talking about the political landscape as the basis for projected coalitions in government:

During the focus groups, it became clear that the ruling party is unlikely to get a majority in the legislature, so they decided to bet on a coalition with the Zhirinovites<sup>7</sup> to help them in the elections. They began to stuff a box of competitors. They look at what electoral shares someone has, what overflows will be made under what hands. Pure mathematics. And what if we destroy the KPRF through KPSS?<sup>8</sup> It all counts. If a communist is not needed, then the situation can be dissolved: Now, for example, you are flying by, but in a year, there will be elections to the regional Duma. And if you are not exhibiting now, then next time we will give you one additional "window." This is ordinary political bargaining. (male, 61, political strategist, head of a political consulting agency)

The chances of winning, according to political strategists, depend on how well the candidates manage to fit into the political landscape, as approved and implemented by the owners of the administrative resources. An open clash with the authorities raises the candidate's fame but has nothing to

do with winning an election. The one who is in conflict does not want to be elected. He wants to win the laurels of a fighter against the regime, which can be converted into a host of other projects; this is another task that has nothing to do with an electoral victory. Those candidates act as personifications of certain ideas, and their participation in elections serves the purpose of promoting the idea in the public space. Realizing the impossibility of breaking through the blockade of administrative resources, they do not hope to win, but declare their position by the very fact of participating in the elections. In this sense, even withdrawing their candidacy or refusing to register as candidates serves to draw attention to a certain set of ideas. These can be both left or right political forces that do not fit into the script of the approved political spectrum. Moreover, it is the high-profile scandals associated with their infringement during the elections that more fully correspond to the task of drawing attention to the lack of political competition. In this sense, they “win” by becoming subjects of discussion or even mass protests, even though they formally lose. A typical example is that of a political activist who regularly lost elections and loudly decried the lack of fair political competition (in particular, she accused the winner of exceeding the allowable expenses for the election campaign). She now has the status of a foreign agent. When asked where she draws strength from when she is haunted by failures in the electoral process over and over again, she answers:

“If you see elections as a goal, then burnout will inevitably occur. You hit the wall once, the second time... I look at it not as a goal, but as a path. Way of the Samurai. Yes, an impenetrable wall, but this is not the end of the road. You move on. [...] It’s stupid to live the length of your life” (woman, 50 years old, political activist, founder of several social movements, repeatedly subjected to administrative arrest).

The professionalism of a political strategist lies in the ability to win elections. Creating the image of a martyr is image making—the task of another profession. This idea was traced in interviews with the professionally successful political strategists:

No, we are friends with the authorities. Even if a person goes as a “self-nominee,” without any party, we act only in the regime of loyalty to the authorities. We tried to conduct projects in the mode of confrontation, but then the authorities immediately begin to be afraid. Then it’s immediately block, marginalization, all the money down the drain. It is useless. (male, 55, political consultant)

Thus, administrative resources work like a narrow bottleneck through which only a few candidates manage to pass. But now the candidate has been registered and the active phase of the election campaign has begun.

## The Electoral Campaign

Each candidate has an election fund that can be used to pay for necessary expenses, such as printing leaflets, installing billboards, attracting agitators, or arranging meetings with voters. The size of the fund is determined by the level of the office and is differentiated regionally. Within limits, all candidates are formally equal in their quest to convince voters and win a well-deserved victory. But again, things are not so simple: Administrative resources also play a key role in determining the scale and effectiveness of the election campaign.

### *Consolidation of Money in the Election Fund*

Administrative resources can help or hinder the consolidation of funds for an election fund. It should be noted that in addition to the official election fund, there is a shadow fund; however, for simplicity, we will discuss the financial resources of a campaign collectively (Barsukova & Denisova-Schmidt, 2020; Barsukova & Zvyagintzev, 2006). Election finances are made up of party tranches and voluntary transfers to the candidate fund. There is almost always a shortage of party money (and in the case of single-mandate members, there is no money in principle). Where can the candidate get the missing money—and more precisely, from whom? The answer is obvious: From people who have money and, in particular, from businesses.

