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# **SYSTEMIC OPPOSITION AT RUSSIA'S GUBERNATORIAL ELECTIONS**

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## **SYSTEMIC OPPOSITION AT RUSSIA'S GUBERNATORIAL ELECTIONS<sup>2</sup>**

This study is based on descriptive analysis of systemic opposition in Russia and its regions. We focus on the procedure and results of gubernatorial elections held in 2012-2015 in 62 regions (twice in two of them). The author has analyzed statistical information on electoral participation and performance of the opposition at gubernatorial elections, along with numerous interviews with political actors and experts. This study presents a logical model of ruling elites' and systemic opposition's strategic behavior and interaction proved by cases studied by the author in Russia's regions. The author gives the definition of systemic opposition and analyzes its relations with the federal and regional authorities. Of particular importance is the role of systemic opposition in the legitimating of gubernatorial elections. However, the study shows that the legitimating process fails due to low turnout and usually leads to electoral losses of systemic opposition. Gubernatorial elections give systemic opposition very limited opportunities (despite the fact of its first victory in 2015) but still integrate it into the system while leaving the systemic parties with more chances to get political positions in legislative bodies.

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## **Introduction**

The topic of opposition in hybrid and authoritarian regimes is often focused on pro-democracy movements aiming at changing the regime itself. At the same time, the phenomenon of systemic opposition is misunderstood, undervalued and unstudied. From our point of view, the systemic opposition should find its proper place in a theory of hybrid / authoritarian regimes and be considered more seriously as a political force. Still there is a strong need for further research of this phenomenon and better theoretical framework. The studies of opposition in Russia are full of myths and misconceptions, one of them being in an attempt to divide opposition into “real” (i.e. anti-systemic / non-systemic) and “pretending” (i.e. systemic). In we want to study the Russian opposition seriously we should revise many concepts used in such studies such as the concepts of dominant party, electoral authoritarianism, and opposition itself and move further into the studies of authoritarian institutions [Gandhi, Przeworski, 2007], [Gandhi, 2008].

The idea of this paper is to look at the opposition from a different angle seeing it as an integral part of the hybrid regime and its supporting and necessary element. We call the opposition systemic not because it does not have any ideas how to change the system. In terms of ideology, almost any opposition can be or at least seem anti-systemic. In our opinion systemic is the legal opposition, which is accommodated within the existing political system with some limited access to power and has neither will nor resources to change it but enjoys its own organization and strategies.

To understand the practices of this regime it is important to see them from the both sides. From the side of authorities it is a constant rule-setting and limit-setting / punishing process. The authorities produce both control and limited opportunities for political actors. Once in Russia's regime its key element is the presidential and executive power, the control is aimed at the legislative bodies and sub-national regional and local authorities. In existing system, this means the domination of United Russia among regional governors, mayors, regional and municipal deputies, and in spoils' distribution as well. The practices of limitations and punishment consider different barriers to block the penetration into power of unwanted elements in unwanted quantities. Then if some unwanted elements appear to win the local election such instruments as forced resignation and criminal / corruption cases can be used to wipe them out of power.

Setting rules of control and punishment is a practice that lets the authorities manage the opposition [March, 2009]. Since the rules are often unclear, or different elites groups may have different views on them, the opposition never knows whether it gets the prize or the punishment if winning a sub-national election. The practice of uncertainty is also very important. In other words, rule- and limit-setting never has to be clear in order to keep the oppositional actors unsure

of their activities' results. Such uncertainty usually makes them more accurate and cautious (however aggressive behavior is also possible in an attempt to make the authorities compromise).

The most interesting theme is the behavior of the systemic opposition under conditions of impossibility of federal-level victory (since Zyuganov's loss at the presidential elections in 1996) and low but still a possibility of regional and municipal victories. That is why this research considers regional level of the system but gives conclusions for the system as a whole. The question we research is about the strategy of systemic opposition, which we see as a strategy of adaptation, and of maximizing the political resource within the certain limits. Mainly we focus on three parties of parliamentary opposition such as CPRF, LDPR and Fair Russia (with regard to the fact that their relations with authorities are different too). We also take into consideration other officially registered parties if needed.

In our opinion, the most appropriate theory to understand the systemic opposition is the rational choice institutionalism [Shepsle, 2008]. The analytical paradigm we use considers rational behavior of oppositional actors aiming at maximizing political profit under current conditions. From rational point, immediate profits within the system give more opportunities and fewer risks than the struggle for power on the national level with zero chances to win. Pieces of sub-national power can be that kind of profits the systemic opposition needs most and can get one way or another. However, such rationalism does not mean that the actors just agree with the enforced rules: they can try to promote their ideas and overcome the set boundaries and see what happens around the corner of the maze. Anyway, this is the opposition in such terms that it has alternative views in politics and economy, can criticize the government and draw support from dissatisfied and undoubtedly oppositional voters. Political competition and authoritarianism can be combined in certain ways and such combinations deserve further studies too [Levitsky, Way, 2010].

### **Control and legitimation at the gubernatorial elections**

The regional governors' elections started again in 2012 have become pivotal point for this system. Their analysis is usually based on theory of electoral authoritarianism [Schedler, 2006]. What is most important is the electoral procedure, both formal and informal, which uses practices turning the competition into the consolidation (or at least dialogue and bargaining) of the actors. It implies not exclusion of opposition but rather its inclusion into the system of power/resources distribution on certain conditions of loyalty.

