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# **FACTORS OF COMPETITIVENESS IN RUSSIAN GUBERNATORIAL ELECTIONS, 2012-2018**



## ABSTRACT

Recently, the Russian regions have attracted a lot of experts' attention. In light of stagnating economy, public dissatisfaction with the federal policies has become particularly pronounced in the regions (which tend to be poorer than Moscow), as demonstrated by Kremlin's failures to elect several of its candidates to the positions of regional governors in 2018. Will the Kremlin's failures at the regional level continue this year? To answer this question, we carry out a qualitative and quantitative analysis of factors that have contributed to victories by the pro-Kremlin candidates in gubernatorial elections that took place in 2012-2018. The regression analysis based on the data regarding these elections shows that the percentage of the vote gained by the pro-Kremlin candidates positively correlates with a higher turnout (which can point to a higher possibility of election fraud) and the support for Vladimir Putin in the most recent presidential election. The key finding of our analysis is the correlation between the dynamics of real disposable incomes and the voting for the pro-Kremlin candidates, which hasn't been earlier registered by similar studies. As social and economic situation in Russia continues to deteriorate, this correlation can be expected to become increasingly stronger. The results of our analysis suggest that the population's declining real incomes can lead to a substantial increase in electoral risks facing the Kremlin at the regional level.

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## REGIONAL ELECTIONS IN RUSSIA: WHY ARE THEY IMPORTANT?

### **The situation in Russian regions is of the utmost interest to political analysts and pollsters.**

First of all, the Russian regional politics is an interesting subject for a comparative study. Many essential factors influencing the political processes—such as history, the similarities between political institutions, ideological and historical legacy—are found to be constant when it comes to the regions, while there is a considerable variation of political regimes at the subnational level (Panov, Ross, 2013; Titkov, 2014; Sharafutdinova, 2015). The combination of these two factors provides a large potential for a study.

Second, regional dynamics often mirror federal processes, and in some cases even anticipate them. Research shows that it was the turn toward authoritarian practices on the regional level that reinforced the nationwide trend of tightening control over political processes (Golosov 2011; Demchenko, Golosov, 2016).

Third, a considerable number of Russian regions (at the time of the publication of this report, 75 subjects of the Federation with direct gubernatorial elections, including republics, territories, regions, federal cities, an autonomous region, and autonomous districts) provide sufficient data to carry out a statistical analysis.

And, finally, Moscow, which is today essentially overflowing with money, presents no particular interest for the study of political processes. According to Natalya Zubarevich, one Russia's leading specialists in economic geography, in 2016, Moscow accounted for a quarter of all income tax revenues in the budgets of the subjects of the Russian Federation, and in the first half of 2017, this number reached 28 percent. Also in the latter period, Moscow accounted for 20 percent of the revenues of the consolidated budget of all subjects of the Russian Federation—that is, one in five rubles.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, the situation in the regions is becoming increasingly challenging due to the economic stagnation and a series of decisions by the federal government that shifted the responsibility for executing presidential decrees on wage increases to the regional level.<sup>2</sup> Such dynamics will likely lead to destabilization at the regional level rather than in Moscow.

These reasons informed the authors' interest in these topics.

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1 Zubarevich, N. "How Sobyanin's Moscow is different from Luzhkov's Moscow" (In Russian: «Чем Москва Собянина отличается от Москвы Лужкова»), *Vedomosti*, October 27, 2017. Accessed January 31, 2019 (subscription required) <https://www.vedomosti.ru/opinion/articles/2017/10/27/739584-moskva-luzhkova-sobyanina>. [Accessed on March 5, 2019].

2 Zubarevich, N. "Lessons of the Budget Economizing" (In Russian: «Уроки бюджетной экономии»), *Vedomosti*, April 20, 2016. Accessed January 31, 2019 (subscription required) [Accessed on March 5, 2019] <https://www.vedomosti.ru/opinion/articles/2016/04/11/637124-uroki-byudzhetnoi-ekonomii>.

## KEY CRITERIA OF GUBERNATORIAL ELECTIONS: HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

**The elections of regional leaders (governors) known as “senior government officials of the subjects of the Russian Federation,” were introduced in 1991. However, they had become nationwide only in 1996 and then were abolished in January 2005**

From 2005 to 2011, regional leaders (whose offices are called differently in different parts of Russia) were appointed by legislative (representational) bodies of the subjects of the Russian Federation upon the recommendation of the Russian president.

In 2012, on President Dmitri Medvedev’s initiative, a law was passed reinstating direct gubernatorial elections. However, in 2013, now on President Vladimir Putin’s initiative, amendments were made to this law allowing the regions to replace direct gubernatorial elections with votes in regional legislatures. According to the new procedure, Russia’s president chooses three candidates from the list put forward by the parties represented in the regional and federal parliaments. After that, one of these candidates is elected by the regional legislature.

In 2013, four republics of Russia’s North Caucasus (Dagestan, Ingushetia, Karachay-Cherkessia, and North Ossetia) abolished direct gubernatorial elections. In 2014, Kabardino-Balkaria and two new subjects of the Russian Federation—the Republic of Crimea and the city of Sebastopol—exercised this right (Sevastopol later backed down from this decision), as did three autonomous districts incorporated into regions (the Nenets, Khanty-Mansiysk, and Yamalo-Nenets autonomous districts). In 2016, direct elections were abolished in Adygea. Thus, 10 out of 85 subjects of the Russian Federation do not hold direct gubernatorial elections.

Overall, from 2012 to 2018, 109 direct gubernatorial election campaigns were held in Russia. In 32 regions they were held twice, and in the Amur region thrice. Such a high number of elections over a relatively short period is explained by the fact that, despite having been elected by a popular vote, the governors often resigned or were dismissed early. The Russian president then would appoint interim governors—oftentimes, they were the same people who had just left office. In some cases, when the incumbent regional leaders were appointed as interim governors due to the expiration of the president’s term of office, they had to go through the procedure of a direct vote on the country’s earliest nationwide election day.

These factors illuminate why almost a third of all elections (32 out of 109, or 29.4 percent, according to Russia’s Central Election Commission <sup>3</sup>) were officially considered early elections. They also explain why among all the candidates from the ruling party—usually United Russia members—96 were interim governors and only 13 were acting regional leaders.

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<sup>3</sup> Official website of the Central Electoral Commission of the Russian Federation: [www.cikrf.ru](http://www.cikrf.ru) [Accessed on March 5, 2019].

Table 1. Dynamics of gubernatorial elections, 2012-2018

Election Date	Number of Direct Elections	Including Early Elections
14.10.12	5	0
08.09.13	8	0
14.09.14	30	8
13.09.15	21	8
18.09.16	7	2
10.09.17	16	5
09.09.18	22	9
<b>Total</b>	<b>109</b>	<b>32</b>

Between 2012 and 2018, four or five candidates usually participated in the elections (on average, 4.6 candidates). The 2012 Bryansk gubernatorial election saw the minimum number of candidates—two; while the gubernatorial elections in the Vladimir region (2013), the Nizhny Novgorod region (2014), and the Ulyanovsk region (2016) had the maximum number of participants—seven. Six or more candidates ran in only 12 elections.

Table 2. Breakdown of the regions by the number of candidates in gubernatorial elections, 2012-2018

N°	Number of Candidates	Number of Elections
1	3 or fewer	9
2	4	44
3	5	44
4	6 or more	12
	<b>Total</b>	<b>109</b>

A low voter turnout (on average, 44.2 percent) was typical for this period, including 2016 when gubernatorial and parliamentary elections were held on the same day, and the average turnout reached 57.5 percent. The average year-over-year turnout never exceeded 50 percent unless regional and federal elections were held simultaneously. The lowest turnout (21.0 percent) was registered at the 2015 elections in the Arkhangelsk region, while the Kemerovo region showed the highest turnout of 92.1 percent that same year. Meanwhile, the Chechen republic accounted for the record high turnout (94.8 percent) during the 2016 gubernatorial election, which was, notably, held on the same day as the State Duma election.

In terms of annual characteristics of gubernatorial elections, the 2018 vote showcased the lowest average result of a winner—only 63.8 percent, excluding the repeat voting (the average over the seven-year period being 72.1 percent). The regional leaders' faltering campaigns are often to blame for this low number: in Khakassia and the Khabarovsk territories the incumbent governors came second in the electoral race.

The average numbers are largely determined by the selection of regions that held elections in the given year. However, the 2018 nationwide factor of the pension reform—initiated and pushed by the government, but unpopular among voters—heavily influenced the elections resulting in disappointing numbers for the winners.

Table 3. Average results during gubernatorial elections, 2012-2018

N°	Election Date	Gubernatorial Election	Number of Candidates	Turnout, %	Result, %
1	14.10.12	5	3,4	45,9	72,1
2	08.09.13	8	5,0	37,9	69,6
3	14.09.14	30	4,6	45,6	77,3
4	13.09.15	21	4,7	45,6	71,8
5	18.09.16	7	4,4	57,5	73,0
6	10.09.17	16	4,5	40,6	74,8
7	09.09.18	22	4,6	41,3	63,8
	<b>Total</b>	<b>109</b>	<b>4,6</b>	<b>44,2</b>	<b>72,1</b>

## COMPETITIVENESS IN REGIONAL ELECTIONS

**Researchers have become increasingly interested in running election diagnostics at the subnational level and thus evaluating election competitiveness (Skovoroda, Lankina, 2017; Moraski, 2017).**

Experts mostly agree in their evaluation of the competitiveness level in gubernatorial elections from 2012 to 2017, which they view as low.<sup>4</sup> For example, the September 9, 2018 elections were largely expected to be noncompetitive. In its August 2018 outlook for the 2018 campaigns the Foundation for Civil Society Development (FCSD) concluded that these elections would be one-party dominant and anticipated an even further decline in competitiveness. “Competitive scenarios are doomed to serve as exceptions to the rule, as they are predetermined, for example, by [such factors as] unresolved intraregional conflicts, intrigues against specific governors, and mistakes by campaign teams. Still, [analysts] have accumulated considerable experience of ‘early detection’ of such threats over the last six years. Additionally, a clear understanding has emerged that an artificial promotion of competitiveness is pointless and even destructive, [which is why] there were no exceptions to the rule in both [2017] and [2018]” (FCSD, 2018).

Some analysts foresaw the likelihood of runoffs in certain regions, but incumbent regional leaders were projected to be re-elected nonetheless. The FCSD report did mention that some incumbent regional leaders (e.g. governors of Khakassia and the Vladimir region) might face difficulties, such as lower-than-expected results, but the possibility of a runoff was not envisaged (FCSD, 2018). In a commentary about the September 9, 2018 election, Gleb Kuznetsov, head of the expert council at the Expert Institute of Social Studies (EISS), flagged the issues facing incumbent governors of the Khabarovsk territory, the Amur and the Vladimir regions, which, in turn, could have resulted in “all sorts of sensations” given that United Russia’s poll standings would not be at their highest anymore.<sup>5</sup> And Public Opinion Foundation’s lead analyst Grigory Kertman theorized potential runoffs in Khakassia, the Khabarovsk territory, and the Vladimir region.<sup>6</sup>

On the election day, these three regions had an unexpected fourth addition—the Primorye territory—that had not been previously identified by pollsters and political analysts alike as having a potential for a runoff.