Through administrative pressure, the order of a “voluntary” donation can be brought to the attention of a business. Businesses cannot refuse such an order because they are strongly dependent on the authorities. In fact, they have a formal right to refuse, but they must be prepared for missed opportunities and all sorts of trouble (Barsukova & Denisova-Schmidt, 2022); this gives them the right to consider these extortions a form of informal taxation (Oleynik, 2008). Businesses pay “political dues” to avoid conflict with the authorities. This scheme works throughout the country, and the stronger the administrative pressure brought to bear on businesses in a particular region, the more effectively it operates.

Refusal to sponsor elections means excommunication from all forms of beneficial cooperation with the government, including government contracts and assignments, supplies to the state reserves system, and other tidbits. In addition, disloyalty is fraught with sanctions. Entrepreneurs understand this and do not show any pushback when they are asked by the authorities to provide financial assistance to a certain candidate.

Here, you are the power, and you say: “Come on, businessmen, come here. Contribute to my fund.” They credit you. In principle, this businessman can contribute to your opponent. But the transparency is high, they can see it. Accordingly, a

businessman will think three times before helping a competitor. (male, 49, political strategist)

The principle works: you fold, and then we will somehow try to compensate for this at the decision-making level. To be honest, I don't think it's a very good investment for business. But he is not left with a choice. (male, 54, businessman, member of the Legislative Assembly)

It is not always about pressure on business, however. Cooperation can be mutually beneficial, and the election can become a platform for the implementation of contractual schemes. Businesses may perceive an election as a "window of opportunity," bargaining for certain benefits with their sponsorship.

Is that how it works? For example, an entrepreneur needs a building plot. The governor is asking for ambulances in return. The guy delivered forty cars and got a building site. And the governor went out to the voters saying that he kept his word and set up the work of the ambulances so that they would continue to vote for him. (male, 59, businessman)

It is erroneous to think only the representatives of the party in power receive administrative support. Elections are a complexly organized dramaturgy, with an important role played by the so-called spoilers—the parties or candidates whose aim is not winning but taking votes away from strong opponents. For example, the Communists of Russia party is doing an excellent job of reducing the electoral results of the real, well-established Communist Party. Accordingly, administrative resources do not just "roll" rubles into the coffers of the ruling party.

And the same administrative resources stand, like a goalkeeper, in front of those candidates who should not win. For this reason, some entrepreneurs who decide to support a non-agreed candidate try to hide their sponsorship by channeling funds through shell companies or passing cash from hand to hand. However, the influence of administrative resources is not exhausted by finances alone.

### Media Support for Candidates

Administrative resources play a huge role in the media support of candidates. According to legislation, candidates are provided with a certain amount of free access to television and newspapers, all controlled by the state. Any other media presence is paid for from the electoral fund through the significant role of administrative resources.

Politicians who are already in power often appear regularly in the media anyway. Moreover, their media presence is not limited to the election campaign itself. Under the guise of informing the population about the work of the authorities, this latent phase of the election campaign is always being carried out. A position in the administrative hierarchy

can be converted into a massive presence in the mass media: *"Before the elections, the mayor did not disappear from the local channels; they constantly showed him meeting with the builders of the metro, with someone else."* (male, 36, political strategist)

Those with administrative resources can use budgetary money to create a positive image for themselves. There are many chances and opportunities for creativity here: *"Our governor handed out notebooks with his portrait to the students, and the children naturally took these notebooks home. They were handed out on September 1<sup>st</sup>, just in time for the elections"* (male, 52, human rights activist).

What is important is not only the quantitative dominance of the administrative leader in the media space, but also qualitative preferences: We are talking about a place in a broadcasting network or on the newspaper page. With administrative support, the campaign material receives the correct media frame: *"We had our own commissioner on the channel—this is a representative of the headquarters, who controlled all the content. If there is a story about a candidate, it should not be followed by a story about shooting dogs"* (male, 49, political strategist).