The mechanism of inclusion at the gubernatorial elections is based on the municipal filter that is the main and very high barrier for candidates' registration. This filter gives the regions a possibility to choose a threshold at anything between 5 and 10 per cent of municipal deputies and

elected municipal heads to give their signed support for the candidate of their choice. But the worst part is the need to collect the signatures in three fourths of municipalities of the first sub-regional level such as towns and municipal *rayons* (districts). There are also hidden obstacles such as possible problems with notarial verification of signatures, deputies who appear to sign for two candidates when only one signature is valid (so called double signatures), and the regional electoral commission if it finds some signatures void for whatever reason.

Currently the municipal barrier blocks registration for all the parties except for the communists (and very rarely Fair Russia) but they can easily register their candidates only in a few regions. That means that the participation at the gubernatorial elections for each party automatically means inclusion and loyalty because of a pre-electoral informal deal with the authorities. It should be remembered that the independents are not allowed except for a handful of regions including Moscow, so it is all about parties and their closer relations with the authorities. Thus, municipal barrier means very restrictive policy. The selection of candidates becomes a crucial informal procedure because there is no formal way to overcome the barrier just touring the region and agitating the municipal deputies. Only those selected in discussions and bargaining procedures with the federal and regional authorities can become candidates.

Extremely high barrier to access the political market at the gubernatorial elections not only boosts parties' willingness to cooperate with authorities but also creates a very important problem of legitimacy of authoritarian elections. This problem is both practical and also interesting and controversial in terms of political theory [Howard, Roessler, 2006].

The legitimacy problem in hybrid regime can be solved only by means of authoritarian management. The procedural legitimacy here means satisfactory turnout, number of participants and their political status. What is satisfactory is purely empirical of course. But as the practice of elections shows the satisfactory turnout should be more than 40 per cent and the number of candidates is no less than four. According to our calculation, the overall turnout in 64 cases of the regions where gubernatorial elections were held in 2012-2015<sup>3</sup> reached 45.6% while at the State Duma elections in 2011 it was 58.8% in the same group.

Limited and unfree competition at the gubernatorial elections leads to very low turnout. As compared with the federal elections turnout drops sharply by 10-20 points (13.2 points down for the whole sample) and can be lower than 40 and sometimes even 30% (with anti-record at 21% in Arkhangelsk region in 2015). Obviously, this worsens the legitimacy problem. However, the limited public support of United Russia and ruling elites means risks of electoral failures if the turnout rises. Hence, we have two competing concepts of turnout management. In the 2000s

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<sup>3</sup> Our sample for this study is made up by 64 cases of electoral campaigns in 62 regions (in Amur and Bryansk regions elections were held twice during this period).

authorities preferred to boost turnout as the socio-economic situation was improving and fears of opposition decreased to none. Results of federal elections used to show very high correlation between the rise of turnout and United Russia's results [Turovsky, 2012]. In recent years, the practice of keeping low turnout has become more typical due to the fear of protest mobilization. The idea is to bring to vote only the loyal part of electorate dependent on the authorities (such as pensioners, bureaucrats, the military, social sphere employees paid from the state budget etc.).

As expected, almost all the gubernatorial elections in 2012-2015 demonstrated significant decrease in turnout. In fact this is usual because at the regional elections in Russia turnout is always lower. The turnout went up as compared with State Duma elections in 2011 in Tatarstan, Samara and Kemerovo regions only. But these are exceptions found in the regions with the most effective administrative mobilization of voters<sup>4</sup> [Oreshkin, 2001].

### **Competition or participation?**

Under conditions of low turnout, the regime tries to solve the legitimacy problem by increasing the participation of systemic opposition. The idea is to enhance the competition but still limit it in a way safe for incumbents and/or system stability. However, this leads to an awkward situation when United Russia deputies are forced to sign for the candidates of other parties. In extreme case of Moscow United Russia gave part of the signatures to its fierce enemy Naval'niy. Of course, the distribution of loyalist signatures among different parties makes the latter systemic but in too weird way.

It should be mentioned that the federal center is more interested in solving the legitimacy problem than the regional authorities are. Initially the very idea of gubernatorial elections' return was aimed at rising public responsibility of the regional power, ensuring its feedback with the people. What is very important is the obligatory second round if nobody gets 50 per cent in the first round. In Russia's practice the second round is considered dangerous for the incumbent due to the risk of oppositional consolidation in the second round (as 1990s elections showed; see, for example, [Kolosov, Turovsky, 1997]). This was proved again in 2015 when an incumbent lost elections in the second round in Irkutsk region (according to the typical scenario, even the turnout rose in the second round in opposition's favor).

On one hand, Russia's gubernatorial elections seem to be a case of electoral authoritarianism aimed at ensuring the incumbents' victory. On the other hand, this is more complicated phenomenon, which we call sub-national authoritarianism in hierarchical power system (on federalism and electoral authoritarianism see, for example, [Ross, 2005]). This means

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<sup>4</sup> Samara region was no surprise too since its governor Merkushev used to rule Mordovia, which was one of clear examples of the region with "managed" voting.

that the federal center tries to control the electoral competition in its own and not regional incumbents' interest. In other words, the federal center as a dominating power body in the system needs the legitimacy of elections more than the legitimacy of each governor elected. That means that the federal center insists on the participation of all or almost all parties presented in the State Duma, which again stimulates their inclusion into the system. And the Kremlin is not interested in super-high results of gubernatorial support, especially if achieved by fraud.