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4 Some political analysts believe that in the absence of competitiveness—when the winner is known beforehand,—one cannot call such voting “elections” but rather a procedure to formalize a de facto appointment (for example, Kynev, Lyubaryov, Maksimov, 2017). Others believe that noncompetitive elections represent a specific type of elections called “plebiscite” or “dominant-party elections,” whose the electoral nature cannot be challenged (see, for example: The Foundation for Civil Society Development, 2017).

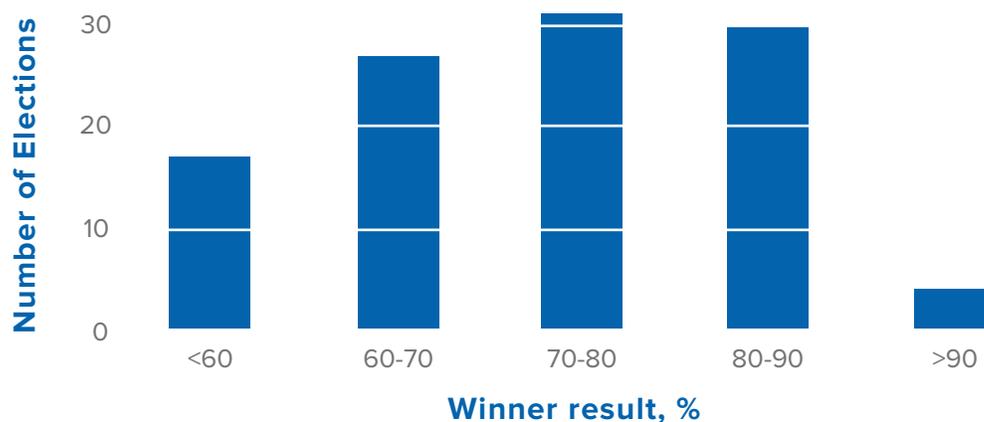
5 Guryanov, S. The regions that have the toughest conditions for the acting leaders’ electoral campaigns have been named (in Russian: «Названы регионы с самыми трудными условиями для кампаний врио глав регионов»). *Vzglyad*, September 3, 2018. <https://vz.ru/news/2018/9/3/940214.html> [Accessed on March 6, 2019].

6 Unlike pollsters, some political analysts had admitted the possibility of a runoff, but only in Khakassia. There is a lack of trust in pollsters likely triggered by their faulty predictions regarding the September 2017 elections, in which they had anticipated the runoffs in three regions—Karelia, the Tomsk and the Sverdlovsk regions. In reality, the incumbent regional leaders of these regions managed to receive over 60 percent of the vote, although these were the lowest results in the country. See: Mukhametshina, E. Pollsters do not rule out runoffs in gubernatorial elections in three regions (in Russian: «Социологи не исключают проведения второго тура на губернаторских выборах в трех регионах»). *Vedomosti*, September 3, 2018. <https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/articles/2018/09/03/779764-sotsiologi-ne-isklyuchayut> [Accessed on March 6, 2019].

In the remaining 18 regions, the September 9 elections resulted, unsurprisingly, in the victory of the incumbent governors, some of whom had been appointed as interim regional leaders by the Russian president. In the Altai territory, the Amur region, and the Chukotka autonomous district, the Kremlin-supported candidates received less than 60 percent of the vote.

Figure 1 below shows the collective results of the winners in gubernatorial races from 2012 to 2018. With the winners' average performance reaching 72.1 percent, the results varied greatly from one region to another.

Figure 1. The breakdown of gubernatorial elections according to the winners' results



In 17 regions, the winners in gubernatorial races received less than 60 percent of the vote. It is noteworthy that over the period of 2012-2017, there were only ten elections yielding similar results, and as many as seven in 2018 only. Such results were shown in 16 regions: the Amur region held competitive elections twice—in 2015 and 2018.

In our opinion, a winner's result below 60 percent of the vote points to electoral competitiveness. This formal criterion was first introduced by political scientist Alexander Kynev in his work titled "Depersonalization of Regions. Electoral Machines under External Management" (2018).<sup>7</sup> The selection of competitive regions according to this criterion fully matches the lists of the regions compiled on the basis of different, informal criteria. For instance, in its assessment of the 2012-2017 electoral period, the 2018 FCSD report<sup>8</sup> ("the results of the ruling party's candidates out to be much lower than expected") registers competitive elections in the same ten regions that we have identified in our analysis under the criterion of "below 60 percent result." In other words, there is corroborating evidence supporting our proposition that if the ruling party's candidates receive less than 60 percent of the vote at the regional elections, such elections can be seen as competitive. Still, we are mindful of the fact that similar results in different regions can point to various levels of electoral competitiveness.

7 Kynev, A. Depersonalization of the regions (in Russian: «Деперсонализация регионов. Электоральные машины под внешним управлением»). In Liberty, April 27, 2018 <https://www.inliberty.ru/article/regime-kynev/> [Accessed on March 6, 2019].

8 Official website of the Foundation for the Civil Society Development: "Political studies: Overview of the campaigns to elect top level officials, 2018" (in Russian: «Политические исследования: Обзор кампаний по выборам ВДЛ – 2018»). August 29, 2018. <http://civilfund.ru/mat/view/107> [Accessed on March 6, 2019].

## FACTORS OF COMPETITIVENESS IN REGIONAL ELECTIONS

**We have identified several factors that media commentators and political analysts often rely on to predict the level of electoral competitiveness in the Russian regions. We have also assessed these factors using the qualitative and regression analysis. The results are summarized below.**

### TURNOUT

Voter turnout is one of the most oft-cited factors that experts use in their analysis. There are, however, disagreements among experts as to whether or not the authorities benefit from a high turnout. On the one hand, in today's Russia a high turnout generally translates into a higher number of votes cast for pro-Kremlin candidates. If that's the case, the turnout numbers within a region would be, as a rule, distributed unevenly: some polling stations would visibly stand out due to unusually high turnout compared to the rest. Such distribution can be observed when the vote share of the Kremlin-favored candidate is artificially inflated (i.e. through ballot-stuffing). This is typical of the so-called "electoral sultanates"—the regions that have become infamous for their abnormally high turnout: Kabardino-Balkaria, Chechnya, Dagestan, Karachay-Cherkessia, and Tatarstan.<sup>9</sup>

On the other hand, a rising public discontent with the government can cancel out the high turnout effect. For example, independent observers already help prevent mass electoral fraud, while protest sentiments mobilize pro-opposition voting. As a result, the connection between the vote share of the pro-Kremlin candidate and the government might have a parabolic shape. Political analyst Grigory Golosov believes that the optimal turnout for the Kremlin is between 52 and 55 percent. "When voter turnout exceeds this threshold, the voting is affected by people who come to express their opposition views. With a low turnout of about 40 percent, the share of votes for the candidates from the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR) and the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF) increases. These parties enjoy a limited but stable support [among Russians]; their voters are mobilized. More people will vote for candidates without niche support, if there is a very high turnout."<sup>10</sup>

In the *Table 4* below we present data on voter turnout and the number of candidates in regional elections where the pro-Kremlin candidates received less than 60 percent of the vote.

Correlation coefficients in this quantitative measurement reveal a positive connection between the turnout and the winner's result: the higher the turnout, the higher the result. However, this correlation is neither functional nor universal. Comparative analysis of average performances in competitive elections in these regions and the numbers for all the elections held during the examined period shows that, at the mean, a similar number of candidates (4.6) participated in all types of the elections while noting a slightly lower turnout (39.0 percent against 44.9 percent) for the competitive elections. Still, these factors can hardly be used as criteria of electoral competitiveness.

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9 Oreshkin, D. Regime of the electoral sultanates (In Russian: «Режим электоральных султанатов»). New Times, June 5, 2017 <https://newtimes.ru/articles/detail/116429/> [Accessed on March 6, 2019].

10 Klochkova, K. Who benefits from the low turnout (in Russian: «Кому выгодно высокая или низкая явка»). Fontanka.ru, January 31, 2018 <https://www.fontanka.ru/2018/01/31/029/> [Accessed on March 6, 2019].

## Factors of competitiveness in Russian gubernatorial elections, 2012-2018

Table 4. Key data on gubernatorial elections where the winners received less than 60 percent of the vote.

N°	Subject of the Russian Federation	Election Date	Name of the winner	Nominated by	Turnout (percent)	Number of candidates	Result (percent)
1	City of Moscow	9/8/2013	Sergei Sobyanin	Self-nomination	32,1	6	51,4
2	Altai Republic	9/14/2014	Alexander Berdnikov	United Russia	54,2	4	50,6
3	Republic of Sakha (Yakutia)	9/14/2014	Yegor Borisov	United Russia	52,7	5	58,8
4	Mari El Republic	9/13/2015	Leonid Markelov	United Russia	47,1	5	50,8
5	Amur region	9/13/2015.	Alexander Kozlov	United Russia	33,5	4	50,6
6	Arkhangelsk region	9/13/2015	Igor Orlov	United Russia	21,0	5	53,3
7	Irkutsk region	9/13/2015	Sergei Yeroshchenko	United Russia	29,2	4	49,6
		9/27/2015	Sergei Levchenko	The Communist Party	37,2	2	56,4
8	Omsk region	9/13/2015	Viktor Nazarov	United Russia	33,8	5	60,0
9	Zabaikal territory	9/18/2016	Natalia Zhdanova	United Russia	37,4	4	54,4
10	Ulyanovsk region	9/18/2016	Sergei Morozov	United Russia	52,3	7	54,3
11	Republic of Khakassia (three repeat election results canceled)	09.09.18	Valentin Konovalov	The Communist Party	41,9	4	44,8
		11.11.18	Valentin Konovalov	The Communist Party	45,7	1	57,6
12	Altai territory	9/9/2018	Viktor Tomenko	United Russia	37,3	4	53,6
13	Primorye territory (first election results canceled, repeat election held)	09.09.18	Andrei Tarasenko	United Russia	30,2	5	46,6
		23.09.18	Andrei Tarasenko	United Russia	35,4	2	49,6
14	Khabarovsk territory	09.09.18	Sergei Furgal	LDPR	36,1	5	35,8
		23.09.18	Sergei Furgal	LDPR	47,5	2	69,6
15	Amur region	9/9/2018.	Vassily Orlov	United Russia	31,3	4	55,6
16	Vladimir region	9/9/2018	Svetlana Orlova	United Russia	32,9	4	36,4
		9/23/2018	Vladimir Sipyagin	LDPR	38,3	2	57,0
17	Chukotka autonomous district	9/9/2018	Roman Kopin	United Russia	60,2	4	57,8
<b>Average (in main elections)</b>					<b>39,0</b>		<b>4,6</b>

For example, in some cases, the winner can receive a large portion of the vote despite a low turnout, as happened in 2013 in the Vladimir region where, running against six other candidates in her first gubernatorial election, an interim governor Svetlana Orlova gained 74.7 percent of the vote on a 28.5 percent voter turnout. In other cases, a reverse connection can be observed, as it happened in the Altai Republic where a long-serving governor Alexander Berdnikov, who had been appointed the interim governor prior to the election, received only 50.6 percent of the vote on a 54.2 percent turnout.