Loyalty and obedience to the mass media is bought by a completely legal method—a generous infusion of budget money, which is the pinnacle use of administrative resources: *"It is necessary to increase the circulation of domestic newspapers in advance, increase their budget funding, distribute some grants. The media space should be directed to the elections"* (male, 55, vice-governor).

The non-verbal reactions from our interlocutors—their gestures and facial expressions—are interesting in this regard. For example, a vice-governor tells us that some independent newspaper is the main source of information in the region. When asked to clarify if the newspaper is really independent, the official winks and says with a frank smile: *"Yes, much more independent."*

Administrative resources are used for the thematic organization of the media space. Repeatedly in interviews, the idea was voiced that it is possible to criticize the authorities on issues that are not key for the electorate. Sociological polls are used to rank problems. Cutting these problems allows the voting results not to be spoiled, and the entourage of political journalism to be preserved: *"Oppositional media should be given those topics on which you can get a minimum of votes. If the number one problem is unemployment, then you cannot give them this topic. If crime has a rating of 10, then let them raise the topic of crime"* (male, 53, employee of the regional administration).

By and large, a representative of the authorities can conduct an election campaign with almost no money: *"If there are administrative resources, then with a minimum of money, it is realistic to get a victory"* (male, 46, employee of the city administration, member of the election headquarters).

This is one of the paradoxes of election campaigns: The possession of administrative resources facilitates the concentration of finances for elections but reduces the need for them: *“We lay asphalt and notify about it. We are repairing the heating plant and again the plot on television. This, perhaps, is where administrative resources lie”* (female, 47, head of the PR service of the regional branch of the parliamentary party).

The efficacy of administrative resources is not limited to this, however.

### **Budget as a Tool for Victory**

Operating budgetary funds is an effective tool for electoral victories. It is possible to de facto pay for election campaigns from the funds of the federal, regional, or city budgets, which is then not reflected in the financial statements of a candidate or party.

In this regard, the line between “clean” and “dirty” money becomes very arbitrary. Budget money is a priori “clean”; its distribution takes place in full compliance with all formal procedures. However, the use of the budget distorts political competition, which marks this money as “dirty.”

If you are a governor, then in general, you can do everything through the budget. For example, you need to order a sociological study as part of an election campaign. Your competitor will go, say, to the sociology department of a local university and pay money. And if you are in power, then feed them with grants. They only need to register as an autonomous non-profit organization. From an accounting point of view, this will be pure money—but basically dirty. Why dirty? Because it is not competitive. This money cannot be received by a competitor. It is clean and dirty at the same time. (male, 49, political strategist)

Under the current mayor or governor are all the parts of the state system—from housing and communal services to universities. All live on budget money and, in the opinion of senior leaders, should make a feasible contribution to the reproduction of the system of power relations.

Students can be sent leaflets to hand out. If some sheep fights back, then this sheep is told that it is almost impossible to pass the exam in thermodynamics. (male, 45, political strategist, marketing)

At the expense of the budget, you can do a lot of good deeds then converted into votes. During the election campaign, you can paint benches, plant flower beds, repair playgrounds; all this will be paid for from the city budget. This method of veiled bargaining with voters is available mainly to United Russia, since officials from the executive power structures are, as a rule, from that party. There is a fine line, however: Paying from the budget means taking care of

people and out-of-pocket payments are vote buying. For repairing a playground with his own money, a candidate can be removed from the race through the use of the word “bribery.” This path is only open to those who have access to operating budget money.

Understanding the importance of administrative resources has led, in recent years, to Russia developing a standard algorithm for electing new governors. When a decision is made at the top to change the incumbent head of a region, about 6 months before the elections, the former governor resigns of his own free will and a new person takes his place as acting head. This acting governor will then be elected governor: He begins to manage the budgetary flows and the line between his official activity and his election campaign becomes blurred. The “approved” winner, in his acting role, gets access to administrative resources, which creates a powerful advantage over any competitors, if they arise.

