

Non-Ruling Parties in a Multi-Party Authoritarian Regime: Case of Russia under Putin

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Abstract

Recent research on the role of quasi-democratic institutions in non-democratic regimes finds differential effects of legislatures on economic performance and regime stability across subtypes of non-democracy. This empirically observed variation has however remained a “black box” lacking a micro-theoretical foundation. This paper helps bridge this gap by proposing a theory of two types of non-ruling parties (real and decoy opposition) that might be present in a non-democratic legislature and affect the way the legislature functions. I test behavioral implications of the theory using parliamentary speeches from the Russian legislature under Putin and show that, unlike decoy parties, real opposition strives to set the agenda on the floor of the parliament. I also show that decoy parties, unlike real opposition, avoid raising topics about the foundations of the regime, although they are trying to deceive voters by discussing weak points of the government. This variation in parties’ strategies helps shed new light on the internal functioning of an autocratic legislature.

1 Introduction

Different quasi-democratic institutions produce different outcomes in non-democratic regimes (Escriba-Folch 2012, Wright and Escriba-Folch 2012). This empirical finding reveals the fact the quasi-democratic institutions are not only a facade for a non-democratic rule. Instead, these institutions actually have certain functions, as has been shown in a number of works on the topic (Gandhi and Przeworski 2006, Magaloni 2008, Franz and Ezrow 2011). However, existing work has not yet provided a clear explanation for the observed variation in institutional effects. Given there is a party system with more than one party and a multi-party legislature, how exactly do different types of dictators force the same institutions to function in different ways? Why do some legislatures constrain the dictator while others fail completely in this job?

These questions can also be asked from a different perspective. Instead of looking at politics from a dictator's point of view, one can take on a partisan perspective: Why do some non-ruling parties that are incorporated into the regime challenge the dictator whereas other do not? The Brazilian Democratic Movement (MDB), a party that was established by a group of military officers in Brazil after they overthrew the president and banned all 13 existing political parties (Martinez-Lara 1996), started playing an active political role soon enough after its establishment. Party representatives were publicly questioning the regime's decisions in economics, domestic affairs, and foreign policy, and gaining an increasingly higher representation in the Congress until a party candidate finally won the 1985 presidential election and put the end to the military regime (Dulles 2007, Kinzo 1988). The MDB case shows that a non-ruling party is potentially capable not only of constraining the dictator, but also of crashing the non-democratic regime. But is it always to case?

Even though there has been vast academic research on the role of institutions in authoritarian regimes, these questions remain largely unanswered, meaning that we do not have a full understanding of the role non-ruling parties play in multi-party non-democratic regimes yet.

This paper builds on the existing literature on institutions in non-democratic regimes to develop a theory of non-ruling parties' behavior in multi-party autocratic regimes with empirically testable implications. I distinguish between non-ruling parties of two different types: real opposition that aims to oust the dictator, and decoy parties that the dictator uses to gain some democratic legitimacy. These two types of parties are endogenous to regime characteristics. In particular, in repressive military or personalist regimes, there might be no organized opposition. A radically different situation is a non-democratic regime with a relatively strong opposition and a dictator who does not have enough resources to create a decoy non-ruling party without the risks of having one more opposition party. Hence, I conceptualize the difference between real opposition and decoy parties as an intrinsic characteristic of a non-democratic regime that reveals to some extent its nature and robustness. Furthermore, I conceptualize non-ruling parties' public behavior as signaling to one of the two possible principals – the dictator or voters – in order to lower uncertainty about their true type. Having two different principals both motivates parties of different types to pursue different goals and imposes constraints on the tools that can be used for that.

Using data on parliamentary speeches from the Russian legislature in 2007 – 2011, I show that the real opposition strives to set the agenda by systematically raising a number of special topics. I also show that the real opposition is the only political party that raises topics related to the foundations of the regime, including issues related to elections. Finally, I show that even though decoy parties talk about issues that are believed to be weak points of the regime, they never challenge regime foundations.

This paper makes three main contributions to the literature. First, it proposes a theory that allows to analytically differentiate between legislatures in non-democratic regimes based on the types of parties present. Second, it shows the differences in the goals and strategies of different types of non-ruling parties. Finally, I go beyond existing research on Mexico, Vietnam, Jordan and Egypt and broaden the empirical basis that is available for studying non-democratic institutions by collecting and employing a new dataset of parliamentary

speeches in the Russian State Duma.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 provides an overview of the existing literature on institutions in authoritarian regimes. Section 3 develops the theoretical argument. Next section describes the methodology and the data used to test hypotheses. Section 5 presents the empirical results, and Section 6 concludes.