We therefore suggest the following hypothesis:

***Hypothesis 1: The support for the candidate from the ruling party is positively correlated with voter turnout.***

## NUMBER OF CANDIDATES

**The relation between the results of pro-Kremlin candidates and the number of candidates allowed to run in the elections is another interesting factor pertinent to our analysis.**

According to a report by the Liberal Mission Foundation, the September 2018 regional election campaign was marked by a record number of candidates and party lists removed from the race for offices in regional legislatures and capital city councils by court decisions based on the requests from their opponents.

<sup>11</sup> The persistence of the authorities' efforts to eliminate unwanted candidates from the ballot suggests that a large number of participants undermines the chances of a pro-Kremlin candidate.

However, according to Alexander Kynev, the Kremlin's strategy of allowing "external" candidates to participate in the race depends on the round of voting. The presence of "too many candidates" in the first round "increases the chances for a runoff, and a runoff means defeat [for the Kremlin]. There is no need for unwanted candidates in the first round. The number of votes received by each candidate is thus diluted, including that of a frontrunner. If there is just one round, more candidates are needed."<sup>12</sup>

Since our analysis is primarily focused on the assessment of the results of the pro-Kremlin candidates in the first round of voting, we put forward the following assumption:

***Hypothesis 2: The support for a candidate from the ruling party is negatively correlated with the number of candidates allowed to run in the election.***

Table 4 shows the data on the number of registered candidates on the ballot. Calculating basic correlation with the result of the pro-Kremlin candidate gives us the result of zero. The summary of the regression analysis leading to this conclusion is presented below.

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<sup>11</sup> Official website of the Liberal Mission Foundation. "Publications: Analytical report No. 6 on Monitoring of the September 9, 2018 elections" (in Russian: «Публикации: Аналитический доклад № 6 по Мониторингу выборов 09.09.2018»). September 26, 2018 <http://www.liberal.ru/articles/7274> [Accessed on March 6, 2019].

<sup>12</sup> Galeeva, V. Might comes before right, if the governor is unpopular (in Russian: «Против черта льского нет приема, если губернатор непопулярен»). Fontanka.ru, September 25, 2018 г. <https://www.fontanka.ru/2018/09/25/117/> [Accessed on March 6, 2019].

## PARTY AFFILIATION

**Most winners in the regional elections—either competitive or noncompetitive—were nominated by the United Russia party. Even when a winner was not officially nominated by this party, he or she was still somehow connected with it by either running as a self-nominated United Russia member or opposing United Russia's overt or covert support while running on**

The self-nominated candidate Sergei Sobyanin, a United Russia member since 2001

Table 5. Participation of political parties in gubernatorial elections, 2012-2018.

N°	Winner nominated by	Number of elections	Number of victories
1	United Russia	100	96
2	LDPR	102	3
3	The Communist Party	90	3
4	A Just Russia	74	1
5	Self-nomination	7	6
	<b>Total</b>		<b>109</b>

and a bureau member of the party's supreme council since 2004, won the Moscow mayoral race twice—in 2013 and 2018. Sobyanin chose self-nomination knowing that the United Russia party was quite unpopular in the Russian capital. And Sobyanin had the ambition to become the “mayor of all Muscovites,” not just the mayor of one particular party, albeit the ruling one, which still backed his election campaign.

In the 2014 gubernatorial election in the Kirov region, the self-nominated candidate Nikita Belykh, who had chaired the Union of Right Forces party before his appointment as Kirov governor in 2008, won the election with United Russia's support.

The self-nominated candidate Alexei Dyumin (who is seen by some observers as a potential successor to Vladimir Putin <sup>14</sup>), became governor of the Tula region in 2016.

Another victory for the self-nominated candidate was registered in the Omsk region, where a former A Just Russia party representative in the State Duma Alexander Burkov won in 2018. He entered the election not as A Just Russia member, but as a self-nominated candidate and as an interim governor appointed by the Russian president due to unpopularity of his party in the region: at the 2016 parliamentary election the party received only 6.2 percent of the vote. Instead of nominating its own candidate, United Russia chose to support Burkov in defiance of Viktor Nazarov, a

13 The term “systemic opposition” in Russia usually describes the parties represented in the State Duma that are technically in opposition to the ruling United Russia party. These parties are: the Liberal Democratic Party (LDPR), the Communist Party, and A Just Russia. Representation of these parties is “allowed” by the Kremlin, which makes them part of the Kremlin's system.

14 “Personas. Alexei Dyumin, governor of the Tula region” (in Russian: «Персоны. Алексей Дюмин, губернатор Тульской области»). Svobodnaya Pressa <http://svpressa.ru/persons/aleksey-dyumin/> [Accessed on March 6, 2019].

United Russia member, who had held the gubernatorial office in Omsk region until his early resignation in October 2017.<sup>15</sup>

We need to acknowledge here the existence of the so-called “gubernatorial quota,”<sup>16</sup> which means that, under the Kremlin’s unspoken, informal rules, every party represented in the State Duma has the right to put its member into a governor’s office. It was decided by the Kremlin that the Omsk gubernatorial post would go to A Just Russia, since the latter’s member in the Zabaikal Territory, Konstantin Ilkovsky (elected in 2013) had been dismissed. This left A Just Russia without its “quota” governor, unlike the LDPR and the Communist Party. United Russia helped elect Burkov by withholding nomination of its own member and thus allowing for the victory of A Just Russia representative.

By the same token, the Smolensk region went to the LDPR’s Alexei Ostrovsky, who had led this region since 2012 (upon the president’s recommendation), and won the 2015 race with 65 percent of the vote. Like in the Omsk case, United Russia helped Ostrovsky’s election by not putting its candidate on the ballot. Incidentally, while United Russia had received 48.1 percent of the vote in the 2016 parliamentary election in the Smolensk region, the LDPR itself gained only 19.4 percent.

Under the “gubernatorial quota” the Communist Party was “given” the Oryol region where its member Vadim Potomsky received 89 percent of the vote in 2014, and Moscow City Duma deputy Andrei Klychkov, also a Communist, won with almost 84 percent of the vote in 2018. At the same time, in 2001-2016, support for the Communist Party in the federal parliamentary elections in the Oryol region has decreased from a record high of 32.0 percent to 17.9 percent, with a Communist Party candidate Pavel Grudinin receiving only 12.2 percent of the vote in the 2018 presidential election—an average for the country. Still, the region stayed under a Communist governor. It is noteworthy that neither Potomsky nor Klychkov had any connection to the Oryol region before becoming governors. Moreover, before their appointments by the president and further elections as governors, both of these politicians had been nurturing ambitious for high offices in other regions. Potomsky ran in the 2012 gubernatorial election in the Bryansk region, while Klychkov had planned to participate in the 2018 Moscow mayoral race.

United Russia had evidently had a hand in the victories of the candidates from the systemic opposition—the Communist Party, the LDPR, and A Just Russia—in the aforementioned regions, both at the federal and local levels. By withholding nominations of its own candidates, United Russia allowed members of other parties to win. Competitiveness in these elections was out of the question, as elections were simply “fixed” between the ruling party and the systemic opposition. The so-called “opposition” governors were not even local party functionaries, but administrators integrated into the Putin system. These elections showcase United Russia’s sharing some of its power in the regions to avoid formal accusations of monopolizing regional governments.

In 2012-2017, United Russia’s support for a candidate guaranteed his or her electoral victory with one exception: in the 2015 gubernatorial election in the Irkutsk region the ruling party’s candidate and the front-runner of the race, Sergei Yeroshchenko, failed to score the victory in the first round. In another surprising turn of events, he also lost the runoff to the Communist candidate Sergei Levchenko. Following this precedent

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15 Ivashchenko, T. The Omsk region: A Just Russia candidate instead of a “smiley” governor (in Russian: «Омская область: справоросс вместо «улыбчивого» губернатора»). Regnum, October 10, 2017 <https://regnum.ru/news/2332402.html> [Accessed on March 6, 2019].

16 Surnacheva L., Rustamova F., Kozlov P. Putin refuses to congratulate governors who won against his will (in Russian: «Путин отказывается поздравлять губернаторов, выигравших вопреки его воле»). BBC, December 6, 2018 <https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-46459194> [Accessed on March 6, 2019].

and up until 2018, United Russia took measures (e.g. introduced restrictive municipal filters<sup>17</sup>) to prevent further failures.

Thus, we suggest the following hypothesis:

***Hypothesis 3: The support for the candidate from the ruling party positively correlates with his or her membership in United Russia.***

EBack in 2013, United Russia could afford strong opposition candidates' participation in gubernatorial races. The ruling party could even help them overcome the municipal filter by adding signatures of its own elected representatives to the candidates' registration lists. A well-known example of this permissive approach was the registration of Alexei Navalny as the Moscow mayoral candidate and his admission to the 2013 race, which resulted in a competitive election with the potential for a runoff. The 2018 Moscow mayoral race was markedly different: not a single opposition candidate was allowed to be registered; the election itself was noncompetitive.

Also in 2018, Maxim Shevchenko, a strong candidate from the Communist Party, was not admitted to participation in the Vladimir gubernatorial election, while little-known, "shadow box" candidates were registered to provide background for re-election of Governor Svetlana Orlova, the United Russia's member.

Overall, the dynamics of the 2018 gubernatorial elections have changed, as protest sentiments have noticeably increased. In four subjects of the Russian Federation, United Russia's candidates—incumbent leaders and interim governors—failed to win in the first round. In Khakassia and the Khabarovsk territory they did not even lead on the ballot. The fact that affiliation with United Russia did not guarantee a candidate's victory is undoubtedly a sign of the increasing electoral competition. In some regions the United Russia brand, in fact, alienated voters. As a result, opposition votes went to the candidates from the Communist Party and the LDPR whose party affiliation as well as reputation and authority were not important in these cases. Protest voting has emerged: people began to vote not so much for a certain opposition candidate, but rather against United Russia. In the light of this development, further look into the correlation between a candidate's membership in the United Russia party and his or her electoral prospects appears worthwhile.

## **PLACE OF BIRTH**

**Another factor often used to predict the level of electoral competitiveness is the place of birth of a candidate from the ruling party. The logic behind this factor is, as follows: "outsiders" from other regions, unfamiliar with local specifics, are perceived less favorably by the local population.**

However, data in *Table 6* below do not confirm this hypothesis. Election results of the pro-Kremlin candidates in competitive elections seem to be unrelated to such factors as the governor's place of birth and the length of his or her terms of office.