You put a person on temporary duty as governor or mayor. He has such and such a budget, NGOs, universities, housing and communal services, transport ... By and large, these are all the resource base of his election campaign. (male, 49, political strategist)

One striking case is the situation in Primorsky Krai: In the fall of 2018, the gubernatorial elections were declared invalid due to the too aggressive use of administrative resources. New elections were scheduled for December of the same year. Oleg Kozhemyako was urgently transferred to the region, having been appointed as acting governor of Primorsky Krai. He had only 2 months before the election, and he made good use of them:

Pink salmon, which for many years has been more expensive for us than in Moscow, with the advent of Kozhemyako as acting, fell in price from 170 to 110 Rubles [~2,27 to 1,47 USD] and began to be sold with the inscription “Primorsk fish should be accessible” and the signature “Oleg Kozhemyako.” He also allocated some money to the children of the war. These are people born before 1945. There are not many of them left, but nevertheless, they always said that there was no money. And Kozhemyako, having become acting, said to find this money. And it was found. (female, 52, chair of the precinct election commission)

This ability to rely on administrative resources leads to political strategists being able to work almost alone, with a minimal team. In fact, all city or regional administrations become the organizational units of the election campaign.

Let’s separate right now. There are campaigns from the authorities and there are campaigns not from the authorities. They are completely different organizational models. If you are from power, then the structures of the administration become the

technological structures of the election campaign. STRC [the State TV and Radio Company] is your back office on television. Journalists are your writers. Janitors are your leaflet distributors. Basically, you don't need anything. You come, become the ideologist of the campaign, and simply cut tasks for different services. And if you don't work for the authorities, then there should be a full set of specialists, which requires a large electoral fund. (male, 49, political strategist)

### *Campaigning, Meetings with Voters*

To reach the voter, candidates need to put up leaflets, organize meetings, install campaign billboards, and so on. Any of these channels can be easily squeezed by a call from above. The quest begins with the creation of leaflets, billboards, and other campaign materials.

The games begin: Some candidates are denied printing services. They have to print in neighboring regions. By law, all printing houses must be accredited, which means that they have leverage. They say directly: If you print leaflets for such and such a candidate, then you will not have state support, state orders will pass by. And printing houses refuse undesirable candidates. The money is small from one candidate, and it is unprofitable to lose the state order. (male, 52, human rights activist)

Even if an objectionable candidate has overcome the administrative block and printed leaflets, their distribution can be complicated by administrative means. Shop assistants will not be allowed to leave campaign materials, while posters of the "right candidate" will be hung in the most visible places. Concierges, warned by the heads of the housing departments, will throw unwanted leaflets in the garbage chute.

Leaflets are not only posted, but they can also be torn down. Political strategists talk about cleansing brigades whose task is to rip down the campaign posters of competitors—a crude but effective method to extinguish the information presence of the enemy. Here, administrative resources come in handy to the fullest:

Basically, the party in power abuses this. Because it has such resources that these brigades work, in fact, under the auspices of the police. At the right time, police squads simply do not pop into the areas where these brigades operate. (male, 37, political strategist)

Venues for meeting with voters are also under the control of the administration. Freely available city halls, theaters, and schools do not exist; they are subordinate to the departments of culture or education. And if they are privately owned, then the entrepreneur has no reason to quarrel with the administration that issues licenses and arranges inspections. As a result, cultural and educational facilities

provide their venues very selectively for meetings between candidates and voters.

