

Demolition and Discontent

Governing the Authoritarian City

Abstract

The presence of large cities increases the probability of authoritarian breakdown, but the literature has offered little empirical insight as to why cities are dangerous beyond noting the concentration of protest in urban areas. I develop a theory of cities as complex socio-political spaces that are difficult to govern, particularly in the absence of democratic institutions. This complexity makes both cooptation and coercion difficult, meaning the very tactics that authoritarian cities use to control discontent can become its proximate cause. Using a large, city-financed housing project in Moscow targeted at rewarding regime supporters, I utilize a Bayesian semi-parametric model to demonstrate that even a seemingly well-targeted clientelistic exchange contributed to a surprising defeat for the regime in a subsequent municipal election. My results suggest that treating cities as simple agglomerations distinct from rural areas obscures important dynamics in the development of opposition to authoritarian rule.

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A growing body of research suggests that authoritarian durability relies heavily on cooperation and control at lower levels of government. Local governments play a critical role in coopting citizens, targeting the opposition, turning out and coercing voters, and distributing patronage to regime elites (Magaloni, 2006; Reuter and Robertson, 2014). For these reasons, establishing and maintaining the loyalty of effective subnational political machines is a critical part of authoritarian consolidation (Saikkonen, 2016; Reuter et al., 2016).

In particular, urban contentious and electoral dynamics play an important part in authoritarian survival. Increasingly, the urban middle class drives protest and electoral opposition in authoritarian regimes. Opposition gains in local elections disrupt patronage networks, establish programmatic ties to voters, and create effective political bases for opposition to compete against authoritarian incumbents nationally (Lucardi, 2016; Magaloni, 2006). Urban contention forces incumbents to acknowledge electoral defeat, challenges electoral fraud, ties opposition actors to citizens, and creates effective mobilizing structures. In the more dramatic cases, urban mobilization even brings down the regime itself (Bunce and Wolchik, 2011). In cases as diverse as Tunisia and Serbia, urban protest, subnational and municipal electoral defeats, or both preceded the fall of seemingly durable authoritarian regimes (Bunce and Wolchik, 2011; Beissinger, Jamal and Mazur, 2015).

While it is evident that urban political dynamics pose serious risks to authoritarian rule, little is known about how these risks develop. While a substantial body of work focuses on the relationship between national-level political and economic factors and authoritarian durability, politics at the municipal level are largely ignored, with opposition at the ballot boxes or on the streets simply assumed to inevitably occur within cities. While we know that large authoritarian cities are often hotbeds of opposition activity, we lack a clear theory as to how, when, and why they become dangerous (Wallace, 2013, 2014). Using data from a housing project and municipal elections in Moscow, I demonstrate that large cities are risky for authoritarian regimes because their socio-political diversity and density makes both targeting cooptation and anticipating reactions to cooptive policy difficult.

I begin by arguing that while the literature on authoritarianism has established that controlling subnational threats is critical to authoritarian survival, it treats urban politics as a black box, obscuring the factors that drive citizens to oppose authoritarianism at the local level. I draw on insights in urban sociology and political geography to argue that cities must be understood as complex political ecologies, where variations in the distribution of social groups and political stimuli create an illegible social terrain. In the absence of ethnic enclaves or concentrated poverty, authoritarians are forced to distribute clientelistic benefits in an environment in which brokerage is extremely difficult or impossible, reducing the effectiveness of the exchange and leading to unanticipated discontent. I will then discuss the appropriateness of my case selection, empirical strategy, and hypotheses. I will close with presentation of results, which confirm that the urban socio-political environment creates a high risk that authoritarians' attempts to maintain social peace can instead be the proximate cause of serious challenges to authoritarian control of urban space.

This work makes substantive, methodological, and theoretical contributions to the study of authoritarianism and urban politics. Theoretically, I provide evidence of a mechanism linking large cities to authoritarian failure, demonstrating that the typical tools of cooptation carry high risks when applied to the complex social environment of the city. Methodologically, I demonstrate that Bayesian semi-parametric models are a powerful tool for testing theories that grapple with social complexity and effect heterogeneity; not only are these models capable of dealing with these potential pitfalls where the standard methods in the discipline fail, they do so in a flexible, principled, and easy to communicate manner. Additionally, I use a Bayesian semi-parametric model to test my proposed mechanism, establishing that modern computational methods have significant utility in the elaboration of causal mechanisms. Substantively, I explain a surprising defeat for Russia's seemingly powerful regime party in its largest city.

Subnational Politics and Authoritarian Survival

While a robust literature exists on the role of subnational politics in maintaining national authoritarian rule, it treats dynamics at the urban level as a “black box”, assuming that protest and opposition voting are simply endemic to cities rather than phenomena that themselves require explanation. In particular, cross-national statistical studies have established that large cities significantly reduce the duration of authoritarian regimes, but have not clearly established any mechanisms to explain this effect (Wallace, 2013, 2014). Little consideration is given to how and when cities become dangerous to authoritarian rule.

In the urban threat literature, cities, particularly the large capital cities that are common in authoritarian regimes, are tinderboxes of collective action (Wallace, 2013). As cities get larger, discontent becomes more dangerous; densely-populated, large cities lower the barriers to collective action and have the potential to make contention more destabilizing and threatening to state actors. In addition, large protests in cities are more likely to create a national “tipping point” phenomenon in which citizens’ public alignments rapidly and dramatically change in response to perceived decrease in the costs of opposition (Kuran, 1991). Facing this potential threat, authoritarian regimes often choose to redistribute economic resources from the countryside to their large cities in an attempt to forestall the short-term threat of collective action, ultimately increasing the concentration of their population in a few urban centers and correspondingly increasing the threat of longer-run regime failure (Wallace, 2013; Ades and Glaeser, 1995; Bates, 2014). Wallace (2013) refers to this as the “Faustian bargain” - successful cooptation of urban residents through the provision of clientelistic or public goods pacifies cities in the short term, but in the long term increases the risks of urban unrest.

While this literature is generally assumed to apply to contentious politics, it also rationally applies to electoral threats in electoral authoritarian regimes. Bunce and Wolchik (2011)’s study of electoral authoritarianism in post-communist countries note that in all but one of their cases of authoritarian defeat, opposition victories in local elections preceded

the critical national elections. The paradigmatic case is Serbia, in which the government's initial refusal to certify opposition victories in Belgrade's municipal elections created a large contentious surge. The organizational infrastructure of these protests later proved critical in defeating Milošević at the national level (Bunce and Wolchik, 2011). Large cities can be expected to lower the cost of electoral campaigns in much the same way as they reduce the difficulty of solving the contentious collective action problem.