In the September 9, 2018 election, the ruling party's candidates in Khakassia, the Khabarovsk territory, and the Vladimir region scored the lowest results despite the fact that for many years these subjects had been led by elderly incumbent governors (not interims, as in many other regions), who had won previous elections by a landslide. One may speculate that voters in these regions were extremely tired of the prolonged rule by the same persons, which resulted in their popularity drop.

As election of a candidate without a "negative history" in the region is easy, the

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<sup>17</sup> Municipal filter is a procedure that requires that the candidates to regional leadership positions collect signatures of the deputies of the local representative bodies in support of their candidacy.

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Table 6. Results for the pro-Kremlin candidates in gubernatorial elections

<b>N°</b>	<b>Subject of the Russian Federation</b>	<b>Election Date</b>	<b>Name of the candidate from the ruling party</b>	<b>Interim/incumbent leader</b>	<b>Born in the region</b>	<b>Holds office since</b>	<b>Result (percent)</b>
1	City of Moscow	08.09.13	Sergei Sobyenin	Interim	No	2010	51,4
2	Altai Republic	14.09.14	Alexander Berdnikov	Interim	Yes	2005	50,6
3	Republic of Sakha (Yakutia)	14.09.14	Yegor Borisov	Interim	Yes	2010	58,8
4	Mari El Republic	13.09.15	Leonid Markelov	Interim	No	2001	50,8
5	Amur region	13.09.15	Alexander Kozlov	Interim	No	2015	50,6
6	Arkhangelsk region	13.09.15	Igor Orlov	Interim	No	2012	53,3
7	Irkutsk region	13.09.15	Sergei Yeroshchenko	Interim	Yes	2012	49,6
8	Omsk region	13.09.15	Viktor Nazarov	Interim	Yes	2012	60,0
9	Zabaikal territory	18.09.16	Natalia Zhdanova	Interim	Yes	2016	54,4
10	Ulyanovsk region	18.09.16	Sergei Morozov	Interim	Yes	2005	54,3
11	Republic of Khakassia	09.09.18	Viktor Zimin	Incumbent	No	2008	32,4
12	Altai territory	09.09.18	Viktor Tomenko	Interim	No	2018	53,6
13	Primorye territory	09.09.18	Andrei Tarasenko	Interim	Yes	2017	46,6
		16.12.2018	Oleg Kozhemyako	Interim	Yes	2018	61,9
14	Khabarovsk territory	09.09.18	Vyacheslav Shport	Incumbent	Yes	2009	35,6
15	Amur region	09.09.18	Vassily Orlov	Interim	Yes	2018	55,6
16	Vladimir region	09.09.18	Svetlana Orlova	Incumbent	No	2013	36,4
17	Chukotka autonomous district	09.09.18	Roman Kopin	Incumbent	No	2008	57,8

Kremlin has recently started to actively replace old leaders with new candidates, whose track record in a given region is “clean.” Alexander Kynev observes a high level of rotation in regional leadership over the last two and a half years (in 50 regions out of 85), which is an absolute record for the last nearly 30 years and is comparable to the Gorbachev era when the first secretaries of the Communist Party’s regional committee would be replaced similarly en masse.<sup>18</sup>

The “outsider factor” provides the Kremlin with a stronger control over the appointees. Deterioration of the social and economic situation creates further risks of losing control over the regional elites for the Kremlin. Against this backdrop, it becomes more preferable for the federal center to appoint someone “from the outside,” a person who is not associate with the local elite, but rather with in Moscow those who appointed him. Additionally, the Kremlin strengthens its grip over the personnel policy: “the governors turn into ‘managers on a business trip,’ who often have no right to even form their own team.”<sup>19</sup>

Based on this analysis, we suggest the following hypothesis:

***Hypothesis 4: Support for a pro-Kremlin candidate in a given region negatively correlates with him or her being born in this region.***

## **SPLIT OF THE ELITES AND COMPETITIVENESS OF THE BUSINESS ENVIRONMENT**

**The so-called “split” of the elites is often named as yet another factor highlighting competitive elections in which a pro-Kremlin candidate receives fewer votes than expected in the regional elections because he or she appears, by certain parameters, unacceptable for the local elites. To advance regional candidates to representative offices, the local elites engage in rallying against the pro-Kremlin candidate, tapping, among other things, into the possibilities of the electoral process (Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies, 2014).**

The 2018 election in the Vladimir region serve as a good example of such a split. Svetlana Orlova, who had been serving as the region’s governor since 2013, somehow found herself at odds with numerous interest groups, including business, the siloviki, and the media.<sup>20</sup> According to journalist Alexei Shlyapuzhnikov, this feud was largely due to the fact that Orlova had taken the land and housing development from under the jurisdiction of the city of Vladimir and transferred it under the auspices of the Vladimir region—that is, of the governor. Her actions did not bode well with the mayor of Vladimir, who happened to manage the unofficial fund established in support of the United Russia candidates. As a result, Orlova lost access to this fund, which negatively impacted her election campaign.

In 2014, the head of the Altai Republic Alexander Berdnikov won the elections in eight districts out of 11, including the republic’s capital, Gorno-Altaysk (50.6 percent), having lost in three. According to Alexander Kynev, almost all districts with ethnically

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18 Kynev A. Facing the event. Is Putin’s party being punished? (in Russian: «Лицом к событию. Наказывают «партию Путина?»). Svoboda, March 26, 2019. <https://www.svoboda.org/a/29842778.html> [Accessed on April 28, 2019]

19 Ibid.

20 Rustamova F., The Kremlin is for it: Why Governor Orlova can lose the runoff (in Russian: «Кремль за, люди против: почему губернатор Орлова может проиграть во втором туре»). BBC, September 21, 2018 г. <https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-45598932> [Accessed on March 6, 2019].

Russian population voted for Berdnikov, while districts where the majority was ethnically Altai gave their votes to his rival, Vladimir Petrov. Similar dynamics were observed in the simultaneous regional parliamentary elections: ethnic Russian districts largely supported United Russia and the LDPR, while the ethnically Altai districts, which had previously voted for Petrov, this time chose Patriots of Russia and Civic Initiative. Thus, one can conclude that the split of the elites in the Altai Republic had an ethnic element, despite the fact that the top competitors in the gubernatorial race (Berdnikov and Petrov) were experienced local politicians, both ethnic Russians born in the region.

The split of the elites can also explain why the pro-Kremlin candidate Sergei Yeroshchenko lost in the 2015 election in the Irkutsk region. Eighteen months after his appointment in the spring of 2012, Yeroshchenko began to “tighten the screws,” which resulted in a conflict between his administration and the municipalities of Irkutsk and other cities. It also led to a scandalous resignation of Lyudmila Berlina, speaker of the regional legislature and a highly respected representative of the old regional elite.<sup>21</sup> Yeroshchenko also squared off against Alexander Bitarov, chairman of the finance and construction company Novy Gorod, one of the largest developers in the city. As a result of all these tensions, Berlina reportedly went to work for Sergei Levchenko, Yeroshchenko’s main opponent from the Communist Party, while Bitarov sponsored Levchenko’s campaign.<sup>22</sup> During the election, Levchenko got into the runoff—the fact that mobilized the region’s protest vote—and won the election in defiance of the Kremlin’s support for the incumbent governor who had access to some of the best political strategists.

Unfortunately, the split of the elites is a qualitative characteristic that is hard to measure quantitatively. To overcome this problem, we propose to use the measure of business competitiveness in a given region, assuming that political monopoly leads to a decrease in the number of independent businesses. In modern Russia, large business groups (usually, they are larger developers, retailers, and banks) tend to invest in certain candidates to lobby their interests in the region, while independent regional businesses often seek to support alternative candidates to protect their interests.<sup>23</sup> Hereby we introduce two indexes of regional competitiveness to make an operationalization of this assumption possible .

Based on the analysis above, we suggest the following hypothesis:

***Hypothesis 5: Support for pro-Kremlin candidates in a given region is lower in the presence of a more competitive business environment in this region.***

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21 Sokolov, M. Why Putin needs early “elections”? (in Russian: «Зачем Путину досрочные «выборы»?»). Svoboda, May 20, 2015 20 мая 2015 г. <https://www.svoboda.org/a/27026568.html> [Accessed on March 6, 2019].

22 Vinokurov, A. United Russia’s loss in Irkutsk (in Russian: «Иркутский проигрыш “Единой России”»). Gazeta.ru, September 28, 2015 [https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2015/09/27\\_a\\_7781729.shtml](https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2015/09/27_a_7781729.shtml) [Accessed on March 6, 2019].

23 Orlov D., Neyzhmakov M. New governors and old elites. Political situation in the regions before the elections. Analytical report (in Russian: «Новые губернаторы и старые элиты. Политическая ситуация в регионах накануне выборов. Аналитический доклад»). Regnum, September 28, 2015 <https://regnum.ru/news/2267421.html>. [Accessed on March 6, 2019]. Also, see: Institute of the Social, Economic and Political Studies (Foundation), Analytical report titled “Direct gubernatorial elections and the system of collecting municipal signatures in 2012: impact on the political system development and directions for improvement” (in Russian: «Прямые выборы губернаторов и система сбора муниципальных подписей в 2012 г.: влияние на развитие политической системы и направления совершенствования»). November, 2012. <https://vz.ru/itog.pdf> [Accessed on March 6, 2019].

## SHARE OF THE URBAN POPULATION

**Electoral competitiveness also manifests itself territorially. In noncompetitive elections, when the regional leader gains over 60 percent of the vote (let alone over 80 percent), his or her high level of support is often evenly distributed throughout the region. The opponents usually see a low level of support across all regional polls, but they can get higher results in the cities, especially big ones, where the voting process is more independent and transparent compared to the rural areas.**

By contrast, in competitive elections, when the winner receives less than 60 percent, distribution of the votes varies greatly across the territory. Discrepancies are mostly visible between relatively independent, opposition-leaning cities and conservative rural areas that find themselves under stronger government control.

Territorial fluctuations in election results were observed in the 16 regions examined in this report, where 17 competitive elections took place (*Table 7*).

In six regions their leaders won across all locations. These are the Altai and Zabaikal territories, the Arkhangelsk, Amur (in 2018), and Omsk regions, and even the Primorye territory (in the first round). The leaders of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia), the City of Moscow, the Amur (in 2015) and Ulyanovsk regions, and the Chukotka autonomous district each lost at just one location. It is illustrative that in the 2013 Moscow mayoral election, such location happened to be the most democratic district in the city—Gagarinsky—where Sergei Sobyenin lost to Alexei Navalny. Incumbent Amur governor Alexander Kozlov lost the election in the region’s capital, Blagoveshchensk, and Chukotka governor Roman Kopin in his region’s administrative center, Anadyr. Having won in the region’s capital, the incumbent Ulyanovsk governor Sergei Morozov lost the election in the region’s second largest city of Dimitrovgrad. The Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) is the only exception to this pattern: its leader, Yegor Borisov, won in the republic’s capital city of Yakutsk, albeit with a relatively low result (50.4 percent), but lost in the Namtsy district. This puzzle can be easily explained: Borisov’s main opponent Ernst Beryozkin was born in the Namtsy district. As for Borisov, he was born in the Churapcha district where he scored a record of 94.0 percent of the vote.