What do administrative resources allow you to do? They allow you to enter controlled organizations. These are municipal institutions, large enterprises, which, as a rule, will not refuse administrative bodies. (male, 46, political strategist)

If you are undesirable in the political field, then there will always be a reason to refuse you:

We were not even allowed into private taverns when we wanted to organize a meeting with our candidate. Even private traders shied away from us so as not to spoil relations with the administration. It was generally a bummer. We held a meeting with our candidate in a children's center, among toys and children. (male, 37, political strategist)

Difficulties in organizing meetings with voters when an administrative block is on a candidate were recognized by all political technologists without exception. There was no significant difference between budgetary organizations and private enterprises. Nobody wants to get in trouble:

What are administrative resources? You call the company, say that you need a meeting, and they arrange it for you. And vice versa, one call from you and your competitor's meeting is canceled. (male, 39, political strategist, journalist)

In one story from the interviews, an employee of the administration, who was sent to a rural area to inspect preparations for the elections, brought bad news: An announcement was hanging in the village council that a meeting with a communist candidate was scheduled in front of the city hall. Immediately, the regional administration called and explained to the head of the municipality that he was wrong:

Everything is simple, without frills. They [the regional administration] yelled so hard that the president's portrait almost fell off the wall. Fuck! Whatever you want to do! At least arrange a tractor rally on the square. In short, we recaptured the square. (male, 59, employee of the regional administration)

Candidate debates are sometimes rehearsed. The effect of this is especially noticeable if it is broadcast on local television. Here, administrative resources come in handy: One candidate may be surprised by the host's questions, while another, by some chance, turns out to be perfectly prepared:

It was just obvious that there were prepared questions that some of the candidates were introduced to in advance so that they could answer convincingly. (female, 49, campaign accountant).

As a result, one candidate gains the approval of the audience, while the other does not. There were many examples in our interviews. An employee of the regional administration humorously told us how they arranged uninterrupted songs and dances in the square in front of the regional government building in order to keep political competitors out; only the right parties and agreed candidates were scheduled during these busy periods. Day after day, the square was again occupied by folklore groups or a competition for drawings on asphalt.

A special issue is campaign access to schools. Of course, the children are not campaigning, but they have parents. Here, administrative resources also play a decisive role. The situation is similar with agitation in hospitals, libraries (candidates with administrative backing can meet with any group, while “unauthorized candidates” cannot) and so on:

Teachers, doctors... Come wherever you want. Why not win? You go, everything will be organized for you. And we penetrate everywhere with a fight. You come somewhere to a parent meeting; the meeting is immediately dispersed. (male, 41, deputy of the Legislative Assembly from the Communist Party of the Russian Federation)

The deputy director of a school spoke about her experience allowing a deputy from the Communist Party to speak to the parents. She was saved from the wrath of the administration only with a fiery speech that allowed her to disavow the candidate. Since few teachers are capable of this, it is generally better not to take risks and let unwanted candidates through the door.

Finally, the most important component of administrative resources is the use of state employees as a campaign team—for free. This practice mostly involves schoolteachers; its intensity varies by locality, but the general attitude is that, as one regional minister said, “*a teacher is a person who speaks, so let him say what is needed.*”

It should be noted that the degree to which these administrative resources practices are, on the one hand, “top-down” directed manipulations by those in positions of authority, or, on the other hand, some sort of voluntarist and anticipatory behavior by individuals very much closer to ground is balancing to some extent. For example, our study outcomes suggest one case when a printing house entered into an agreement to produce campaign materials for an opposition candidate. Formally, it was a proper deal. In response, the authorities used their positions: The printing house began to be inspected for compliance with fire safety requirements, and of course, violations were found. The management of the printing house showed shrewdness and terminated their contract with the candidate, whereupon the fire department’s claims also ceased. The story went viral within the industry. Other printing houses drew conclusions and behaved as expected of them. The candidate was forced to print campaign materials in a neighboring region. Several

points are important in this case: The authorities did not directly order the termination of the contract with the candidate. Printers were expected to be resourceful. Anyone who did not understand the hints was punished. Formally, the punishment was not related to the election itself, but to fire safety requirements. Such situations create a grassroots desire to demonstrate correct behavior and take initiative. Pressure from above stimulates initiative from below.