Failure to contain local electoral threats has played a significant role in the collapse of many other authoritarian regimes. Lucardi (2016) argues that opposition victories in local elections in Mexico hampered the operation of PRI patronage and electoral machines, lowered the perceived cost of defection, and created programmatic ties to voters that could be later mobilized at the national level. Much as in Mexico, local electoral victories in Romania, Serbia, Georgia, Croatia, and Slovakia directly contributed to the collapse of national authoritarian regimes. Victory in local elections allowed opposition actors to coordinate and create mobilizing structures in an otherwise hostile electoral environment (Bunce and Wolchik, 2011). Simultaneously, it deprived authoritarian leaders of critical organizational resources for monitoring citizens, manipulating elections, operating clientelistic networks, and repressing the opposition. It is clear that failure to maintain local control presents a real danger to the survival of authoritarian rule, disrupting authoritarian power verticals and wresting control of state resources from the regime.

The existing literature makes it clear that firm control of subnational politics, and urban politics in particular, is fundamental to authoritarian survival. However, very little of this literature considers urban politics specifically, instead focusing on the interaction of local and national politics (Rosenfeld, 2018; Reuter et al., 2016), the national consequences of specific urban movements (Bunce and Wolchik, 2011), or the generalized threat large cities present to long-term authoritarian survival (Wallace, 2013). We lack a theory of why and how cities are such fertile ground for destabilizing political events despite authoritarians' focus on coopting and controlling urban areas, largely because it rarely considers cities as a

social and political phenomena rather than a simple geographical category.

Cities, Complexity, and Cooptation

To begin unpacking the urban threat, it is necessary to conceptualize cities as a specific political space. Leveraging work in urban sociology and political geography, I argue that the urban threat originates in the socio-spatial complexity of cities. The density, complexity, and heterogeneity of cities makes successfully targeting the cooptation associated with urban bias difficult. As cities grow in response to urban bias targeting difficulty increases, creating a negative feedback loop in which the chances and risks of failing to co-opt potentially restive populations, maintain support, or avoid backlash become higher. In the absence of politicized ethnicity, concentrated poverty, a large and expensive broker network, or a near inexhaustible pool of resources, authoritarian regimes are doomed to suffer from their own success at co-opting the cities.

The idea of cities as complex social spaces has a long history in urban sociology, beginning with Wirth (1938)'s seminal work "Urbanism as a Way of Life". Wirth argues that three distinct characteristics of cities create patterns of social behavior via the structure they impose on human interaction: population size, population density, and heterogeneity. The heterogeneity and density of the city leads to more rarified, complex social interactions and a corresponding system of social stratification. Labor within the city is generally highly-differentiated, and the number of people from different classes and ethnicities an urban-dweller comes into contact with is orders of magnitude higher than their rural counterparts. This more varied life leads to a proliferation of different voluntary associations, from social groups to political interest groups. In turn, urban governance becomes more difficult than rural governance, with cities forced to grapple with a bewildering array of interests and groups. This creates an environment of socio-spatial complexity, where the heterogeneity of the urban population is patterned across the small spatial scale of the city.

While Wirth considers only one elementary spatial variable (density), work in urban sociology and political geography has elaborated on the complex effects socio-spatial patterning has on political behavior. Sampson (2012), through an in-depth study of Chicago, identifies the contribution of the surrounding socio-political context to the complexity of urban governance. Sampson finds generation-spanning contextual effects across neighborhoods that pattern residents collective efficacy, electoral and contentious mobilization, ties to government elites, and a vast number of other social and political outcomes. These effects are not simply a function of the social profiles of neighborhood residents; even statistically similar neighborhoods demonstrate vastly different outcomes due to the mediating effect of the surrounding context. Individuals of a certain social profile are certainly more likely to organize, protest, and lobby than others, but the surrounding community plays a large role in their decisions and ability to actually do so. Since these contextual effects emerge from a dense network of invisible and difficult to quantify social ties and interactions, the city government of Chicago cannot simply read them off a map of socio-economic fundamentals and tailor their policies accordingly. The city government always faces the possibility that the complexity of the city will produce unpredictable responses to even carefully crafted or targeted policy.

These contextual effects have been particularly well demonstrated in the context of elections. The study of electoral neighborhood effects begins with Cox (1971), who argues that urban voting must be understood as a complex “urban voting surface”. It is well understood by political scientists that certain social fundamentals pattern voting in predictable ways; gender, ethnicity, and class are all known to be potent predictors of vote choice. Cox further nuances this understanding by arguing that the spatial distribution of social groups and political stimuli mediates the effects of social fundamentals. Repeated research has robustly demonstrated the existence of these contextual effects on electoral behavior (Pattie and Johnston, 2000; Johnston et al., 2004). While contextual effects exist in rural as well as urban areas, it is no accident that Sampson (2012) and Cox (1971) focus on cities; the more

varied spatial terrain of the city combined with its increased density bring people into closer contact with their neighbors, and those neighbors are considerably more varied on social characteristics than typical in rural areas. This leads contextual effects in cities, on balance, to be more complex and difficult to predict.

While most this literature focuses on democracies, there is no reason to expect its insights to not apply in the authoritarian context. Indeed, the complexity of cities should be expected to be higher in most authoritarian regimes; authoritarianism induces heavier concentration in a smaller number of urban centers relative to democracies (Wallace, 2013, 2014). The effect of local context on collective action may also be expected to be larger and more complex; whereas the costs of collective action are generally low in democracies, the high cost of organizing in authoritarian regimes necessitates a larger and more robust community capable of sustaining that cost. Likewise, as electoral authoritarian regimes become more common, we should expect to see socio-spatial complexity pattern electoral results as well. While vote choice is constrained in electoral authoritarian regimes, the fact remains that it exists and is likely to be influenced by social context.

This complex social environment makes implementing urban bias difficult. To effectively target cooptation and buy social peace, maintain a pool of supporters, or buy votes, political actors require a network of brokers to identify whom to target for redistribution and to monitor compliance in the clientelistic bargain (Stokes et al., 2013; Kitschelt and Wilkinson, 2007). Without an effective brokerage network, regimes must depend on aggregated sources of data such as vote totals, leaving them vulnerable to “seeing like a state” and running afoul of the particularly complex social networks and processes that undergird cities, resulting in either failure to accurately target or failure to anticipate negative reactions to cooptive policy (Sampson, 2012; Scott, 2008). The urban environment makes establishing such effective broker networks harder for three reasons: anonymity, observability, and demographic.