As mentioned above, the incumbents’ results in administrative (urban) centers are usually lower than across the entire region. It is also revealing that while the incumbents lost the main elections in only two regions (Khakassia and the Khabarovsk territory), there have been seven recorded cases of them losing in regional administrative centers—in the Mari El Republic, the Amur (in 2015), Irkutsk, and Vladimir regions, and the Chukotka autonomous district (*Tables 8 and 9*).

During unstable periods, big cities residents’ behavior, especially within a highly centralized political system, like Russia today, can play a decisive role in the elections.<sup>24</sup> That said, based on the analysis above we suggest the following hypothesis:

***Hypothesis 6: The larger the share of the urban population in the region, the lower the support for pro-Kremlin candidates.***

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24 Rezunkov V., Political analysts Grigory Golosov and Dmitry Goncharov discuss possible scenarios of overcoming Russia’s domestic political crisis (in Russian: «О возможных сценариях выхода из внутривнутриполитического кризиса в России в гостях у Виктора Резункова беседуют политологи Григорий Голосов и Дмитрий Гончаров»). Svoboda, February 9, 2012 <https://www.svoboda.org/a/24476159.html> [Accessed on March 6, 2019].

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Table 7. Winners' results by Territorial Election Commissions (TECs)

<b>N°</b>	<b>Subject of the Russian Federation</b>	<b>Name of the winner</b>	<b>Number of TECs in the subject of the Russian Federation</b>	<b>Number of TECs where the winner came first</b>	<b>Lowest result, %</b>	<b>Highest result, %</b>
1	City of Moscow	Sergei Sobyanin	127	126	37,3	69,5
2	Altai Republic	Alexander Berdnikov	11	8	32,3	70,1
3	Republic of Sakha (Yakutia)	Yegor Borisov	35	34	43,8	94,0
4	Mari El Republic	Leonid Markelov	18	15	34,9	86,2
5	Amur region	Alexander Kozlov	29	28	30,3	72,0
6	Arkhangelsk region	Igor Orlov	32	32	39,9	79,2
7	Irkutsk region	Sergei Yeroshchenko	45	38	26,8	82,3
		Sergei Levchenko	45	31	11,6	74,5
8	Omsk region	Viktor Nazarov	37	37	45,6	78,7
9	Zabaikal territory	Natalia Zhdanova	38	38	43,9	74,6
10	Ulyanovsk region	Sergei Morozov	29	28	26,6	88,5
11	Republic of Khakassia (three repeat election results canceled)	Valentin Konovalov	13	10	23,1	54,3
		Valentin Konovalov	13	13	50,8	69,3
12	Altai territory	Viktor Tomenko	74	74	40,5	80,7
13	Primorye territory (first election results canceled, repeat elections held)	Andrei Tarasenko	38	38	35,2	64,9
		Andrei Tarasenko	38	14	36,7	74,3
		Oleg Kozhemyako	38	38	46,1	82,2
14	Khabarovsk territory	Sergei Furgal	23	11	15,0	50,4
		Sergei Furgal	23	21	31,4	79,5
15	Amur region	Vassily Orlov	29	29	41,7	70,9
16	Vladimir region	Svetlana Orlova	23	15	27,1	48,0
		Vladimir Sipyagin	23	20	43,9	76,2
17	Chukotka autonomous district	Roman Kopin	7	6	30,9	79,6

Table 8. Election results of the top candidates in various administrative centers

N°	Subject of the Russian Federation	Name of the winner	Name of the runner-up	Winner's result (percent)	Runner-up's result (percent)
1	City of Moscow	Sergei Sobyenin	Alexei Navalny	51,4	27,2
2	Altai Republic	Alexander Berdnikov	Viktor Petrov	50,6	32,4
3	Republic of Sakha (Yakutia)	Yegor Borisov	Ernst Beryozkin	50,4	36,5
4	Mari El Republic	Leonid Markelov	Sergei Mamayev	37,3	39,0
5	Amur region	Alexander Kozlov	Ivan Abramov	30,3	45,2
6	Arkhangelsk region	Igor Orlov	Olga Ositsyna	41,7	20,2
7	Irkutsk region	Sergei Yeroshchenko	Sergei Levchenko	30,5	55,3
			Sergei Yeroshchenko	71,1	27,0
8	Omsk region	Viktor Nazarov	Oleg Denisenko	48,5	37,7
9	Zabaikal territory	Natalia Zhdanova	Nikolai Merzlikin	45,5	34,0
10	Ulyanovsk region	Sergei Morozov	Alexei Kurinny	46,9	30,8
11	Republic of Khakassia (three repeat election results canceled)	Valentin Konovalov	Viktor Zimin	44,0	25,1
		Valentin Konovalov	-	54,0	-
12	Altai territory	Viktor Tomenko	Vladimir Semyonov	52,0	16,4
13	Primorye territory (first election results canceled, repeat elections held)	Andrei Tarasenko	Andrei Ishchenko	38,6	30,6
		Andrei Tarasenko	Andrei Ishchenko	58,8	39,3
		Oleg Kozhemyako	Andrei Andreichenko	51,3	32,9
14	Khabarovsk territory	Sergei Furgal	Vyacheslav Shport	39,1	33,7
		Sergei Furgal	Vyacheslav Shport	71,3	26,7
15	Amur region	Vassily Orlov	Tatiana Rakutina	55,8	28,0
16	Vladimir region	Svetlana Orlova	Vladimir Sipyagin	28,1	36,5
		Vladimir Sipyagin	Svetlana Orlova	57,7	35,9
17	Chukotka autonomous district	Roman Kopin	Yulia Butakova	30,9	34,1

## SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC SITUATION

**Another factor is the regional social and economic situation. The decline in the living standards, inadequate pension reform and other signs of the economic crisis unavoidably affect gubernatorial elections.**

The September 2014 elections held against the backdrop of the annexation of Crimea, with no clear signs of the economic decline, determined a higher level of electoral stability and helped the incumbent governors to be re-elected. In the regions, like Udmurtia, the Stavropol, Voronezh, Ivanovo, Kurgan, Lipetsk, Nizhny Novgorod, and Chelyabinsk regions—that are not usually described as “electoral sultanates”—incumbent governors received more than 80 percent of the vote; and in the Samara region over 90 percent. In the Primorye territory the governor won with 77.4 percent of the vote. The 2014 national average for a Kremlin candidate was 77.3 percent—the highest number over the recent election years. In only two regions out of 30—the Altai Republic and the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia)—the elections could have been called competitive.

By September 2018, the electoral situation had changed dramatically: voting was held in the context of the sluggish economic growth, decline in the living standards, and the advent of the pension reform, responsibility for which was redirected from the federal authorities down to the regional level.

In June 2016, the experts of the Civic Initiatives Committee (Nikolai Petrov, Alexander Kynev, and Alexei Titkov) created a map entitled “A Tense Russia” that visualized the ranking of the social tension points across different regions (see *Figure 2 below*). However, the map does not allow for establishing connections between the ranking and electoral competitiveness. The Irkutsk region that held a relatively competitive election in 2015, and the Ulyanovsk region where another relatively competitive election took place in 2016, both scored high for social tension in the CIC ranking. Other regions identified as having high social tension in early 2016 were Moscow, Udmurtia, the Krasnodar territory, the Penza and Chelyabinsk regions, but none of them, by any means, held a competitive election in 2015-2018. The regions that had competitive elections—the Amur region (2015 and 2018), the Omsk region (2015), the Zabaikal territory (2016), the Republic of Khakassia, the Khabarovsk and Primorye territories, and the Vladimir region (that held a runoff in 2018)—showed the lowest level of social tension (below-average). They were not even listed in the ranking as regions with potential social and political risks. Almost all the criteria used in this ranking of social tension are dynamic, which is why regional rankings have been repeatedly changing. If one is to compare three semi-annual rankings in 2016-2017, only Moscow and the Chelyabinsk region held top positions in all of them, while the Altai territory, the Kemerovo, Kirov, Omsk, Samara, and Chelyabinsk regions topped the last two rankings. There were competitive elections in these regions over the examined period.

The CIC experts were not the only ones to create a ranking of social tension in the regions. The Center for Economic and Political Reform (CEPR) developed a similar ranking, but based it on a different set of criteria.<sup>25</sup> The CEPR used statistical data on labor disputes and protests. Their approach proved to be more accurate in establishing a correlation between social tension and competitiveness in gubernatorial elections.

According to CEPR, the highest levels of social tension were detected in the Primorye territory, the Sverdlovsk region, Moscow, the Khabarovsk territory, and

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25 Kuznetsova E., Dergachev V. Experts identified the regions with the highest level of social tensions (in Russian: «Эксперты назвали регионы – лидеры по социальной напряженности»). RBC, February 16, 2017 [www.rbc.ru/politics/16/02/2017/58a5851a2ae59608670c6e3f](http://www.rbc.ru/politics/16/02/2017/58a5851a2ae59608670c6e3f) [Accessed on March 6, 2019].

Figure 2. Index of socio-economic and political tension

**Regions of increased socio-economic and political tension**

Matching risk factors	2016 (2nd half of the year)	2017 (1st half of the year)
ECONOMY POLITICS PROTESTS	Altai region	
ECONOMY POLITICS	Kemerovo region Kirov region Omsk region Samara Region Saratov region Chelyabinsk region	Komi Republic
ECONOMY PROTESTS	Krasnodar region Astrakhan region Ivanovo region	
POLITICS PROTESTS	The Republic of Buryatia Moscow Crimea Sevastopol	Republic of Dagestan Chuvash Republic Altai region Kemerovo region Kirov region Kurgan region Omsk region Rostov region Samara Region Tver region Chelyabinsk region Moscow

Source: Index of socio-economic and political tension in Russia’s regions, as of July 1, 2017 (the CIC). RBC, 2017

Buryatia—this group captures two regions that held runoffs in 2018 election, a sign of competitive elections. Also on the list of top-20 regions with the highest level of social tension (related to labor issues) were three regions that held runoffs: Khakassia, the Irkutsk and Vladimir regions. Thus, frequency of the labor conflicts in the region can point to a higher probability of electoral competitiveness.

However, the correlation here is not functional. For instance, the Samara, Rostov, Nizhny Novgorod, and Voronezh regions are also among the top-20 regions with the highest rate of labor conflicts. But competitive elections can often take place in the regions with a low rate of labor disputes, such as the Ulyavovsk and Omsk regions and the Altai Republic. Overall, social tension in general and labor tensions in a narrower sense can hardly explain electoral competitiveness.

Lack of data on social tension for a sufficient number of years (the CIC index covers 2015-2017; the CEPR index just one year, 2016) prevents us from including this information in the regression analysis. Instead, we are using the unemployment rate in a given region—the indicator that indirectly correlates with social tension.