### *Power Cover and Judicial Support*

In a contested struggle, tough methods can be used, up to and including forceful pressure on the competitors. The most important advantage of those with administrative resources on their side is the favor of law enforcement agencies and the loyalty of the courts:

When Gaiser was the head of Komi, I worked for A Just Russia, that is, against them. And what a skating rink of administrative resources Gaiser has, I learned in full. The physical hitting of jeeps on picketers—they allowed themselves such techniques. Absolutely with impunity. (male, 58, political strategist, head of a PR agency)

Pro-government candidates, with advantages on a large number of grounds, also have the opportunity to conduct a more aggressive and creative campaign using the loyalty of the judiciary. For everyone else, any creative deviation from conservative campaigning methods is fraught with legal risks, as the courts are mobilized to block unwanted applicants. Actions that are ambiguous from the point of view of legislation, such as holding a lottery, presenting gifts, are immediately used as a reason for withdrawing from the race.

It is always a very debatable issue where propaganda and printed materials end and material values begin. I know cases in which people were disqualified for calendar cards. The fact that the price is 5 rubles [~0.04 USD] does not interest anyone. And I know reverse examples, when people were given network receivers that are plugged into a socket worth 300 rubles [~4 USD]. I personally filed a lawsuit against such a competitor. And the court recognized it as propaganda material. (male, 46, political strategist, journalist)

In the course of the campaign, they can easily be removed for any wrong move. If there is a task to shoot, then they shoot by any means. (male, 35, political strategist, lawyer)

Even if a candidate has almost reached the voting day, there is always an opportunity to take emergency measures at the last moment with the help of administrative resources:

In my elections in 2014, the candidate was clearly going to win. In the last days, an order came from Moscow: He [the candidate] should not be there [on the list], since he has a serious

tax record. So, while they [authorities] thought that he would lose, they turned a blind eye to this, let him in as an extra. And as soon as victory loomed, they immediately removed him. They did not even have time to change the ballot papers, they were already printed. He was simply deleted by hand. People saw this mess, turned around and left and someone stubbornly entered his last name. (male, 46, political strategist, journalist)

The removal of candidates who suddenly loomed victorious can occur with amazing ingenuity. In one interview, our interview partner talked about removing a school director, who had been nominated by the Communist Party, from a race. In the midst of the elections, when it was clear she would win, the director was falsely accused of being a member of United Russia. In another story from the interviews, the contender for the post of governor was removed from the second round of elections because one of the products of his enterprise had fallen in price by a few kopecks, which the court considered to be bribery of the voters. Though he argued that as chairman of the board of directors, he was not involved in the direct price setting, the elections were over.

In order to ensure the victory of our governor, his main competitor was removed from the elections on a far-fetched pretext. As if he was either selling milk or ice cream at reduced prices. All! Voter bribing! They removed him. (male, 59, employee of the regional administration)

Administrative resources have turned the heads of some party functionaries so much that they have begun to think about how to do without political technologists:

At some point in the leadership of United Russia there was an idea from a peasant who was involved in the elections, so that the party members would conduct elections without any outside firms. This is stupidity. All over the world, even strong parties invite professionals to electoral campaigns. (male, 58, political strategist, head of a PR agency)

What was called “stupidity” in the interview is evidence of self-confidence, due to the possession of administrative resources.

## Study Limitations and Conclusion

This article has three substantive limitations. First, only events that happened before voting days have been discussed. Manipulation of the ballot boxes, the counting of votes, and the filling out of protocols have not been considered. Second, we have not discussed whether administrative resources are omnipotent. If this question haunts, then let us briefly note that administrative capital is not omnipotent, and its effectiveness largely depends on the region and level of elections. Under a certain set of

circumstances (the duration of the campaign, the personality of the candidate, the amount of financial costs, and the contradictions between interest groups), it is possible to achieve an electoral victory in some regions without administrative support (Barsukova & Levin, 2020). The third limitation of this article is our refusal to discuss the dynamics of the intensity and efficiency of the use of administrative resources in post-Soviet Russia. This is an extremely important topic, but beyond the scope of this discussion.