Effective brokers are individuals deeply embedded in their communities, enabling them identify the needs of community members and target them for resource distribution. In rural

areas, this task is simple: community members interact with each other frequently, generally remain in the community for most or all of their lives, and are generally socio-economically similar (Stokes et al., 2013). Given these relatively simple and stable social networks, brokers can easily identify who can be co-opted and how. In contrast, urban citizens are far more anonymous. Especially when urban areas are growing, new arrivals, gentrification, and generally more frequent relocation of citizens makes community membership unstable. Additionally, urban communities tend to be more socio-economically heterogeneous. This creates a high level of what Kitschelt and Wilkinson (2007) call “constituent heterogeneity”. In this context, brokerage becomes more expensive and less effective, requiring both more brokers and higher skill brokers (Stokes et al., 2013).

The urban environment also makes observing the effectiveness of cooptation difficult. The churn of residents also contributes to this; when members of a broker’s network move, the broker loses the ability to observe their behavior directly. Under electoral authoritarianism, compliance at the voting booth also becomes harder to observe in urban environments (Stokes et al., 2013). Even with the secret ballot, polling stations with small numbers of voters provide an intelligible signal as to a broker’s effectiveness and clients’ compliance. As the number of votes cast at a polling station increases, this signal rapidly becomes noisier (Kitschelt and Wilkinson, 2007; Stokes et al., 2013). Brokers are forced to either violate the secret ballot or simply use aggregate vote totals as a weak measure of their effectiveness.

Finally, the demography of a city not only contributes to anonymity of urbanites, it also makes it more difficult to organize them in a coherent manner that allows for efficient targeting. The fate of the PRI in Mexico offers an illustrative example of how urban socio-political complexity derails targeting. While the PRI was able to organize the rural poor using corporatist structures, Mexico City’s rapid growth resulted in a large population of urban poor participating in a broad array of economic activities, frequently in the informal sector. Concentrating the urban poor into a corporatist structures was not possible, largely because their needs and goals varied widely. The resulting reduction in monitoring and

targeting ability meant the PRI was unable to prevent the defection of the urban poor to the opposition in the 1988 general election, forcing the PRI to commit widespread fraud to maintain power (Magaloni, Diaz-Cayeros and Estévez, 2007). While the PRI was able to recover a substantial amount of support from the urban poor using targeted cash benefits, this required massive investment in an extensive brokerage infrastructure, and served only to delay and not prevent the fall of Mexico's hegemonic party regime (Magaloni, 2006; Magaloni, Diaz-Cayeros and Estévez, 2007). Additionally, a critical demographic tends to live in cities: the middle class and the wealthy. It is well established that the middle class require a higher price for their votes, making it inefficient for brokers to target them. Moreover, wealthier voters frequently disapprove of clientelistic politicians, preferring investments in public goods (Weitz-Shapiro, 2012).

This is not to say that clientelism is impossible in urban environments; the literature on clientelism is rife with examples of successful urban clientelistic machines in developing democracies in Latin America, Asia, and even the early 19th century United States. These machines function in large part due to massive networks of highly-embedded brokers combined with the existence of concentrated poverty and/or politicized ethnicity. In the slums, brokers are deeply integrated into the tight, outwardly-hostile social networks that characterize these areas, enabling them to meet the needs of those in their networks by conditionally connecting them with state resources. Given the tenuous nature of life in the slums, the price of vote-buying is relatively simple: food, medicine, work, cash, and other essentials. This simplifies the task of brokerage considerably, with politicians providing brokers with these resources and brokers enabling and monitoring their conditional distribution (Zarazaga, 2014; Auerbach and Thachil, 2018; Levitsky, 2003; Auyero, 2000). Politicized ethnicity functions as a similar simplifying heuristic; ethnic leaders can serve as natural brokers for the purchase of votes, and when ethnic enclaves exist, geographical targeting of club goods becomes feasible and efficient (Wilkinson, 2007; Kitschelt and Wilkinson, 2007). The ability of brokers in these environments to provide highly-individualized benefits results

in both a more efficient distribution of resources and reduces the visibility of clientelistic exchanges to wealthier citizens or excluded groups, simultaneously minimizing the risks of ineffective targeting and backlash.

Where authoritarians cannot rely on poverty and ethnicity reliably, the difficulty of targeting cooptation creates a doubly dangerous feedback loop. To forestall the short-run danger of urban unrest, they redistribute from the countryside to the cities, including the provision of clientelistic benefits to reward loyal supporters and prevent less loyal citizens from defecting. However, the distribution of these benefits is difficult; distribution may be inefficient, ineffective, fail to be targeted towards restive groups, or create backlash. When redistribution is successful, it leads to further urban concentration, making the task of targeting even more difficult. Simultaneously, urban concentration increases the threat posed by the city, making careful targeting even more necessary. This adds another twist to Wallace (2013)'s Faustian bargain: authoritarians who successfully buy urban peace via redistribution will find future redistribution both more difficult and more dangerous.

Case Selection

To demonstrate the difficulty and destabilizing potential of urban redistribution, I examine the relationship between a highly-targeted social policy and opposition support in a paradigmatic electoral authoritarian regime, Russia. A large project to provide new housing in Moscow targeted at regime supporters preceded substantial opposition gains on municipal formation ¹ councils in September 2017, despite the program being highly popular among those receiving new housing. While this mobilization was ultimately not regime threatening, it is nevertheless a representative case study of how clientelism can fail in the urban environment, and did force the Moscow city government to adopt riskier tactics to maintain control.

The Russian regime and the Moscow city government cannot rely on pre-existing clien-

¹The Moscow equivalent of a city district

telistic machines. The collapse of the Soviet Union also resulted in the demise of the corporatist organizing structures that characterized it. This was quickly followed by rapid economic dislocation and transformation, leading to large-scale migration to a small group of cities, primarily Moscow. Boris Yeltsin failed to build a stable party or base of support, and Vladimir Putin only succeeded in consolidating a ruling party (United Russia) in the early 2000s, long after the complete transformation of Russian political life. Adrift without the large, deeply embedded network of brokers or the slums and ethnic enclaves that make urban clientelism feasible, the Russian regime has been forced to frequently resort to risky and coercive strategies to maintain its strong electoral advantage: outright fraud, workplace coercion, and the repression or even killing of opposition candidates (Frye, Reuter and Szakonyi, 2014).

This is not to say that clientelism, and even urban clientelism, does not exist in Russia; Russia's ethnic republics, poorer regions, and areas heavily dependent on single industries have powerful clientelistic machines (Hale, 2007). In line with my argument, Moscow is a much more difficult case. Moscow in many ways exemplifies (Wallace, 2013) urban threat: a very large, rapidly growing capital city. With an estimated 12.4 million residents, Moscow contains approximately 9% of the Russian population, with that population increasing by nearly 4 million since 1989 despite the steep decline of the Russian population as a whole. As such, Moscow presents an ideal case study of the difficulty of urban clientelism. The rapid growth and development of the city creates significant anonymity, the rapidly transforming and diversifying economy creates high constituent heterogeneity, and the increasingly dense population makes observability of behavior difficult.