Based on this analysis, we suggest the following hypothesis:

***Hypothesis 7: Support for the pro-Kremlin candidate in a given region is inversely related to the unemployment rate.***

## REAL DISPOSABLE INCOMES

**In our analysis, we itemize separately the dynamics of the people's real incomes. Many observers draw the connection between the decline in Russian people's real incomes and the recent falling of the federal authorities' approval ratings.** <sup>26</sup>

However, in her work for the Liberal Mission Foundation, Natalia Zubarevich did not find any connection between the income flows of the population and the 2018 gubernatorial election results: "If one is to trust [the Russian Statistics Agency] (regional statistics are not particularly reliable), the most pronounced decline in real incomes in 2014-2017 and in 2018 was registered in the Magadan region. However, its governor received one of the highest results [in terms of voting]. A noticeable decline in incomes in the Pskov region in 2018 did not prevent the appointed governor from being elected either. In the four regions where incumbent leaders failed to win the elections, the decline in income was less pronounced. The decline in the population's incomes likely created a negative backdrop but did not trigger protest voting" ("Stress Test for Half of Russia," 2018, p.19).

But it was in the September 2018 elections when, due to accumulation of the factors of economic decline, the winners' results turned out to be at the lowest level in many years. Results over 80 percent were registered only in the Kemerovo, Magadan, Omsk, and Oryol regions. In only seven out of 22 regions (32 percent) the elections were competitive, and in four of them a runoff was needed to determine the winner despite most predictions. In 2018, for the first time since 2012, the incumbent governors of two regions (Khakassia and the Khabarovsk territory) lost to representatives of the systemic opposition, even though these leaders had easily won previous elections in 2013.

In the Primorye and Khabarovsk territories, government initiatives that had not accounted for the regional specifics and, as a result, hit the pockets of the local population, contributing to the overall failure. According to sociologist Leonid Blyakher, in the Khabarovsk territory, certain actions of the federal center and the lack of comprehensive policies by the local authorities caused a decline in employment opportunities in the traditional sectors, such as the forestry and timber industries and gold mining. This negatively affected the budget replenishment rate and dealt a blow to the employees of the budget sector. In the Primorye territory the changes introduced by the federal authorities to the requirements for the cars produced abroad (mostly, in Japan) led to an abrupt reduction of the number of imported vehicles and the collapse of the entire car-service infrastructure. New jobs created by government initiatives failed to compensate for this decline. In both cases, real incomes of the population decreased. Despite these developments, the regions were officially described as thriving and successful. This discrepancy between rhetoric and reality exacerbated public discontent across the whole area, triggering protest voting in the Primorye and Khabarovsk territories.

In Khakassia, the region that heavily relies on federal subsidies, the already ominous economic situation in 2018 turned dire<sup>27</sup> following the introduction of the Western sanctions against businessmen Oleg Deripaska (En+, Rusal) and

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26 Bershidsky, L. Putin Has to Find a Way to Raise Incomes. Bloomberg, February 20, 2018. <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2018-02-20/vladimir-putin-may-goose-russia-s-economy-before-the-election> [Accessed on March 12, 2019].

27 Ivashchenko, T. Can a new leader of Khakassia reverse a difficult situation in the region? (in Russian: «Сможет ли новый глава Хакасии переломить трудную ситуацию в регионе?»). Regnum, November 14, 2018 <https://regnum.ru/news/2518571.html> [Accessed on March 6, 2019].

Andrei Melnichenko (EuroChem), whose factories provided tens of thousands jobs in the region.<sup>28</sup>

Based on the analysis above, we suggest the following hypothesis.

**Hypothesis 8: Support for the pro-Kremlin candidates in a given region positively correlates with the dynamics of the regional population's real disposable incomes.**

## ELECTORAL PREFERENCES

**One can assume that in the regions with a high level of support for opposition parties and/or for opposition candidates in federal elections, the chances of the latter in gubernatorial elections should be higher. We calculated fractions of the votes cast for opposition parties and for their candidates (differentiating between systemic and non-systemic opposition<sup>29</sup>) in the recent federal elections—the 2011 and 2016 parliamentary elections and the 2012 and 2018 presidential elections—and compared the results with the outcomes of the competitive elections.**

Voting preferences vary over time, and people vote in different ways in different elections, i.e. in parliamentary and presidential ones, as it was in our case. For instance, supporters of the government are likely those who voted for United Russia in parliamentary elections and for Vladimir Putin in presidential ones. However, the share of Putin's supporters is larger than that of United Russia due to the fact that the figure of the president attracts more voters.

Comparison between the cumulative percentages of the vote received by United Russia and Vladimir Putin and those of the nonsystemic opposition

Table 9. Percentage of the vote in federal elections

N°	Year, election	Vladimir Putin	United Russia	Systemic opposition	Nonsystemic opposition
1	2011 elections to the Russian State Duma		49,3	44,1	4,0
2	2012 elections of the Russian president	63,6		27,3	8,0
3	2016 elections to the Russian State Duma		54,2	32,7	2,7
4	2018 elections of the Russian president	76,7		17,4	2,7

leads to a clear conclusion: the opposition stands no chance of winning

28 Kozlov, O. Khakassia: The life of a region that has gold but no money (in Russian: «Хакасия: как живет регион, в котором есть золото, но нет денег»). BBC, November 27, 2018 <https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-46319845> [Accessed on March 6, 2019].

29 As opposed to the systemic opposition, the non-systemic one has no representation in the State Duma and is generally prevented by the Kremlin from the official forms of political participation.

a gubernatorial election, even if all members of the opposition unite to endorse one candidate.

Support for United Russia and Vladimir Putin usually extends to all ruling party's candidates in gubernatorial elections. Competitive gubernatorial elections tend to take place in the regions where both United Russia and Vladimir Putin perform worse than the national average. For example, in the regions where the president received less than 75 percent of the vote in 2018 (lower than the national average of 76.7 percent) and where United Russia gained less than 50 percent in 2016 (lower than the national

Table 10. Comparison between gubernatorial and federal election results (%)

N°	Subject of the Russian Federation	Result of the pro-government candidate in the first round	Result of the opposition candidate in the first round	Putin, 2018	United Russia, 2016	Communist Party 2016	LDPR 2016	Systemic opposition total, 2016
1	Republic of Khakassia	32,4	44,8	69,2	38,1	20,9	19,5	47,6
2	Primorye territory	46,6	24,6	65,3	39,0	18,0	19,7	42,8
3	Khabarovsk territory	35,6	35,8	65,8	37,3	16,5	25,0	46,0
4	Vladimir region	36,4	31,2	73,7	45,2	13,0	18,0	38,6

average of 54.2 percent), systemic opposition parties were able to score the percentage of the vote that is comparable to or even exceeding that of United Russia (*Table 9 and Table 10*).

The September 2018 election in the Chukotka autonomous district could be an exception to this rule. Governor Roman Kopin won the election with 57.8 percent of the vote (a competitive election), while in the March 2018 presidential election Vladimir Putin received 82.3 percent in the region. In the 2016 parliamentary election, United Russia gained 58.8 percent. However, this discrepancy between the support for the pro-Kremlin governor and the support for Putin and United Russia was likely driven by Kopin's unpopularity, low recognition in the region, and fraught relationship with the regional elites.

This analysis allows us to put forward yet another hypothesis:

***Hypothesis 9: High level of the regional voter support for the United Russia or Vladimir Putin during federal elections leads to a better performance of the ruling party's candidates in gubernatorial elections.***

Based on that assumption, it is interesting to see how the regions that will be holding gubernatorial elections in 2019 voted in the most recent federal elections (*Table 11*). Initially, the 2019 elections were planned in 14 subjects of

the Russian Federation where terms of office of the regional leaders were to expire, but two more—the Zabaikal territory and the Sakhalin region—were consequently added to the list because of the early resignations of their incumbents.

In our view, it is in the Zabaikal territory, the Astrakhan, Vologda, Kurgan, Orenburg, and Chelyabinsk regions that the pro-Kremlin candidates might face challenging elections in 2019: the total vote for the systemic opposition in the 2016 parliamentary election in these regions exceeded United Russia’s results.



*President Elections in Orenburg region, 2018  
Foto: Natalia Trubacheva*

Table 11. Results of the most recent federal elections in the regions where gubernatorial elections will take place in 2019 (%)

N°	Subject of the Russian Federation	Putin, 2018	United Russia, 2016	Communist Party, 2016	LDPR, 2016	A Just Russia, 2016	Systemic opposition total, 2016
	<i>Scheduled elections</i>						
1	Altai Republic	70,6	48,8	18,9	12,7	4,1	35,7
2	<b>Republic of Bashkortostan*</b>	77,7	56,4	18,6	11,3	6,9	36,8
3	Republic of Kalmykia	81,7	70,6	11,7	4,3	3,2	19,2
4	Stavropol territory	80,6	54,3	13,2	15,5	4,3	33,1
5	<b>Astrakhan region</b>	77,0	42,2	14,2	13,1	17,6	44,9
6	Volgograd region	77,6	50,6	14,9	16,2	5,6	36,7
7	Vologda region	72,4	37,2	13,9	21,4	10,5	45,8
8	<b>Kurgan region</b>	73,3	41,5	14,6	18,8	13,8	47,2
9	<b>Kursk region</b>	81,0	51,7	12,8	15,7	4,6	33,0
10	<b>Lipetsk region</b>	80,8	56,2	13,7	12,3	6,0	32,0
11	Murmansk region	76,4	42,0	11,1	20,0	8,7	39,8
12	Orenburg region	73,0	40,9	18,4	22,7	5,4	46,4
13	Chelyabinsk region	73,0	38,2	12,0	16,7	17,5	46,2
14	<b>City of Saint Petersburg</b>	75,0	39,7	11,3	11,4	6,9	29,6
	<i>Early elections</i>						
15	<b>Zabaikal territory</b>	72,0	39,9	15,9	26,4	4,2	46,5
16	<b>Sakhalin region</b>	66,9	45,4	15,4	20,0	3,4	38,9

\*Bolted are the subjects of the Russian Federation with appointed interim governors (as of end of March, 2019).

## STATISTICAL/REGRESSION ANALYSIS OF FACTORS OF COMPETITIVENESS IN GUBERNATORIAL ELECTIONS

**We have developed nine hypotheses concerning the factors that could have led to a higher or lower than average percentage of the vote received by candidates backed by the federal government in gubernatorial elections in 2012-2018.**

Next, we proceed to the regression analysis of the factors that determined the percentage of the vote received by the pro-Kremlin candidates in the first rounds of gubernatorial elections. Since additional factors (i.e. the mobilization of the protest vote in support of the opposition candidates) might influence the vote in the runoffs, we limit our analysis to the first rounds to simplify the formulation of hypotheses.

As a dependent variable we took the percentage of vote for a candidate backed by the federal government in a given region's gubernatorial elections during the 2012-2018 period.

*The first hypothesis* suggests a positive correlation between the pro-Kremlin candidate's support and the voter turnout in gubernatorial elections. To operationalize this hypothesis, we added to the analysis the turnout factor in the corresponding region's gubernatorial elections.

*The second hypothesis* suggests a negative correlation between the pro-Kremlin candidate's support and the number of candidates allowed to run in the first round of gubernatorial elections. To operationalize this hypothesis, we added to the analysis data on the number of candidates allowed to run in the corresponding region's gubernatorial elections.