Our study shows that all three parties of parliamentary opposition took part at the elections in 35 cases out of 64. In 17 more cases, CPRF and LDPR were present but Fair Russia was not. The pair of LDPR and Fair Russia competed in six more cases. On the other hand, only in one region none of three parliamentary opposition parties participated. In three cases, only LDPR was present and in one case, it was either CPRF or Fair Russia left alone. There are no cases of the pair made up by Fair Russia and CPRF. All this shows that the participation of systemic opposition is not omnipresent but very significant. Considering that CPRF and LDPR have more stable electorate, their participation in 52 cases (in 35 of them with Fair Russia also present) out of 64 makes the elections more or less competitive.

The process of competition management is aimed at creating more or less significant participation of different parties. According to our calculation, the number of participants at gubernatorial elections averaged 4.56 corresponding to number of four parliamentary parties with some small extra. However some parliamentary parties can be absent and on the other hand, more smaller parties involved. It is very characteristic that it was LDPR which usually goes into informal coalition with United Russia which could participate in maximum number of cases (61). The most powerful oppositional party CPRF had fewer chances (53 cases). Fair Russia while being loyal was often absent due to the lack of candidates (42 cases). Other 25 parties were present in 52 campaigns.

The participation of smaller parties usually reflects Russia's practice of "technical" candidates who does not take part in public campaign but secure incumbent from withdrawal of all other candidates. One of the most experienced of smaller parties, "Patriots of Russia" participated in 17 cases, and another such party, "Right Cause" did this in five cases. Both parties existed before the last reform of the party system in 2012, which led to the skyrocketing rise of the number of registered parties. More oppositional of "older" parties, "Yabloko" could participate in three campaigns only. As for the new parties created after reform, it seems that some of them were just picked for "technical" participation and distributed among the regions. Eleven parties were present in only one region each (but including oppositional PARNAS). Besides the number of parties taking part at gubernatorial elections (29 plus 22 with unsuccessful nominations) does not cover the whole list of registered parties (75 parties as of October 2015).

However the politics of legitimation does not mean that each party of systemic opposition is guaranteed to take part in each gubernatorial campaign and that at least one new party can have its try too. While 292 candidates were allowed to come through municipal filter and could finish the campaign, 185 nominated candidates (38.8%) were sorted off one way or another. Most of them (139) were denied registration. In 39 more cases, candidates were withdrawn by parties themselves or did not apply for registration as it was clearly impossible to overcome to barrier or they decided to support the governor instead. Finally, seven candidates were withdrawn after successful registration for different reasons.

Authorities were especially restrictive towards PARNAS and Yabloko as less controlled and predictable liberal parties. Smaller leftist or nationalist parties or parties without ideological bias were obviously more reliable as a source of technical candidates. Also important are the cases when the authorities blocked the participation of former governors or other high-ranking persons. Such candidates had no other opportunity than to apply for support from smaller parties. All such attempts failed in the very beginning. In Republic of Altay, party “Great Fatherland” cancelled nomination of former federal minister of energy Kalyuzhniy. In Bashkortostan, party “Civic Power” did the same with the former republican prime minister Sarbaev who was earlier considered as main successor of the former republican president Rakhimov. Both former governors who attempted to participate (Rutskoy in Kursk region, Chernogorov in Stavropol’ kray) could not collect municipal signatures without authorities’ support.

As for systemic opposition, the practice showed that they had their limits too. Surely most significant were the cases when the candidates of parliamentary opposition failed to launch or finish their campaigns. CPRF and Fair Russia had five such cases each, LDPR had three cases. In case of CPRF usually this was the strongest competitor of incumbent. For example in 2014 promising candidates of CPRF were denied registration in Lipetsk and Nizhniy Novgorod regions while in Tyumen’ region its registered candidate went upon investigation and was forced to withdraw. Besides in Volgograd region CPRF refused to run when its strongest possible candidate and regional party leader went under criminal investigation. However, in 2015 Russia’s Supreme Court did favor to CPRF and approved its candidate’s registration in Omsk region. This case proved the Kremlin tries to give parties of systemic opposition more opportunities at gubernatorial elections pressing down governors’ interest to bring the competition to the minimum. But the scenario of strong elites running with the help of smaller parties did not work both for the centre and for the regional governors too.

LDPR withdrew its candidate only once (in Orenburg region) thus ruining the only attempt in Russia’s history to create the united opposition to the governor (this candidate Katasonov was supported by CPRF and Fair Russia and as a result of his withdrawal no party of

parliamentary opposition was present in that region at the elections). One very serious case of registration's denial was found with Fair Russia in Saint Petersburg (Dmitrieva who was considered even possible winner if allowed to participate). Most of these cases of pressure on systemic opposition seemed as overreaction but regional authorities clearly wanted to secure their victories and make them seem landslide. The Kremlin did not try to prevent this up to a certain limit when it decided to help CPRF in Omsk region in 2015.

On the other hand in some regions systemic opposition preferred to support the governor from the start of campaign. Most clear were the cases of striking deal in public when systemic opposition got mandates in the Federation Council instead. Fair Russia decided not to nominate its candidates in Primorsky kray, Vladimir and Omsk regions and the governors nominated this party's State Duma deputies as their representatives in the Federation Council. LDPR got the Federation Council's seats in Bryansk region and Orenburg region (where it cancelled nomination of oppositional candidate as mentioned above). Such deals looked more rational for systemic opposition than participation without any significant result<sup>5</sup>.