However, Russia and Moscow do not and cannot rely entirely on fraud and coercion to maintain control over the capital, as the Moscow renovation project evidences. The Moscow renovation project is intended to replace decaying Soviet housing stock throughout the city, in particular the five to nine story walk-up apartment buildings colloquially known as "Khrushchyovki". These buildings were constructed in the aftermath of the Second World

War to resolve a severe housing shortage, and were never intended to stand as long as they have; as such, they are in varying degrees of disrepair. The Moscow administration selected 4,573 buildings for potential inclusion in the project. Residents were then allowed to vote on whether or not the buildings were to be demolished; if two-thirds of the apartments in a building supported demolition, it was included in the project. The administration promised residents of included buildings that they would be resettled in equivalent apartments in a newly-constructed building if they voted for inclusion. Nearly all selected buildings voted for inclusion. However, despite the apparent popularity of the project with residents of included buildings, the project inspired protests throughout Moscow, with Muscovites expressing concerns about the impact of such a large construction project on their neighborhoods, the potentially low quality of new buildings, corruption, and potential transport disruptions associated with the project (Levada Center, 2017). As demonstrated in Figure 1, the project affects the majority of Moscow's densely populated urban core.

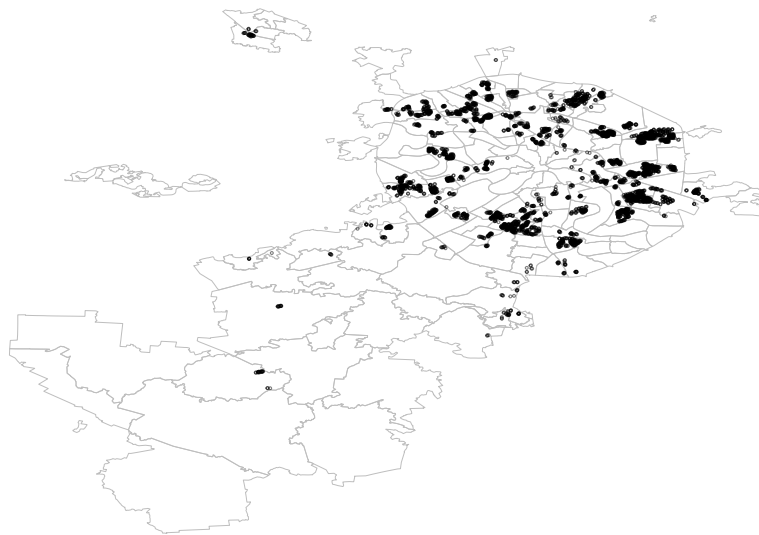


Figure 1: Buildings Selected for Demolition

There is strong evidence that the plan was intended to advantage previous regime supporters as a form of patronage. Smyth (2018), using fine-grained building and neighborhood level data, demonstrates that while older buildings were more likely to be selected, consistent

with the city government’s stated goal, age has a substantively small effect on the probability of inclusion. Two factors did result in substantially different probabilities of inclusion: high support for Putin in the last presidential election and low rents, increasing the probability of inclusion by approximately 20% and 45% respectively. This is consistent with clientelism’s role in maintaining electoral support; poor voters are more responsive to clientelistic benefits, and by providing these benefits as a reward, the regime’s base is maintained (Magaloni, Diaz-Cayeros and Estévez, 2007; Stokes et al., 2013). While the program’s stated goal of improving the quality of Moscow’s housing stock is on some level true, it is clear that the program also presented an excellent opportunity to reward poorer regime supporters with a precious private good. Simultaneously, it also punishes those who opposed the regime via denying them the good. On paper, it appears as a smart and successfully spatially-targeted project: rewarding supporters as specifically as possible given available data, punishing non-supporters, and providing an example of government responsiveness to citizens’ needs.

However, Moscow’s reliance on the aggregated spatial signal of vote totals and corresponding lack of individual-level, broker-mediated targeting information resulted in a potent anti-regime backlash. While the housing project used limited information to seemingly accurately target poor supporters for redistribution, the blunt nature of the project created a wave of backlash from citizens either affected by its disruptive nature or excluded from new housing. Rather than simply cementing support for United Russia, the housing project produced a wave of opposition against the regime that caused them to lose their previously near unanimous control of low-level institutions of urban governance.

Empirical Strategy

Linking the renovation project to opposition victories via this targeting mechanism requires observing two conditions. Firstly, exposure to renovation must have a substantively significant effect on opposition voting that is distinguishable from zero. Secondly, we should

not expect this effect to be unidirectional. As previously argued, the authoritarian targeting task is hard largely because the complexity of the city makes distributing limited resources and anticipating the reactions to cooptation difficult. Approval of the project was high among the largely poor, largely regime-supporting residents of included buildings. Elsewhere, the project inspired protest and dissatisfaction. As such, we should expect to see significant heterogeneity in effects across space; where targeting was successful and inspired limited backlash, the regime vote should increase, but failed targeting or failure to predict backlash from groups proximate to included buildings should result in decreases in regime voting.

To establish the relationship between renovation and opposition voting, I utilize an instrumental variables approach. The instrument is the location of all buildings that were eligible to be included in the project, regardless of whether or not they were actually included; i.e. all “Khrushchyovki” in Moscow. The instrument was constructed from a data set of all apartment buildings in Moscow, selecting all panel-type buildings built between 1956-1971, when the last “Khrushchyovki” was completed in Moscow. Given the length of time that has passed between the construction of these buildings, their wide distribution throughout Moscow to resolve housing shortages due to extensive war damage, and the rapid changes Moscow has undergone since 1991, the locations of these buildings are plausibly exogenous from present-day opposition voting and affect vote totals only through inclusion or non-inclusion in the project ². This leads directly to the following hypothesis:

H1: Increased exposure to the renovation project causes a substantively and statistically significant increase in opposition vote percentage.

While the instrumental variable (IV) approach is capable of establishing a causally valid local average treatment effect, an average effect obscures the variation across space that my

²See A1 for a map of all eligible buildings

theory predicts. I seek to establish not only that renovation had an effect on opposition voting, but also that even a finely targeted patronage project in a stable electoral authoritarian regime produced unintended and unpredictable urban mobilization, damaging the regime’s ability to control a large capital city in which a significant percentage of the country’s population resides. While the IV approach can demonstrate that the link between the project and opposition victories is not spurious, it cannot speak to my proposed mechanism linking the difficulty of implementing urban bias to the urban threat.