Administrative resources are a set of specific and proven techniques that provide an electoral result planned in advance by the power elite. The repertoire of techniques depends on the situation in a particular region, on the feasibility and the resources available. The ways in which these resources work at the stages of nominating candidates and conducting election campaigns need to be considered in more detail. It is therefore a mistake to reduce the actions of administrative resources to falsifications during the counting of votes. Administrative resources filter the candidates at the entrance to the electoral space and then create unequal chances for the effective organization of an election campaign. In other words, first, they do not allow those who are objectionable into the elections, and then, for those who were still able to break through, they create obviously losing conditions. This also applies to the ability to concentrate finances, ensure a presence in the media and organize meetings with voters. Intervening during the counting of votes is only used as a last resort. Ideally, if administrative resources have competently worked in their tasks in the early stages, then the votes can and should be counted honestly. The results will be the proof.

Moreover, the issue of self-censorship on the ground in anticipation of currying official favor (or avoiding official disfavor) is important. Once the die is cast in these sorts of regimes, actors on the ground respond to the stated incentives/disincentives and wind up doing the regime’s bidding. This phenomenon both reduces the cost of electoral control for the regime and makes the actors complicit in the game, which has its own psychological tool. Political strategists have noted that electoral results in Russia serve not only as a basis for distributing parliamentary mandates and electing leaders, but also as an important signaling function. Mayors signal to governors the loyalty of city residents. Governors signal to the center that the population in the regions is loyal to the current government. “Signalling logic” pervades elections at all levels of government. According to a political strategist, “*We have Putin’s election as an export commodity. It is not directed inward, but outward. It is a signal to the world that his power is solid*” (male, 58, political strategist). For the signal to be heard, it needs to be loud, impressive. That is why it is important for the ruling party not just to ensure victory, but also to outshine other regions. Political technologists refer to this kind of unspoken

competition between governors with the joking slogan “Catch up and outdo Chechnya!”<sup>10</sup>

An analysis of electoral practices in modern Russia shows that the control of election campaigns by the ruling elite is almost total. The nationalization of politics has led to people losing faith in their ability to influence the situation through elections. This affects voter turnout as well as the legitimacy of power. Moreover, after February 24, 2022, electoral integrity is no longer the top priority. In this situation, the use of administrative resources during elections is not completely legitimized; however, the attitude toward it has become more indifferent. People accept that certain measures may be necessary to strengthen the “vertical of power” and keep the economy in a normal state. If only there was no mass mobilization, if only everything would end as quickly as possible. Due to ongoing geopolitical tensions, the authorities receive carte blanche.

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### Notes

1. More studies can be found within the context of “The Electoral Integrity Project” <https://www.electoralintegrityproject.com/>.
2. We guaranteed the anonymity of our respondents. Any audio recordings of the interviews have been destroyed and the printed transcripts are stored in the safe place.
3. The State Duma of the Russian Federation was elected by a proportional system from 2007 to 2011; after that, they returned to a *hybrid* of proportional and majoritarian systems. The composition of the regional legislatures is determined at the regional level. Most subject territories of the Russian Federation have a mixed system of elections to their regional parliaments, while some adhere exclusively to the proportional system, such as Chechnya or Dagestan.
4. In interviews, such candidates are often referred to as “*samohod*” or “*samodvig*”; “*iditi samodvigon*” means to run as a self-nominated candidate (Barsukova & Denisova-Schmidt, 2023).
5. The letters “e” and “ë” are independent in the Cyril alphabet, although “e” could cover both “e” and “ë”.
6. The abbreviations “g.” and “gor.” can both stand for the Russian word “gorod” (city, town), referring here to the signer’s place of birth.

7. Referring to Vladimir Zhirinovskiy (1946–2022), the leader of Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR), one of the leading parties in Russia, established in 1992.
8. The Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF, the party with a long history and tradition) versus the Communists of Russia (KPSS, spoilers).
9. September 1: The Day of Knowledge, the first day of school (including vocational and higher education institutions) throughout Russia.
10. An allusion to a very famous statement made by Nikita Khrushchev “Catch up and outdo America!” Voter turnout in Chechnya is often close to 100%.

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