However, the policy of including the systemic opposition into the gubernatorial elections' system has its clear drawbacks. First of them is low interest of the parties considered that they have small chances to win. But the case of Irkutsk regions in 2015 proved to them that the victory is not impossible at all. Second is low turnout due to very inactive campaigns (it also should be remembered that since the voting takes place on the second Sunday of September the main part of campaign goes on in the dead-season month of August). Despite attempts to boost parties' participation incumbents showed very high results. In addition, in fact the policy of procedural legitimization of gubernatorial elections (supported in some regions like Moscow by relatively fair electoral procedure) failed due to low interest of both parties and voters. The key problem is still an unfree selection of candidates.

Failure of procedural legitimization of gubernatorial elections with the help of systemic opposition makes the authorities think of another ways to legitimate the sub-national power by increasing its public support and accountability. The very important question is the quality of authorities' support as different from the "quantity" given in extremely high electoral results (our calculation shows that United Russia's incumbents got 78.4% of the overall vote at 2012-2015 elections<sup>6</sup>). Recent trends show that under conditions of low turnout the incumbents' support results from mobilization of dependent social groups. In competitive environment, the support of incumbents becomes much more fragile (as Moscow mayoral elections showed in 2013, followed by governor's loss in Irkutsk region in 2015). However, systemic opposition at most of

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<sup>5</sup> However, loyal mode of participation can be rewarded too. In Saint Petersburg, its governor Poltavchenko appointed LDPR's candidate Sukhenko head of culture department after the election.

<sup>6</sup> Including data on formally independent Sobyenin and Belykh clearly supported by United Russia.

the gubernatorial elections is too dependent to make the competition really fierce and attractive to voters. Moreover, the incumbent always has an advantage at the start due to lack or absence of competition in the period between the elections. Very rarely any representative of any opposition has resources to carry on the political struggle beyond the short period of electoral campaign. In addition, the managed selection of the candidates creates the situation when the most popular candidates can be banned from participation. Under such circumstances, the authorities seek for other ways to legitimate sub-national power by means of performance legitimation (by introduction of efficiency evaluations and ratings, solving local socio-economic problems etc.). However, this part of legitimation process is beyond this study.

### **Shrinking electorate**

In our study, we also try to understand how the inclusion into the system and opportunistic behavior affect the electoral results<sup>7</sup>. We uncovered that core electorate of all the parties of parliamentary opposition shrank after federal elections. Limitations and manipulations typical for sub-national electoral authoritarianism bring about self-restriction of oppositional activities and public campaigning and this along with lack of resources leads to the poor electoral mobilization [Gel'man, Ross, 2010].

In our analysis, we introduce the coefficient of mobilization (CM) which is the ratio of percents of the vote at given and previous elections. To eliminate the change of turnout we use percent calculated from the whole number of voters (for turnout itself this is turnout at gubernatorial elections divided by State Duma's turnout). We see electoral results as a sum of efforts of all the participants to mobilize their electorate. This sum makes up the turnout which changes from one election to another due to efficiency of efforts. At sub-national elections, which have lower significance in the eyes of broad public, the turnout is usually lower which means that each participant can bring to vote only part of supporters mobilized at the federal elections.

Decrease of systemic opposition's support is a clear trend at 2012-2015 sub-national elections (see table 1). At the gubernatorial elections, CPRF enhanced support (CM more than 1) in Bryansk region in 2012 (where in the end only two candidates, United Russia's and CPRF's were left) and Mariy El in 2015. In 43 cases, CM was less than 0.5 (down to minimal 0.07 in Kemerovo region). Candidates of Fair Russia performed better than their party only in Chukotka, which was explained again by the cut number of candidates (CPRF could not participate). Usually Fair Russia had worse CM than CPRF and sometimes less than 0.2 (0.06 in Kemerovo

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<sup>7</sup> In further calculations of systemic opposition's performance, we do not count its incumbents and consider only those who ran against the incumbents.

region and 0.07 in Krasnoyarsk kray). LDPR also performed better than at the State Duma elections in one case only. It was Belgorod region where CPRF did not participate. Usually CM of LDPR was less than 0.5 but not as catastrophic as Fair Russia's (the worst results of LDPR being at 0.11-0.15). On the contrary, United Russia's candidates produced very high mobilization of loyal electorate. The exceptions where the percent (from the whole number of voters) decreased were 13 cases (see table 1).

Table 1. Coefficient of Mobilization (CM) at 2012-2015 Gubernatorial Elections.

	Average CM	Regions with CM more than 1.0	Regions with CM at 0.5-1.0	Regions with CM at 0.25-0.5	Regions with CM at 0.1-0.25	Regions with CM less than 0.1
United Russia	1.30	48	13	0	0	0
CPRF	0.38	2	7	36	6	1
LDPR	0.29	1	8	23	28	0
Fair Russia	0.24	1	5	11	20	4

Sources: author's calculations based on statistics presented by Central Electoral Commission ([www.cikrf.ru](http://www.cikrf.ru)).

Comparing electoral mobilization at the State Duma and further gubernatorial elections, we can see that the voting for the dominant party is much more stable. Incumbent governors usually show results exciding those of United Russia at the State Duma elections. On the contrary, systemic opposition loses half of its electorate or even more. This leads to much more striking prevalence of governors over systemic opposition's candidates than United Russia has at the parliamentary elections over these parties. Concluding this we can state that incumbents mobilized 1.3 times more votes than United Russia did in 2011. At the same time CPRF candidates attracted about 38% of their party previous supporters and LDPR candidates about 29%. Fair Russia's candidates received around one fourth of their party vote. The former supporters of systemic opposition are definitely "to blame" for the decrease in turnout.