Providing evidence of my mechanism requires an empirical exercise that while not causal, is falsifiable. My theory predicts that the housing project should create unpredictable and complex effects across the social terrain of the city. If the housing project was both well-targeted and avoided backlash, we should expect rather uniform results across space; areas targeted by the project should record low levels of opposition voting, and the project should have no effect on areas not targeted. If the project instead created backlash, both within the areas targeted for redistribution and those not targeted we should see considerable heterogeneity in effects. These effects should also persist despite controlling for past opposition voting history, pay, and education, which themselves could be expected to produce negative responses to clientelism (Weitz-Shapiro, 2012).

Acknowledging the complex social terrain of urban areas and searching for heterogeneity across space renders most of the standard statistical toolkit inappropriate. Models such as OLS, standard GLMs, and even their extensions with random effects are not capable of modeling hierarchically-dependent treatment effects without researcher specification of the interactions theorized to drive heterogeneity. Given the relative lack of knowledge about what may drive electoral heterogeneity in authoritarian municipal elections, using a standard model would require a “specification search”, possibly leading to spurious results. Even in the presence of an explicitly interactive theory, manually specifying only a few interactions without exploring the entire space of possible interactions, particularly when many different choices for re-coding the data and specifying theorized interactions exist, can unintentionally

lead to a multiple comparisons problem that is difficult to correct, “statistically significant” results that are indistinguishable from noise, and wildly different interpretations of results depending on the interactions actually explored (Gelman and Loken, 2013). I adopt a more principled approach, using Bayesian semi-parametrics to identify latent clusters of effect heterogeneity without researcher discretion, account for the hierarchical structure of the data, and model effect heterogeneity while incorporating uncertainty in latent group assignment.

Specifically, I use a hierarchical Dirichlet process generalized linear model (hdpGLM), a generalization of the infinite mixture model that allows for hierarchical dependence (Ferrari, 2020). The hdpGLM offers several advantages specific to this project. First, it allows me to explicitly identify effect heterogeneity without over-determining the model. If effect heterogeneity is minimal or non-existent, Ferrari (2020) demonstrates in both simulation studies and a real-world application that the model will reduce to a noisy approximation of standard GLM. Secondly, the use of latent clusters sidesteps the messy issue of neighborhood identification and researcher specification searches. Simply using polling station or other administrative boundaries would assume these boundaries are relevant in everyday life, the spatial distribution of social groups, and citizens own conceptions of community.

Additionally, the model is able to incorporate both the data hierarchy and demographic variables into cluster assignment, making polling stations in the same region and similar regions more likely to be assigned to the same cluster while also modeling latent heterogeneity. This acknowledges that within region variation is likely to be lower than between region variation and partially compensates for the lack of polling station level demographic data. The model also allows hierarchical variables to influence the magnitude of effects, while providing coefficients that indicate the degree to which a higher-level variable influences both assignment to clusters (effects-on-assignment) and the estimated effect of lower-level variables (effects-on-effects). Additionally, the hierarchical nature of the model, similar to the more familiar random effects model, controls for unobserved variables correlated with the hierarchical unit in which an observation lies. Finally, as a generalization of the mixture

model, the model naturally incorporates clustering uncertainty into the estimation of effects.

More technically, the model is specified as:

$$\begin{aligned} G_j &| \alpha_0, G_0, W_j \sim \mathcal{DP}(\alpha_0, G(W_j)) \\ \theta_{ji} &| G_j \sim G_j \\ y_i &| X_i, C_i, \theta_{ji}, \sim \mathcal{N}(y_i | X_i, \theta_{ji}) \end{aligned}$$

Where G_j is the set of mixture component means (atoms) for region j , W_j is the set of regional-level covariates, α_0 is the concentration parameter of the Dirichlet process, G is the base measure of the Dirichlet process (which is a function of W_j) and θ is the vector of parameters. The model is then fit with a modified stick-breaking construction and a Gibbs sampler (see Ferrari (2020) for details).

I specify the context-level variables (W_j) at the regional level; while these covariates are available at the municipal formation level, this produces a model with over 800 parameters that is difficult to fit and summarize. Additionally, many municipal formations contain only 1-3 polling stations, resulting in posterior distributions with a high degree of variance. The model assigns polling stations to clusters within each region, with the cluster-specific treatment effect dependent on the W_j variables. The max number of possible clusters (researcher specification required for the fitting process) was set to 30; the model does not approach this upper bound, indicating that it is harmless ³.

This model is particularly well-suited to testing for spatial heterogeneity due to its ability to identify fine-grained underlying heterogeneity without being over-determined (i.e. guaranteed to find heterogeneity). In particular, the model allows effects to not only vary between clusters, but within clusters across regions. For example, suppose a cluster contains polling stations in both a poor region and rich region which are similar enough to be grouped together. The model does not constrain the two heterogeneous regions to have the exact same

³The model activates 9 clusters.

effect sizes; rather, it samples these effect sizes from a common distribution that's mean is dependent on regional-level covariates, allowing the disparate wealth levels of the two regions to mediate the effect. If significant effect heterogeneity does exist, the model is capable of identifying it in a flexible and fine-grained way, while potentially providing some leverage on what drives this heterogeneity. Additionally, it bears re-emphasis that the model is capable of not finding heterogeneity. While Dirichlet process models, similar to all clustering methods, will always identify multiple clusters, the model will return virtually identical distributions for all parameters in the presence of homogeneity ⁴.

Data

I have brought electoral data down to the lowest level available: the polling station. Moscow has 3,619 voting districts, many of which serve geographically small and densely populated areas, meaning most municipal formations have several polling stations. Both the dependent variable (opposition vote) and treatment variable (proximity to renovated buildings) are calculated at this level. The dense nature of electoral districts in Moscow and their embedding in municipal formations and regions allows me to investigate how electoral opposition varied in response to the renovation project at the highest available level of spatial resolution.

The primary independent variable is the impact of the Moscow renovation project in the area surrounding the polling station. I operationalized this as the average distance to all affected buildings from the polling station in kilometers, or in the IV setup, the average distance to all eligible buildings. This is similar to the operationalization used in Ichino and Nathan (2013), which likewise seeks to recover contextual effects on voting. Additionally, this measure is more empirically realistic than a simple count within electoral districts, as this would require assuming that electoral districts are relevant to how voters experience everyday life and the renovation project. The interpretation of this measure is simple, but

⁴See A4 for a visual example of homogeneity in effects

slightly counter-intuitive: a high value indicates low proximity to any affected buildings, whereas a low value indicates high proximity to many affected buildings.