*The third hypothesis* suggests a positive correlation between the pro-Kremlin candidate's support and his or her membership in the United Russia party. To operationalize this hypothesis, we added to the analysis the dummy variable of control for those cases when the pro-Kremlin candidate was not running on the United Russia ticket. There were 11 such cases in the examined period.

*The fourth hypothesis* suggests a negative correlation between the pro-Kremlin candidate's support and the fact of his or her birth in the given region. To operationalize this hypothesis, we added to the analysis the dummy variable of control for those cases when the candidate backed by the federal government was not born in the given region. There were 43 such cases in the examined period.

*The fifth hypothesis* connects the lower level of support for the pro-Kremlin candidate with the more competitive business environment in a given region. To operationalize this hypothesis, we used two indicators of competitiveness. The first indicator of competitiveness was calculated based on the Herfindahl-Hirschman Index (HHI) as the sum of the squares of the fractions of the proceeds of the region's major companies to the total proceeds of all the top firms in the region (Barinova, Zemtsov, and Tsaryova, 2018). As an alternative, we used data on business activity in the region—the number of small businesses per 10,000 employed persons. This indicator describes the local residents' participation in business and registers, indirectly, the proportion of small and medium-size businesses—and thus the level of competitiveness in the region.

*The sixth hypothesis* connects the pro-Kremlin candidate's support to the share of the region's urban population. We believe that more urbanized regions are less likely to support the Kremlin-backed candidates. To operationalize this hypothesis, we added to the analysis the share of the urban population in the given region.

*The seventh hypothesis* connects the pro-Kremlin candidate's support to the social climate of a given region. To operationalize this hypothesis, we added to the analysis the unemployment rate (based on Rosstat's data) with a time lag of one year to the election year.

*The eighth hypothesis* connects the support for the pro-Kremlin candidate to the dynamics of the regional population's real disposable incomes (as a percentage of this index in the previous year). These data are available through 2017 at Rosstat's website. To operationalize this variable, we used the dynamics of the real disposable incomes taken as an average percentage of these indexes for two years preceding the election year (to reflect the long term dynamic).

Finally, *the ninth hypothesis* suggests a connection between a high level of support for opposition parties and/or their candidates in federal elections and a higher level of support for their candidates in gubernatorial elections. To operationalize this hypothesis, we added to the analysis the results obtained by United Russia and Vladimir Putin in the previous parliamentary and presidential elections, respectively.

We also added to the analysis an additional control for the examined election years (temporary fixed effects). Since this analysis is based on one-dimensional arrays, the introduction of exceedingly flexible temporary effects could eliminate the effects of some explicative variables. This might also explain the fact that the introduction of temporary fixed effects neutralizes some variables in our model. The data on these models are provided in *Annex I*.

The variables have been standardized to simplify the comparison between the effects of the different regressors. For the main analysis we used the common method of least squares (LSM) with clustered standard errors.

Based on these hypotheses, we further analyze our data in different specifications. *Table 12* includes all combinations of all the aforementioned variables.

*Table 12* shows that the factors that significantly and positively correlate with the support for the pro-Kremlin candidates in gubernatorial elections, based on the size and significance of the coefficient with the corresponding independent variable, are a higher turnout (Hypothesis 1) and support for Vladimir Putin in the 2018 election (Hypothesis 8). A high level of correlation between the turnout and the results of the Kremlin candidates does not imply functionality, it is rather determined by the regional specifics: in the regions where the Kremlin has more control, the turnout is higher and its candidates historically always win the elections.

The established correlation between the Kremlin's support for the candidate in a given region and the dynamics of the disposable incomes shows that the social and economic situation in the regions does have an impact on the public support for the government, and further deterioration doesn't bode well for the Kremlin. It is noteworthy that support for the pro-Kremlin candidates in gubernatorial elections significantly and negatively correlates with the fact of the given governor's birth in the region (which contradicts Hypothesis 4), which is likely explained by the Kremlin's policy of replacing old leaders with the new candidates who are not marred by a "negative" track record in the region.

In terms of other hypotheses, the models in *Table 12* point to a weak negative

Table 12. Predictors of the support for the pro-Kremlin candidates in gubernatorial elections (GRP), 2012-2018, LSM (clustered standard errors)

Hypothesis, number	Variable	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
1	Turnout, %	<b>0.409***</b>	<b>0.390***</b>	<b>0.600***</b>	<b>0.625***</b>
2	Number of candidates in the election	-0.040	-0.012	-0.040	-0.015
3	Non-United Russia candidate	-0.516	-0.490	-0.576*	-0.561
4	Born in the region	<b>-0.385**</b>	<b>-0.352**</b>	<b>-0.384**</b>	<b>-0.360**</b>
5	Competitiveness index (share of large businesses)	-0.199		-0.186	
	Competitiveness index (share of small businesses)		0.128		0.107
6	Share of the urban population, %	0.043	0.018	0.043	0.024
7	Unemployment rate, %	0.022	0.022	0.026	0.028
8	Dynamics of the disposable incomes, %	<b>0.378**</b>	<b>0.543***</b>	<b>0.327*</b>	<b>0.446**</b>
9	Votes for United Russia, %	0.177	0.193		
	Votes for Putin, %			-0.076	-0.125
	_cons	0.362	0.205	0.374	0.237
	N	108	108	107	107
	r2	0.433	0.407	0.422	0.399
	r2_a	0.380	0.352	0.368	0.343

\* p<.1; \*\* p<.05; \*\*\* p<.01

(though insignificant) correlation with the number of candidates in the elections, the current GRP, and the index of social tension in the given specification. Non-United Russia candidates get a slightly lower result in the elections (an insignificantly negative correlation); voting for United Russia in the 2016 elections had an insignificantly positive correlation with the support for the pro-Kremlin candidates and with the share of the urban population.

In Table 13 below, we have repeated the analysis excluding the so-called “special electoral culture zones”—a term introduced by Dmitri Oreshkin<sup>30</sup> with regards to the Chechen Republic, the Republic of Dagestan, the Karachay-Cherkess Republic, the Tyva Republic, the Republic of Mordovia, the Kabardino-Balkar Republic, the Republic of Tatarstan, the Kemerovo region, the Republic of

30 Oreshkin, D., Kozlov, V. Elections and demographics: The conflict of statistics (in Russian: «Выборы и демография: конфликт статистик»). Svobodnaya Mysl, No. 4, 2008. [https://scepsis.net/library/id\\_2105.html](https://scepsis.net/library/id_2105.html) [Accessed on March 6, 2019].

Table 13. Predictors of the support for the pro-Kremlin candidates in gubernatorial elections, excluding “electoral sultanates,” 2012-2018, LSM (clustered standard errors)

Hypothesis, number	Variable	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
1	Turnout, %	0.451***	0.418**	0.618***	0.620***
2	Number of candidates in the election	-0.018	0.008	-0.033	-0.014
3	Non-United Russia candidate	-0.524	-0.484	-0.594*	-0.568
4	Born in the region	-0.433***	-0.406**	-0.430**	-0.413**
5	Competitiveness index (share of large businesses)	-0.200		-0.179	
	Competitiveness index (share of small businesses)		0.142		0.111
6	Share of the urban population, %	0.098	0.058	0.073	0.041
7	Unemployment rate, %	0.114	0.140	0.062	0.077
8	Dynamics of the disposable incomes, %	0.347*	0.546***	0.307	0.447**
9	Votes for United Russia, %	0.225	0.239		
	Votes for Putin, %			-0.099	-0.149
	_cons				
	N	102	102	101	101
	r <sup>2</sup>	0.354	0.327	0.340	0.317
	r <sup>2</sup> <sub>a</sub>	0.290	0.261	0.274	0.250

\* p<.1; \*\* p<.05; \*\*\* p<.01

Ingushetia, and the Republic of North Ossetia. We have not seen any particular difference in the results: the correlation with real incomes was still present.

In the *Annex*, we provide findings that include control during the election years. As we can see, the integration of the control during the election years eliminates the statistical significance of the coefficient for the real disposable incomes and elevates the role of the coefficient for the percentage of the votes in support of the United Russia party during the 2016 elections. Additionally, this specification shows that voting for the pro-Kremlin candidates positively (but insignificantly) correlates with the support for Vladimir Putin at the presidential elections.

It came as a surprise that in most models the year 2017 positively and significantly correlates with the support for the pro-Kremlin candidates in gubernatorial elections, which might have been facilitated by various methods of administrative support largely employed by the federal center in 2017 (Kynev, 2017).

## CONCLUSION

### KEY FINDINGS

**The 2012-2017 period was characterized by a low level of electoral competitiveness in gubernatorial elections. Almost all the pro-Kremlin candidates confidently won against their opponents, even though some of the latter were well-known opposition leaders. The Russian government helped them to collect signatures of local lawmakers to pass through the restrictive municipal filter.**

The number of competitive elections, which are measured by the presence of a genuine competition among the candidates, has increased over 2018. In 2012-2017, only 10 out of 87 elections (11.5 percent) could have been called competitive; in 2018, this number amounted to seven out of 22 (31.8 percent).

In the competitive category, the number of elections that ended in defeat or replacement of incumbent regional leaders has greatly increased. If in 2012-2017, the Irkutsk region was the only one to see its leader replaced as a result of the election (when the United Russia candidate Sergei Yeroshchenko lost the runoff to the Communist Party representative Sergei Levchenko), in 2018, there were already four such regions, including the Primorye territory where a new governor was elected after a repeat election. For the first time since 2012, the pro-Kremlin candidates lost the first round of elections to opposition representatives—in Khakassia and the Khabarovsk territory.

In this study we have carried out a qualitative and quantitative analysis of factors that contribute to victories by the pro-Kremlin candidates in gubernatorial elections. The regression analysis based on the data regarding the elections that took place in 2012-2018 demonstrated that the percentage of the vote gained by the pro-Kremlin candidates positively correlates with a higher turnout (which can point to a higher possibility of election fraud) and the support for Vladimir Putin in the most recent presidential election (in the model's certain specifications). Also, we found an inverse correlation between the support for the pro-Kremlin candidates and the fact of their birth in a given region, which can be explained by the Kremlin's policy of appointing "outsiders" who have a "clean" track record in the region.

However, what is most interesting in our findings is the correlation between the dynamics of real disposable incomes and the voting for the pro-Kremlin candidates, which had never before been registered in similar studies (see, for example: Stress Test for a Half of Russia, 2018). As social and economic situation in Russia continues

to deteriorate, this correlation can be expected to become increasingly stronger. The results of our analysis suggest that the population's declining real incomes<sup>31</sup> can result in a substantial increase in electoral risks facing the Kremlin, especially at the regional level.