To prove our conclusions we also analyzed the stability of political parties' support using correlation analysis (correlation coefficients for the sample of the regions where elections were

held, between party results at the 2011 State Duma elections and their candidates' results at gubernatorial elections calculated from the whole numbers of voters). This analysis proves that loyalist voting is much more coherent than oppositional. For United Russia correlation coefficient (Pearson<sup>8</sup>) is at +0.74\*\*\* while for CPRF +0.59\*\*\* and for LDPR +0.42\*\*\*. On the contrary, Fair Russia candidates' support poorly relates to the former voting for the party (+0.2)<sup>9</sup>. All this shows rather low level of loyalty of systemic opposition's electorate towards their parties' candidates at gubernatorial elections. In addition, we can see the clear hierarchy of electoral coherence for different parties.

The problems of systemic opposition in its attempts to mobilize voters at gubernatorial elections can be seen from the possible loss of their electorate in governors' favor. To estimate the possible transfer of votes we calculated correlation coefficient for all the regions where the percent of United Russia's supported governors (calculated from the whole number of voters) rose as compared with United Russia's result in 2011 while the percent of systemic opposition's candidates decreased. If the correlation is negative, this means that the rise of one's votes correlates with the loss of another's. However, we did not find any significant correlations<sup>10</sup>.

One more interesting feature is the split of systemic opposition's supporters in terms of their turnout at the gubernatorial elections. We correlated the loss of turnout with the loss of systemic opposition's support. CPRF shows almost zero correlation (Pearson +0.11, Spearman +0.09). At the same time there are more positive correlations for LDPR (Pearson +0.31\*, Spearman +0.32\*) and Fair Russia (Pearson +0.32, Spearman +0.33\*). This may mean that the supporters of LDPR and Fair Russia more often neglect gubernatorial elections thus undermining not only turnout but also support for their parties' candidates. Anyway, further investigations are needed to prove the points about electoral transfers. It is clear that no general trend exists and the behavior of supporters of different parties depends greatly on the personal features of their candidates and ruling governors.

### **Strategies conflicting and entwining**

Therefore, the gubernatorial elections tied systemic opposition closer to the regime but did not give it many sufficient resources (however remembering CPRF's victory in Irkutsk region). Neither had they solved the problem of authoritarian legitimacy. In this awkward

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<sup>8</sup> All the official candidates of United Russia and two "independent" incumbents supported.

<sup>9</sup> Spearman correlation coefficients are as follows: 0.62\*\*\* for United Russia, 0.59\*\*\* for CPRF, 0.44\*\*\* for LDPR, 0.29 for Fair Russia.

<sup>10</sup> Correlation coefficients for CPRF -0.1 (Pearson) and 0.05 (Spearman), for LDPR -0.14 (Pearson) and -0.09 (Spearman), for Fair Russia -0.05 (Pearson) and 0.01 (Spearman).

situation, the strategies of both authorities and systemic opposition should be analyzed more thoroughly.

From our point of view, the authorities' strategy is based on three pillars of dominance, patronage and distribution. Considering dominance strategy, we suppose that Russia does not have a typical regime with a dominant party [Remington, 2008]. Rather this is a multi-tier regime of dominant actors striving for control over all the non-dominant actors. It may seem that the regime, which has created a dominant party, should work in its interests only. But as with the case of sub-national electoral authoritarianism Russia has more complicated regime. Dominant party is not fully reliable in terms of its public support and inner conflicts. That is why the regime encourages the systemic opposition to collect the rest of the votes and needs to spread the dominance strategy over the opposition as well (as different from more typical dominant party systems, see, for example, [Magaloni, 2006]).

There are two dimensions of patronage strategy. Firstly, the central authorities manage regional competition and legitimacy trying to keep it on a certain mid-level because in hierarchical system the regional power should be relatively strong and legitimate but dependent and weak in center-regional relations as well. These are central authorities who try to decide what kind of competition should regions get. Secondly, all territorial levels of authorities try to manage all the parties. Such patronage creates underdeveloped and peripheralized party system where parties are weak, dependent and opportunistic, and their origins come from influential groups of elite or are purely personalist [Hale, 2006].

The strategy of distribution is very interesting to study as it also considers very important inclusion / exclusion choice [Blaydes, 2011]. Our study shows that the regime is more restrictive for systemic opposition in regional executive power. However, it has started small-scale distributive policy even there. Firstly, LDPR was granted with the governor's position in Smolensk region in 2012 (by means of governor's nomination before the elections started). In 2013, Fair Russia turn came after the party showed its full loyalty and got Zabaykalye governorship in reward. More complicated is CPRF case. CPRF in 2013 has lost its last region in Vladimir. Nevertheless, in 2014 it was rewarded with governorship in Oryol region, which is the native region of party leader Zyuganov. But the concessions are not only small but also they do not allow "oppositional" governors to become too strong. In all three cases, Putin appointed governors without roots in the same regions and experience of regional or municipal government (all were State Duma deputies). This means that they have limited support from local elites and are not experienced enough to become effective and create a brilliant showcase of successful rule by systemic opposition. As for the "free and fair battle" CPRF still is the only lucky winner in Irkutsk region thus enhancing number of its governorships to two.