The dependent variable of interest is the share of the polling station level vote won by the opposition. There are 3,266 polling stations in total, representing elections to 125 municipal councils ⁵. I have operationalized a maximal definition of the opposition. The maximal definition includes all parties except the Communist Party of the Russian Federation and United Russia, the regime party. I did not include the Communist Party despite their role as a nominal opposition party, as they are widely considered co-opted (Reuter and Robertson, 2014). While the large “in-system” opposition parties have been accused of collaborating with or being astroturfed by the regime, the fact remains that United Russia attempts to maximize their own vote, as the loss of political control to even astroturfed parties still represents a political defeat. Regardless, votes for the Communist Party collapsed in the September 2017 election. Electoral data was scraped from the Moscow central election committee’s website.

The following control variables are also included in the analysis: turnout, opposition vote in the 2013 Moscow mayoral election, opposition vote in the party list in the 2016 Duma elections, opposition vote in single member simple plurality seats in the 2016 Duma election, distance to the Kremlin, education, welfare dependence, and average monthly pay.

I calculated turnout and all past voting data at the polling station level. Turnout is included to account for the low-turnout nature of local elections in Russia. Low turnout in municipal council elections could be expected to either advantage or disadvantage the opposition; it could indicate both lack of regime machine mobilization or lack of opposition party mobilization. I include past voting data in the most recent local and national elections to control for electoral districts already more inclined to support the opposition. Kremlin distance is the distance from a polling station to the Kremlin, the center of Moscow. This is intended to be a rough proxy of both property values and the desirability of housing; the center of Moscow is both wealthier and more proximate to businesses, entertainment,

⁵The remaining municipal formations have elections on off-years

transportation, etc.

Education and welfare dependence come from the 2010 Russian Census, and are aggregated at the regional (okrug) level for model interpretability (see next section). This is the most recent such data that is currently publicly available below the city-wide level. Education is the percentage of regional residents who have at least a bachelor’s degree. Welfare dependence is the share of regional residents who report that some form of social transfer is their primary source of income, excluding those who rely on student stipends. Average monthly pay comes from 2016 data provided by MosStat, the Moscow government’s statistics office. Novomoskovsky Region is not included in the analysis, as it was annexed by Moscow from Moscow Oblast in 2012 ⁶, so disaggregated census data is not available. As Figure 1 demonstrates, this region possesses very few included buildings ⁷.

Table 1: Summary Statistics

Statistic	N	Mean	St. Dev.	Min	Max
Opposition Vote %	3,266	0.243	0.117	0.002	0.777
Mean Distance	3,266	17.493	5.353	11.922	40.426
Turnout	3,266	0.152	0.064	0.046	1.000
Mayor: Opposition Vote	3,266	0.373	0.065	0.000	0.733
Duma SMSP: Opp. Vote	3,266	0.491	0.144	0.034	0.983
Duma PR: Opp. Vote	3,266	0.459	0.067	0.026	0.676
Kremlin Distance	3,266	13.457	6.715	0.755	39.025
Government Dependence	3,266	19.664	1.260	16.985	21.346
Higher Education	3,266	35.132	4.218	29.937	47.382
Monthly Pay (Rubles)	3,266	71,495.910	10,584.690	60,992.420	102,285.900

Results and Discussion

Table 2 displays the results of the instrumental variables analysis, estimated using the standard two stage least squares approach. The instrumented renovation variable is statisti-

⁶Moscow Oblast surrounds Moscow, but is governed separately as a federal region

⁷Novomoskovsky is the long “strip” extending to the south from the “circle” which makes up Moscow prior to 2012

cally and substantively significant; a 1 standard deviation increase in distance from included buildings is associated with a 3.6% reduction in the opposition vote total. The instrument is strong, allowing me to reject the null on both the weak instruments and Wu-Hausman test. This establishes a valid local average treatment effect for renovation on opposition vote totals and demonstrates strong support for my hypothesis.

	<i>Dependent variable:</i> Opposition Vote %
Mean Dist.	−0.307** (0.131)
Turnout	0.005 (0.016)
Mayor: Opposition Vote	0.238*** (0.023)
Duma SMSP: Opposition Vote	−0.004 (0.018)
Duma PR: Opposition Vote	0.185*** (0.022)
Kremlin Distance	0.232* (0.138)
Government Dependence	−0.033** (0.016)
Higher Education	0.206*** (0.021)
Monthly Pay	0.003 (0.021)
Constant	0.002 (0.015)
Adjusted R ²	0.257
Weak Instruments Test	2528.6***
Wu-Hausman Test	61.6***
<i>Note:</i> *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01	

Table 2: Results of instrumental variables regression using 2SLS. All variables are normalized.

Figure 2 uses the results from the hierarchical Dirichlet process model to demonstrate clear heterogeneity in the relationship between renovation and opposition voting both across and within regions in Moscow. This ridge plot shows the posterior distribution of treatment

effect by cluster and region. Focusing on only a single region, unimodal posterior distributions can be interpreted as lack of effect heterogeneity in that region, whereas multimodal posteriors demonstrate heterogeneity. Comparing all regions' posteriors, the model reveals significant treatment effect heterogeneity both within and between regions. All variables were normalized, so effects are in terms of standard deviation changes. For reference, A4 displays how non-heterogeneity would appear in this plot ⁸.

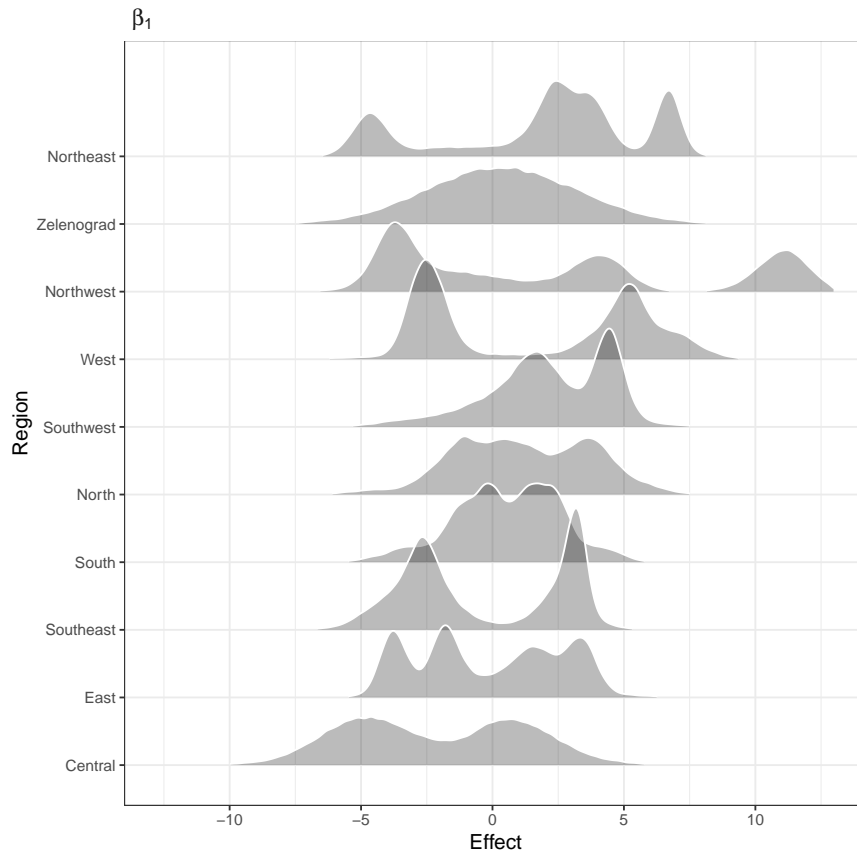


Figure 2: Distribution of the estimated effect of renovation across districts, effects estimated at polling station level.