## HOW THE KREMLIN MITIGATES THE GROWING ELECTORAL RISKS

**As social discontent persists, the risk of a protest vote remains high. Recent Rosstat data show that by the end of 2018 Putin's so-called "May Decrees" (a series of ambitious executive orders targeting social, economic, housing, healthcare and other policies issued by the president in May 2012) promising wages growth for the public sector employees (or every fifth or sixth employed citizen of Russia) have been formally implemented only in 16 regions. In the rest of the regions (59), the decrees have not been implemented at least in one of the employee categories. Moreover, even if the wages were in fact raised, it was done by cutting off the overall number of the public sector employees and/or by removing bonuses and other stimulating payments from their paychecks. In the light of the ongoing economic stagnation, this means that real disposable incomes will continue to decline, which, as our analysis has shown, increases the risks facing the Kremlin's candidates.**

Under the increasingly deteriorating social and economic conditions in Russia, the pro-Kremlin candidates face the risk of a greater number of defeats in gubernatorial elections (held annually across the country). How can the Kremlin mitigate this risk?

### *Renewal of the gubernatorial corps*

First of all, the Kremlin has significantly accelerated the leadership rotation within the gubernatorial corps. The run-up to the 2019 gubernatorial elections has started historically early, and is accompanied by numerous replacements of the incumbents. It is likely that the Kremlin decided that delaying these issues, given the mistakes of the 2018 elections, might be risky.

Secondly, the course for "youthification" and of the gubernatorial corps has been taken as well. In 18 regions that are scheduled to hold gubernatorial elections in 2019, 14 had their leaders resign early. At the end of September 2018, governors of Astrakhan and Sakhalin regions were dismissed early, as well as the head of Kabardino-Balkaria Yuri Kokov (election in the latter region will be held in the republican parliament). In October 2018, six more regional leaders were dismissed early, including the long-serving governors Alexander Mikhaylov (the Kursk region) and Oleg Korolyov (the Lipetsk region), and political heavyweights, such as Georgy Poltavchenko (Saint Petersburg) and Rustem Khamitov (Bashkortostan). In March 2019, five more regional leaders were dismissed in Chelyabinsk, Murmansk, an Orenburg regions, and in the Altai Republic and the Republic of Kalmykia.

The most troublesome for the Kremlin are the three regions with the remaining "old" governors: Alexander Bocharov (Volgograd region), Vladimir Vladimirov (Stavropol territory), and Oleg Kubshinnikov (Vologda region). Governors of the first two regions face serious intra-elite conflicts. As social discontent grows, so does the risk of the protest voting.

In some regions, however, this approach seems to be unreasonable and overly cautious, given voter preferences in the most recent federal election. For instance, the re-elections of Rustem Khamitov, the dismissed president of Bashkortostan,

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31 Bondarenko, M. Russians' real incomes continue to decline 2019 (in Russian: «Реальные доходы россиян в 2019 году продолжили падение»). RBC, February 19, 2019 <https://www.rbc.ru/economics/19/02/2019/5c6c3a0a9a794787fc457225> [Accessed on March 12, 2019]

or of the former governors of the Kursk and Lipetsk regions, would hardly have been problematic. These leaders had been repeatedly reelected in the past. Nevertheless, the Kremlin likely projected that they might receive lower election results and decided to replace them with younger public administrators who, within less than a year, would need to win authority among voters and the regional elites.

There is no guarantee, however, to expect that all the new appointees will be able to get elected. Much will depend of the composition of the electoral competition (those candidates who will be “allowed” to run) and on the social and economic situation in August-September 2019. There is an additional risk: the Kremlin’s policy of ceaseless rotation of the elites might lead to the depletion of its personnel resources.

The Kremlin’s preparation for the upcoming gubernatorial elections will hardly be limited to early dismissals of the incumbents—both the experienced, elderly leaders, and the young ones who have low chances for being elected. This time, under the conditions of the growing protest sentiment, the United Russia’s and Putin’s declining popularity and given the 2018 experience (surprising losses of the Kremlin’s candidates), Moscow will be better prepared for the elections. For example, opponents who will be running against the Kremlin’s candidates will be selected with more caution; most of the candidates themselves will be self-nominated instead of being put on the United Russia ticket; their campaigns will be supported through various investments into the regions; etc. The registration procedure will be stricter; the municipal filter will be invoked to prevent strong opposition candidates from running in the election. Campaigns will focus on the prospects of regional development, which can be implements by the new appointees, while current and past problems will be written off onto old leaders. At the same time, the Kremlin will try to highlight lack of experience in the “protest” candidates who might manage to get registered to run (most of those are likely to be members of the Communist Party). The Kremlin will also try to prevent the run-offs, as they increase winning chances of the “protest” candidates. These are the key tactics that the Kremlin will likely employ to win, but the voting results over 60 percent are expected to be rare.



*Voting in Lyubertsy, 2017 / Photo - Tatyana Yurasova*

### ***Runoffs in doubt?***

With one year separating gubernatorial elections in various regions, it will be hard for the Kremlin to revamp the election law even in the interest of the ruling party. Still, revisions of the law cannot be ruled out either, including the abolishment of the runoff that seems to be challenging for the pro-Kremlin candidates. Especially, if the failures of the 2018 elections will be repeated.

The experience of holding runoffs—in the Primorye and Khabarovsk territories, the Vladimir region in 2018, and the Irkutsk region in 2015—has shown that they result in a higher turnout and mobilization of the voters in support of the opposition candidates. As a result, the opposition wins, while the pro-Kremlin candidates get a slight boost in the vote in absolute terms but lose percentage-wise, as happened in the Vladimir region.

In the regions where runoffs were not marred by mass fraud—in the Khabarovsk territory and the Vladimir region—the opposition candidates had clear-cut victories over long-serving governors. Moreover, the LDPR candidates absorbed not only the votes of their party supporters, but also those of all pro-opposition voters—mostly, the numerous supporters of the Communist Party. The party membership of the opposition candidates was inconsequential—voters cast their ballots not so much for a candidate from any particular party, but rather against United Russia. This development can be seen as protest voting.

The runoff in the Primorye territory that was carried out hastily one week after the first round, instead of the two weeks stipulated by law, did nothing to help the pro-Kremlin candidate Andrei Tarasenko—the runoff resulted in the incumbent governor's defeat. Only the mass fraud during vote-counting at some polling stations (mainly in Ussuriysk) brought him a questionable victory. But then, upon the request of Russia's Central Election Commission, the regional election commission cancelled these results anyway. The appointment of Oleg Kozhemyako, a seasoned politician, who had previously served as governor in three regions in Russia's Far East, following Tarasenko's disappointing performance, shows that the Kremlin intended to keep control over an important post of the Primorye governor and to prevent the Communist candidate Andrei Ishchenko from taking over.

In the same manner, a long procedure of rescheduling the runoff due to a series of refusals by certain candidates to participate was introduced in order to hinder the victory of another Communist candidate, Valentin Konovalov, in Khakassia where he had been noticeably leading over the republic's incumbent governor Viktor Zimin. The obvious purpose was to have the election declared null or void to hold a new election later with a new set of candidates and to ensure that United Russia's nominee would be unchallenged. However, this effort failed, since Konovalov managed to win even this noncompetitive election.

The increasing electoral competitiveness in gubernatorial races that often results in the defeat of incumbent regional leaders supported by the United Russia party and President Vladimir Putin could potentially lead to the abolition of runoffs for the sake of the pro-Kremlin candidates. The Kremlin could keep a form of the elections in which the winner would be determined by a simple majority vote in the first round. The abolition of the runoffs can be implemented by either the federal government or the regional legislatures. The case for this course of action can be easily made by using a set of arguments, including large runoff-related expenses, uncertainty about financing these expenses, extended periods (up to 14 days) of time with no governor between rounds. The pro-Kremlin candidates will find it easier to win such elections. In fact, had gubernatorial elections been held by this scenario, the ruling party would only have lost in two cases—in Khakassia and in the Khabarovsk territory. Moreover, even in these two cases some special preparations (such as diluting the percentage of the vote in support of the genuine opposition

by registering additional candidates) could have prevented the ruling party's defeat in the first round of elections. United Russia's numerous victories in parliamentary elections in single-member districts prove this point.

The abolition of runoffs will noticeably reduce the number of potential defeats of the ruling party's candidates in gubernatorial elections. Even in case of their defeat, the Kremlin will be able to find ways to deal with the opposition winners—from their early dismissals due to alleged violations during the campaign to initiation of criminal cases against them to their integration into United Russia's "reserve pool." It appears that the scenario in which newly elected governors from opposition parties are willingly joining the "vertical of power" might become the most common, since all the unexpectedly elected regional leaders are representatives of the systemic opposition that is by default prepared to cooperate with the government.

The question of the runoffs abolition remains open, but the runup to yet another round of gubernatorial elections had never been launched so early and on such a massive scale. The Russian authorities launched their campaign for the upcoming September 8, 2019 elections right after the September 9, 2018 elections had been over. The course for the "youthification" of Russia's gubernatorial ranks has been set up in the hope that the new acting governors would use this year to prove themselves as regional leaders and prepare for the 2019 elections. But which scenario these elections will follow, and whether or not they will be competitive with unexpected results, we will only find out in September.

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## ANNEX. CONTROL FOR ELECTION YEARS.

### REGRESSION MODELS THAT INCLUDE CONTROL FOR ELECTION YEARS

Table 14. Predictors of the support for the pro-Kremlin candidates in gubernatorial elections, including control for the election year 2012-2018, LSM (clustered standard errors)

Hypothesis, number	Variable	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
1	Turnout, %	<b>0.372**</b>	<b>0.346**</b>	<b>0.487***</b>	<b>0.492***</b>
2	Number of candidates in the election	-0.042	-0.015	-0.015	0.016
3	Non-United Russia candidate	-0.312	-0.290	-0.322	-0.308
4	Born in the region	<b>-0.403***</b>	<b>-0.386***</b>	<b>-0.399***</b>	<b>-0.386**</b>
5	Competitiveness index (share of large businesses)	-0.150		-0.160	
	Competitiveness index (share of small businesses)		0.072		0.054
6	Share of the urban population, %	0.075	0.061	0.071	0.065
7	Unemployment rate, %	0.017	0.005	0.005	-0.006
8	Dynamics of disposable incomes, %	0.305	0.295	0.405	0.407
9	Votes for United Russia, %	<b>0.246*</b>	<b>0.271*</b>		
	Votes for Putin, %			0.139	0.121

Hypothesis, number	Variable	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	<b>2012</b>	0.072	0.321	0.255	0.471
	<b>2013</b>	0.265	0.401	0.380	0.475
	<b>2014</b>	0.673	0.833*	0.714	0.841
	<b>2015</b>	0.290	0.387	0.478	0.548
	<b>2016</b>	0.160	0.220	0.289	0.324
	<b>2017</b>	<b>0.826***</b>	<b>0.870***</b>	<b>1.054***</b>	<b>1.096***</b>
	<b>_cons</b>	-0.026	-0.255	-0.271	-0.494
	<b>N</b>	108	108	107	107
	<b>r2</b>	0.512	0.496	0.498	0.479
	<b>r2_a</b>	0.432	0.414	0.415	0.393

\* p<.1; \*\* p<.05; \*\*\* p<.01



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