Despite the return of gubernatorial elections, the president keeps the position of dominant distributor as he appoints interim governors when the term expires and this starts the whole process long before the election itself. The spread of this practice is easy due to the only one day of elections left that is in September. Putin became a main driving force in governors' selection and change. In 2012, he did not change governors in five regions where elections were held. But he started to change governors more actively then. In 2013, the president made four changes of governors before the elections, and one of them was in the interest of Fair Russia (other four governors stayed). In 2014, elections were held in 30 regions. Putin changed governors in 10 of them (one in the interest of CPRF). In 2015 seven regions out of 21 got new governors (one of them a bit earlier, in 2014). So voters have changed only one governor so far while Putin made 21 changes before the elections bringing to power new governors in almost one third of the regions where elections were held. It is also important that most of the incumbents had a title of interim governors appointed by Putin before the election (due to three reasons: governor's change, incumbent's term expired, incumbent cut the term in order to be elected). Only four incumbents out of 64 ran as "normal", not interim governors because their terms were due to expire after the date of election in the end of the year. In 2015, there was an interesting case of Kaliningrad region, where governor's term did not expire before the elections. Despite this fact, it was decided to appoint the incumbent to the position of interim governor to prove Putin's support.

Thus in all cases but one it was the president but not the voters who decided which governors had to leave and which to stay. However, the inclusion of other parties into the governors' recruitment is painful for the system as it undermines its consolidation. This showed in Zabaykalye where United Russia and former governor's clientele were forced to support new governor who represented Fair Russia and had no roots in the region. The same happened in Oryol region where dissatisfied elites tried to nominate competitors to CPRF's interim governor but none of them were registered. On the other hand, we can see that the new parties are not allowed to hold governors' positions as the case of Civic Platform showed (the most powerful candidates of this party representing local elites failed to register in Zabaykal'sky kray and Vladimir region in 2013).

Thus, the sub-national executive power is all but closed for the systemic opposition except for a few cases of distribution and only one case of electoral victory. However the very existence of such cases makes systemic opposition search the opportunities to win or to be selected (or at least tolerated) to win sub-national elections. However, the best opportunities to accommodate the systemic opposition are still present in legislative power. This branch of power is not closed for the opposition and the policy there is less restrictive, given the lower importance

of this power branch. What is more important is much more widespread distributive politics of dominant regional actors and United Russia, which means a spoils' distribution. Roughly, in half of the regions other parties hold positions of deputy speakers and heads of committees and commissions [Reuter, Turovsky, 2014]. In more regions it may be smaller spoils of deputy heads of committees and commissions (since the law adopted under president Medvedev rules that each party presented in the regional legislature should keep at least one spoil).

The Russia's regime relies on distributive politics aimed at the accommodation of systemic opposition. The federal dominant actor distributes the positions of candidates at the gubernatorial elections in order to increase the legitimacy of elections and distributes governors' positions themselves but rarely in the interest of other parties. The regional dominant actor very often distributes spoils in legislative power but usually blocks the opposition from winning the mayoral positions trying to keep the intra-regional power vertical intact. Hence the centre-regional contradiction reflected by the Kremlin's attempts to boost parties' participation.

Let us now analyze the strategies of the oppositional actors taking into consideration our hypothesis that they are up to maximizing their profit within the given limits. The electoral strategies come first [Smyth, 2006]. One of the crucial choices is between boycott and participation. The most irrational seems to be the strategy of boycotting the elections and it is very rare indeed, since it does not bring any profits. You cannot draw much public attention by this and enhance popular support. This is no more than a losing game. Where it was practiced as in Belgorod in 2012 by CPRF it meant just lack of resources to participate. In other words oppositional actors never boycott the elections in Russia in order just to delegitimize elections.

If we take closer look at the cases of abstention from gubernatorial elections, we can see that none of them could be called boycotting. Fair Russia was less frequent at these elections. In some cases it clearly had a deal with the governor in order to get mandate in the Federation Council (according to procedure any running candidate names three candidates for the Federation Council from regional executive power to choose the one after victory). In some other cases it officially supported the governor or just refused to participate (which was good for governor) however without clear political gains. CPRF did two rational (or call it opportunistic) moves. Novosibirsk region and Nenets autonomous district are the only regions where CPRF members hold mayoral positions in regional capitals. In both cases, it was decided not to run in order to avoid the conflict with governor and secure mayors.

On the contrary, the strategy of electoral participation even if you call it formal is more rational. It pleases the authorities with legitimizing the elections and gives the party of systemic opposition the opportunity to mobilize its voters once again. At last, this is far better than nothing. Because of return of the State Duma elections in single-mandate districts one more

reason came. Gubernatorial elections are seen as a sort of training for the future candidates. This is one of the reasons, why systemic opposition nominates its acting Duma deputies to run for governors. However as we demonstrated above the mobilization of oppositional voters is too poor. It is hardly satisfactory if CPRF candidates got 9.72% of the vote while LDPR (4.56%) and Fair Russia (4.03%) candidates performed just terribly. Among all the competitors, only four received more than 30% of the vote and 7 received more than 20%. However, for parties of parliamentary opposition the situation is a bit worse (see table 2). Among 11 best performing candidates (with more than 20% of the vote) CPRF had seven and LDPR one. In three other cases smaller parties nominated competitors: Petrov in Republic of Altay (Civic Power, 36.4%), Beryozkin from Civic Platform in Yakutia (29.5%), and Naval'niy in Moscow nominated by RPR-PARNAS (27.2%).

Table 2. Performance of Systemic Opposition at 2012-2015 Gubernatorial Elections.