Figure 3 displays median polling station specific effects based on cluster assignment, effectively projecting the modes of Figure 2 onto the map of Moscow. Clusters were assigned to observations based on the maximum cluster responsibility in the posterior. Effects were judged as distinguishable from zero if the 95% credible interval does not include zero, meaning

⁸See A1 for MCMC diagnostics

there is a 95% probability that the true value of the parameter is not zero. Distinct spatial heterogeneity in both the size and direction of effects is evident. Significant effects were identified for 2386, or 73 % of the polling stations in the sample ⁹. The median effect's sign was swapped for this plot, so positive effects indicate that opposition vote increased as more buildings were proximate to the polling station, while negative effects indicate that opposition vote decreased.

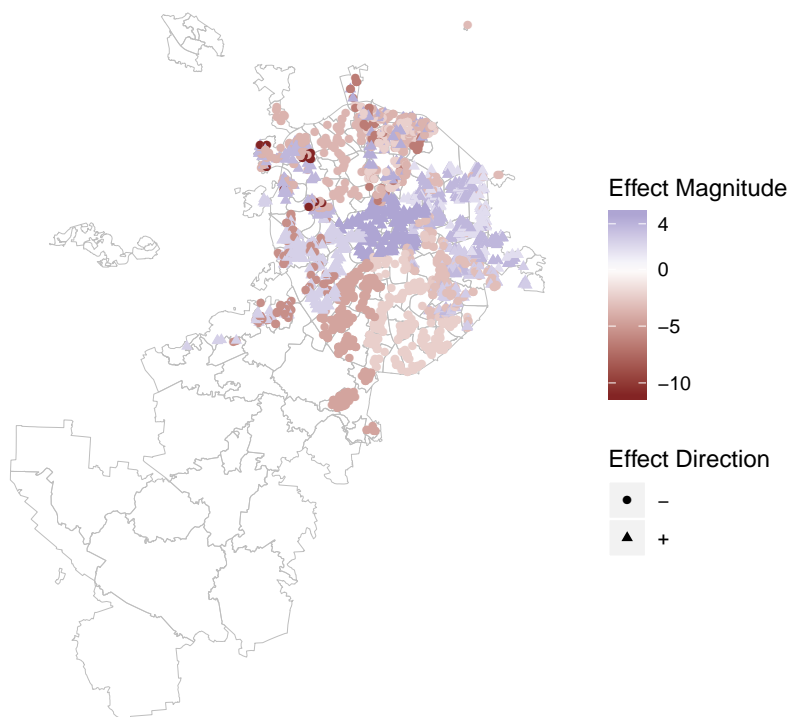


Figure 3: Estimated effects of renovation. Points represent the location of the polling station, and their color represents the standard deviation change in opposition vote percentage associated with a standard deviation change in average proximity to included buildings. Effect signs were swapped, so a positive effect indicates an increase in opposition voting as proximity to renovated buildings increases.

Figure 3 clearly demonstrates that despite the spatial targeting of the project, rewarding supporters was not sufficient to prevent opposition gains, and in fact failed to produce consistent effects across space. In areas close to large clusters of renovated buildings, such as

⁹A2 displays the polling stations for which no effect was identified

the Northeast, West, and Southeast the project had diverging effects, generating both support and opposition to the regime. Even in the wealthy Central region, already unfriendly terrain for the regime, the project is associated with a large increase in opposition voting even after controlling for past opposition support and socioeconomic status. These effects are not simply an artifact of differences between regions: the effects persist despite the hierarchical component of the model controlling for both observed regional level factors and any correlated latent factors. Ultimately, the population of discontented voters was large enough and spatially concentrated enough to deal the Moscow regime a series of unanticipated defeats throughout the city. What was on paper a well-targeted reward for regime supporters instead shattered United Russia's near-unanimous hold on municipal councils.

The disaggregated demographics of the regions offer some leverage as to how this targeted patronage project weakened the Moscow regime's hold on power. The central region is clearly above the average on both monthly pay and education. More interestingly, two of the regions that displayed substantial effect heterogeneity, the West and Northwest, display high dispersion about the mean on both education and pay, with the Northwest in particular displaying a heavily bimodal distribution of municipal formations poorer and wealthier than average. This is consistent with both (Weitz-Shapiro, 2012)'s argument that clientelism alienates the middle class and demonstrates the difficulty of targeting; even with municipal formation level data, the high variability of urban residents' education levels, pay, and occupations across space makes efficient targeting difficult, and avoiding backlash due to spillover effects even harder. This is particularly striking given that Russian case seemed likely to be an exception to (Weitz-Shapiro, 2012)'s argument; one half to two-thirds of Russia's middle class is employed in the state or state-dependent sectors, with the greatest concentration of this state-dependent middle class living in Moscow (Rosenfeld, 2017). This makes the failure of the patronage project all the more remarkable; a targeted attempt to build support in a city with a state-captured middle class still produced a dangerous opposition upsurge.

It is also notable that the failures of the renovation project may have been avoided

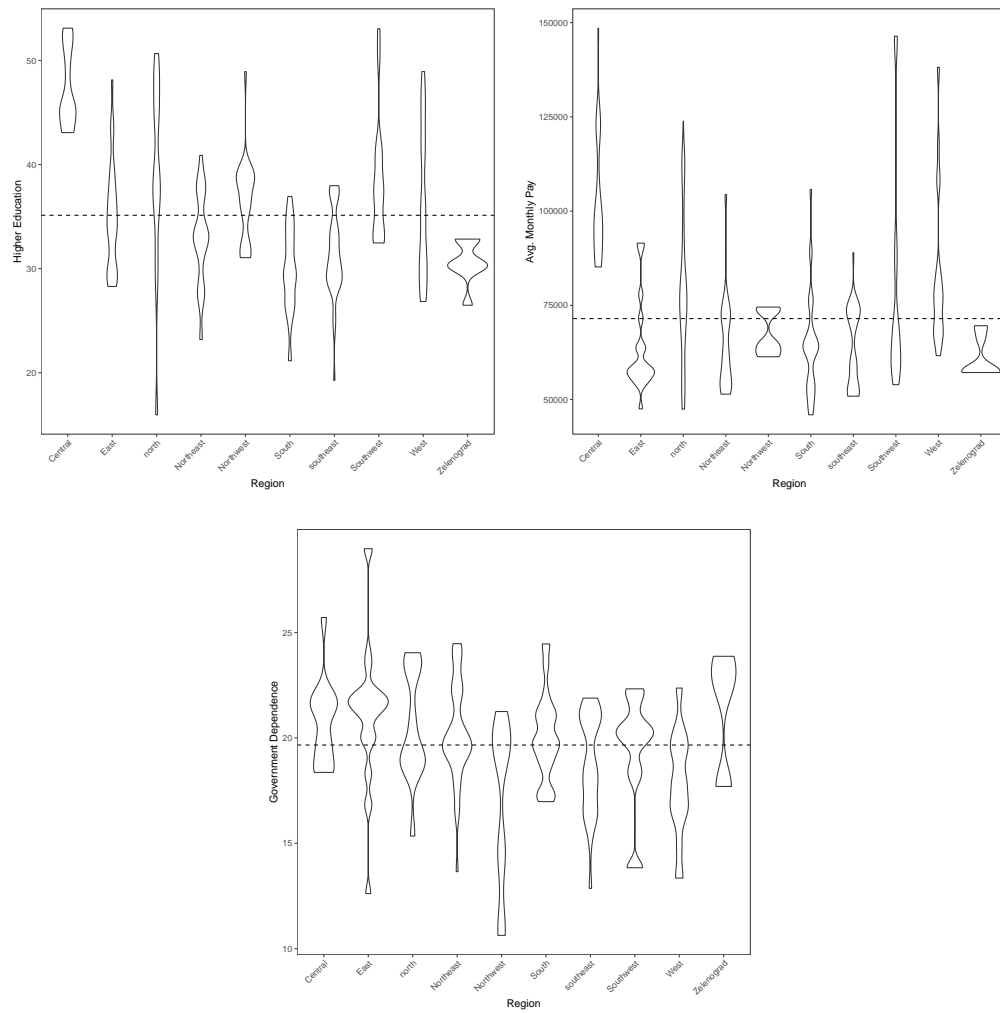


Figure 4: Distribution of regional level socio-economic variables across regions. The dashed line is the mean.

via more individualized broker-mediated clientelism. As discussed earlier, urban clientelism is highly successful in environments where brokers build individualized relationships with clients, allowing the conditional transfer of benefits to specifically voters the brokers have identified as responsive and whose compliance the broker can monitor. Without broker networks, conditional transfer of individualized benefits is impossible, forcing regimes to provide private goods to aggregated groups based on the aggregation of available data. The Moscow regime was able to target the renovation project to generally include supporters, but could neither avoid areas where the project was likely to anger others nor provide the good in a low visibility manner. The urban environment not only makes targeting cooptation more difficult, but also forces urban governments into riskier, less efficient strategies of cooptation.

Ultimately, the response to the Moscow housing project did not generate national regime-challenging electoral or contentious mobilization. However, it did force the Moscow regime into more overt and risky methods of political manipulation. In municipal formations where United Russia no longer held majorities on the city council, the ruling party resorted to tricks, sabotage, and intimidation to achieve their ends. This obstruction has prevented municipal formation heads from being chosen, budgets from being passed, and constituents from being served (Shamardina, 2018). This ultimately appears to be an attempt to discredit the opposition, preventing them from exercising even the minimal power of municipal formation councils to establish enduring political ties to citizens.

Additionally, the opposition's unexpected gains in municipal council elections forced the Moscow regime to clamp down on the competitiveness of 2018's mayoral race. Moscow uses a so-called "municipal filter" that requires mayoral candidates to get at least one signature from a municipal deputy in 110 out of the 130 municipal formations. The opposition did not have seats on enough councils to pass the filter by themselves, and United Russia moved to make sure no opposition candidate from outside the so-called "in-system" opposition would be able to do so, forbidding their members from endorsing any opposition candidates to "maintain their monopoly on the municipal filter" (Meduza, 2017). This ultimately resulted

in a noncompetitive, low turnout race where incumbent mayor Sergei Sobyenin took over 70% of the vote (Kolesnikov, 2018).

Conclusion

The main goal of this article was to examine the dynamics through which urban areas become threatening to authoritarian rule, taking as a starting point Wallace (2013)’s observation that authoritarian regimes redistribute to the city to buy short term peace at the expense of long-term survival. The results demonstrate that the unique socio-spatial illegibility of the city makes this redistribution risky, even in the relatively high-information environment of a particularly capable electoral authoritarian regime. A seemingly precisely targeted program that promised new, higher-quality housing created extremely heterogeneous, spatially-patterned effects, depriving the regime of monopolistic control of the structures of urban governance and tarnishing the regime’s “aura of invincibility”. Rather than providing short-term stability, the renovation project instead became the proximate cause of an electoral and organizational surge for the opposition.

The takeaway for the study of authoritarianism is that buying social peace in the cities not only increases the long term risk of regime failure via urban concentration, but can itself be a potent short-term risk. Ironically, the risk of unintended consequences to cooptation or coercion only increases when the regime does succeed, as urban bias provokes further migration to a few large cities, increasing both urban concentration and the difficulty of targeting future cooptation. Authoritarian regimes that buy short-term stability in the cities are faced with growing inability to target and predict the effects of cooptive policy, increasing both the general risk that regime-threatening mobilization will occur and the specific risk that their attempts to prevent mobilization will become its proximate cause. Wallace (2013)’s characterization of urban bias as a Faustian bargain is more complex and correct than originally characterized.

While the renovation project is certainly unique, conflict over the use of space in cities certainly is not. The defining feature of urban politics is conflict over space: its usage, its owners, its value, and its meaning. When cooptation and coercion are spatially targeted, as they often are, the illegibility of urban areas makes unintended side effects likely in democracies and authoritarian regimes alike. However, as the example of Moscow demonstrates, these unintended side effects can lead to much more than a temporary electoral setback under authoritarianism. They can force authoritarian regimes into riskier and more overt coercion, induce a fractured opposition to coordinate, and in dramatic cases, set into motion the type of wide urban discontent that so commonly brings down authoritarian regimes.

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