	More than 30% of the vote, number of regions	20-30%, number of regions	15-20%, number of regions	10-15%, number of regions	5-10%, number of regions	Less than 5%, number of regions
CPRF	3 (1 of them - more than 50% in the second round)	4	2	19	20	4
LDPR	0	1	3	5	19	32
Fair Russia	0	0	1	5	11	24

Sources: author's calculations based on statistics presented by Central Electoral Commission ([www.cikrf.ru](http://www.cikrf.ru)).

This proves that systemic opposition can lose its capability to mobilize voters if strong and famous personalities from the regional elite manage to run (just using smaller parties), or if non-systemic opposition attracts the voters with active and inventive campaigns. The former was the case of Altay Republic (former republican prime minister) and Yakutia (former regional

finance minister), the latter in Moscow. In all such cases candidates of systemic parties performed poorly losing initiative and status of main competitors. Regarding this, it is understood why in other regions authorities blocked the registration of former regional top brass but approved CPRF.

Of course, the decision to run for governor is hard to make as it promises not a victory but rather a painful failure. But in case of non-participation there is a risk to let the electorate vote for another party's candidate and lose its former loyalty completely. As a result, parliamentary parties choose between the "evils" to run and not to abstain. However, other sub-national elections are more important giving chances to win mayoral positions and deputies' mandates and get spoils in legislative bodies where distributive politics is implemented.

In addition, strategy of participation leads to impossibility of united opposition. Each party has its own interest to run and does not believe in chances to win in case of unification. As a result, it is more rational to run by itself. Surely, this is great for authorities if opposition is fragmented. In fact, there was only one experiment of unification of all three parties of parliamentary opposition in Orenburg region, where LDPR candidate got support from CPRF and Fair Russia. Soon his party cancelled his nomination and got a seat in the Federation Council instead. Moreover, the failed candidate found himself under criminal investigation. So this was a total failure. Apart from this, there was not a single case when one of the parties of parliamentary opposition supported another.

Another choice is made between electoral strategies of harsh critics and full loyalty (with some in-between variations). This choice is much more complicated as it involves different and conflicting rationalities. The strategy of harsh critics can bring more votes but creates risks of conflict with the authorities leading to the blockade of further activities and other punishments. The strategy of loyalty gives more chances in distribution policies (such as spoils in legislatures), but has an obvious risk of poor electoral performance. If the popularity of a loyal party is too low, the authorities will hardly take care to help it.

In fact, systemic opposition should try to balance between these two strategies in order to get both votes and distributed profits such as spoils. Both criticizing and loyalty can be rational as criticizing may be converted into not only formal representation but also spoils (as a concession of authorities) and as loyalty does not always dissatisfy voters, most of whom do not keep an eye on collaborative policies of their favorite parties. Besides spoils are considered by parties as a prize won in the battle and not a cost of collaboration. Disinterest in full exclusion clearly shows up as no parties ever refuse from the spoils if being proposed. The strategy of harsh critics / conflict is widespread but limited to the electoral campaigns and can be combined

with loyalty; in other words, the oppositional party finds itself moving back and forth on the “conflict – loyalty” range.

We also consider four long-term political strategies of the opposition. One of the strategies was mentioned before. This is an electoral mobilization in order to keep the core electorate intact, to draw the supporters of certain ideological values and leaders on a regular basis. To achieve it the party should participate at the elections as much as possible. However, such strategy has its drawbacks. Among them is the erosion of electoral support, which cannot be reproduced too many times if the party shows no chances to win to its supporters. The formal participation when the winner is predestined and its competitors show no signs of challenge may lead to dissatisfaction of voters. This means that the strategy of electoral mobilization cannot be effective without even small number of real victorious cases (not counting the cases when gubernatorial posts were “given” to systemic opposition by the president). Obviously recent elections in Irkutsk region lifted hopes much higher.

However, the mobilization goal cannot be achieved if the conditions of participation are too restrictive or the party does not have a strong candidate. In these cases, party can participate with technical candidates or spoilers. Sometimes these two roles are confused and there is a need for better definition. Technical candidate should be passive in the campaign and ensure the legitimacy of election in case if other candidates withdraw. On the contrary, the spoiler should be active, split the electorate and/or criticize more powerful oppositional competitor (usually spoilers are used against CPRF). In fact, CPRF is seen systemic at the gubernatorial elections and authorities rarely use the obvious spoilers with similar names such as “Communists of Russia” and Communist Party of Social Justice (with acronym identical to former CPSU). Only in seven regions, such spoilers ran along with CPRF candidates (with close results in Khakassia).

Another strategy of systemic opposition is in achieving parliamentary representation, i.e. acquiring piece of power. The opportunities are rather many and their number may rise in the assemblies of all levels due to a number of reasons. One of them is electoral, once United Russia loses its support (at the State Duma elections it got 64.2% in 2007 and 49.3% in 2011). Another reason comes from the spread of party list voting on the municipal level.

Nevertheless, parliamentary participation of systemic opposition is still limited even on sub-national level. Regional legislatures are formed in the interest of dominant party while others have very small factions. Given the relatively small number of regional deputies sometimes it means only one deputy elected on party list (or 2-4 deputies in a faction usually). Only CPRF overcomes the electoral threshold almost everywhere. Recent electoral losses of systemic opposition made the domination of United Russia in regional legislatures even stronger. As for the municipal level, the federal center refused to make party lists voting obligatory for all the

municipalities. For a short period, it was obligatory for city/town councils with a number of deputies exceeding 20, but in 2013 this obligation was lifted too. However, in order to test the situation in 2015 in all the regional capitals elections were held with the use of party lists.

The third strategy is the career making for party activists. Surely, such careers can be made within the party ranks. But the party needs both deputies' mandates and spoils in the assemblies to show its members their real prospects. This strategy partly coincides with the dominant actor's distributive policy. However, it is clear that only a small part of activists can become deputies and even lesser part can get any spoils. Governors' posts are exceptional case. Many activists remain dissatisfied and this makes some of them come and go destabilizing local party structures.

Finally, the fourth strategy of systemic opposition considers politics as business. It means that the party structures are engaged in both legal and illegal fund raising. Parties are often accused in selling their support (such as literally selling places in their party lists to *ad hoc* sponsors) and their informational resources (for discrediting campaigns). Suspicion grows as we see local businesspersons running for regional deputies without any previous party affiliation or moving from party to party.

All political strategies of systemic opposition mentioned above mean inclusion of the systemic opposition, making it play by the rules and bargain for short-term profits.

The current growth of parties' number creates new conditions of structural dominance. The paradox is that more opportunities to participate does not mean more opportunities to win. In other words, the party system becomes fragmented, while non-systemic opposition undermines popularity of those oppositional parties who participate at the elections. The strategy of authorities aimed at the increase in formal competition in fact turns into the fragmentation of opposition and usually supports the domination of United Russia. Recent gubernatorial, legislative and mayoral elections showed that the united opposition was a myth. Each party works out its own strategy and unification of forces is irrational since it does not create more chances to win. The rationality of authorities is clearly coined in an everlasting maxim "divide and rule" while the parties of systemic opposition stand for each own interest only.

Inclusion of the opposition into the system with the dominant actor seems to be the rational strategy for both sides if one rule is relevant: no oppositional party or alliance has a chance to win the national elections. Still this rule works well for Russia and there is no perspective to change it. As a result, more or less short lifecycles of parties and their leaders make them opportunistic.

Resulting dissatisfaction of the part of the voters and political activists has evoked the interest to the non-systemic opposition and created "systemic – non-systemic" divide where both

sides accuse each other in different indecencies. But this divide should not be exaggerated. In our definition non-systemic is the opposition, which is not represented in power bodies, found mainly in officially unregistered organizations and sticks to mass protest actions on the streets or in the Web. But it is also very fragmented (both ideologically and organizationally) and not so popular to become a real political force. Moreover, its leaders in fact want to become systemic, to head legal parties, participate at the elections etc. Given the fact that the registration of parties and selection of candidates is a managed process, this means that such leaders are ready to bargain for the conditions of their inclusion. Participation of Naval'niy at the election of Moscow mayor in 2013 was the first such case when he was registered as a candidate according to Kremlin's decision and with the help of United Russia's signatures. In our opinion, non-systemic opposition is not an alternative to systemic in the time when rational opportunistic strategies prevail. Rather it is a mixture of die-hard anti-systemic radicals and potentially systemic actors (such as newcomers, defectors etc.) seeking for their place in the system.

## **Conclusion**

The opposition itself is a very controversial term and classic "power – opposition" divide in Russian regime is a misleading analytical framework. In fact all the registered parties are part of one system with their roles and functions giving this system extra stability. In our opinion, they should be considered as non-dominant actors with the limited access to power. All major parties have their relations with the authorities and try to bargain for more favorable conditions and positions in power. Rational strategy prevails for all non-dominant actors who combine oppositional electoral behavior with political opportunism and collaborationism. The political system as a whole remains reproductive since it allows conversion of public discontent into the consolidation and collaboration of political actors.

In our opinion, weakness of systemic opposition at the sub-national elections reflects not only the loyalty of electorate but also unsatisfied people's demand for opposition. Firstly, it is seen in low turnout. It is impossible to say which part of abstaining electorate is oppositional but do not see any candidate to vote for. But obviously this is a significant part of absentees.

Secondly, there is a split among regions, which should be thoroughly analyzed. In some regions, the lack of opposition leads to "isomorphic" voting for incumbent, as people do not see any other alternative. Some regions where oppositional candidates were not allowed showed rather high turnout and support for governor nevertheless (Lipetsk, Nizhniy Novgorod, Orenburg regions etc.). In other regions with more public discontent, it leads to three different reactions. One of them is definitely absenteeism. Another response is transfer of electorate from the absent parties to the candidates who run. For example in Novosibirsk region with no CPRF candidate

running there was not only low turnout but also very significant results of LDPR and Fair Russia's candidates. In Belgorod region without CPRF candidate LDPR performed well. CPRF drew more supporters in Bryansk region in 2012 without LDPR and Fair Russia. In other words, systemic opposition does have supporters who prefer to vote for another oppositional party rather than for the governor. But this does not work everywhere.

The third response is what we call "compensatory" voting. It appears when people vote for weak and not even campaigning candidates but not for the governor. Again, these are only isolated cases. For example, CPRF's candidates in Vologda and Magadan regions performed among the best in their party despite lack of charisma and popularity. Two latter responses prove that the voting "for anybody except for incumbent" (instead of absenteeism) still exists and sometimes serves well for systemic opposition. But this scenario works only where public discontent is more significant and governor is less popular (or less effective with administrative resource). The main electoral split still divides incumbents' supporters and absentees while systemic opposition struggles for rather small pieces of electorate.

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