2 Literature Review

Institutions in non-democratic regimes have attracted scholarly attention for the last two decades (Geddes 1999; Gandhi 2008; Pepinsky 2014) producing a variety of theoretical claims and empirical results that refer either to non-democratic regimes overall or their specific types.

While in the beginning the debate seemed to be motivated by research on the breakdown of autocracies and further democratization (Geddes 1999) with the desire to understand the consequences of introducing democratic institutions in non-democratic regimes regardless of their type, there is now a basic scholarly consensus that same institutions can play different roles in different subtypes of autocracies (Wright 2008). Hence, the theoretical argument has evolved from generalized claims about how institutions affect the durability of the regimes (Gandhi and Przeworski 2007) to more nuanced findings about the differentiated role of institutions in different non-democratic contexts (Wright 2008) and to uncovering the black box of institutions in country-specific research (Magaloni 2006; Arriola 2009; Blaydes 2011).

It turns out that different institutional designs produce different social and economic outcomes in non-democratic regimes. In particular, Escriba-Folch (2012) shows that single-party and military regimes tend to increase transfers to social groups supporting the regime when under international sanctions, while personalistic regimes cut all types of social spending. Differences among types of non-democratic regimes have also been found with respect to infant mortality rate and trade policies: it turns out that single and multi-party regimes have

lower infant mortality (McGuire 2013) and more open trade policies (Hankla and Kuthy 2012) than other types of non-democratic regimes.

Although there is a lot of empirical evidence that institutions matter in non-democratic regimes, there is so far much less certainty about why autocrats choose different institutions. As Pepinsky (2014) argues following Riker (1980) and Shepsle (2006), institutions are not exogenous, they are the equilibria that reflect the balance of power and interest in the regimes. Thus, research on the effects of institutions may be following the wrong path and confusing the effects of institutions with the effects of the more fundamental factors that affect both the institutional design in a given regime and its social or economic performance. Consequently, research focused on unpacking the mechanics of how institutions function and revealing the microfoundations of actors' behavior within those institutions attains special interest.

So far, the main focus in the literature has been on the dictator as the most prominent political actor in a non-democratic regime. With respect to elections and legislatures (two institutions that have gained special scholarly attention) many authors have highlighted how dictators might use these institutions to strengthen their power by signaling about the dictator's strength and thus discouraging potential opponents (Geddes 2006; Magaloni 2006; Simpser 2013), lowering risks for the elites and establishing a credible commitment (Magaloni 2008), helping to monitor (Malesky and Schuler 2010) or distribute spoils among elites (Lust 2009; Lust-Okar 2008), or just by providing some democratic legitimacy to the dictator in the eyes of the population and the international community (Schedler 2002).

Although this strand of research has delivered a plethora of important insights that deepen our understanding of non-democratic politics, it has also two major drawbacks. First, it does not fully account for the context in which dictators make their decisions, and "essentially assumes that dictators inherit structure-free domestic environments upon their assumption to power, and create from scratch any institutional arrangements that emerge" (Frantz and Ezrow 2011: 5). Second, it focuses on only one unknown in the equation, the dictator, and largely ignores the elites or the population, almost as if a dictator could rule by himself

without any support from others.

An alternative literature, which adds a lot to the previous one by changing the focus completely, focuses on the challenges that existing institutions pose for the dictator and highlights the possibilities that those institutions open for the masses. In particular, Tucker (2007) and Kuntz and Thompson (2009) noticed that elections, especially if rigged, might provoke protests by the mere fact that they mobilize citizens. These studies emphasize the masses' perspective and analyze the role quasi-democratic institutions can play for regime change.

Nevertheless, even if put together, these two bodies of literature do not provide a full account of quasi-democratic institutions in autocracies due to an important missing link – the elites within political institutions. Surprisingly little is known about elites' behavior in institutions in non-democracies despite the prominence of the relationships between elites and the dictator for regime survival. In the scant research on this subject, the ruling party has attained most attention. Reuter and Gandhi (2011), for example, found that economic hardship increases risks for elite defections from dominant parties. Greene (2007) develops a resource theory of party dominance in non-democratic regimes using Mexico as a case study and argues that “challenger party competitiveness is primarily determined by two types of dominant party advantages: the incumbent's resource advantages and its ability to raise the costs of participation in the opposition” (Greene 2007, p.5).

Although Greene (2007) does not ignore non-ruling elites in his treatment of the PRI dominance in Mexico, he basically explains the weakness of the opposition by its failure to coordinate, and the incumbent's resource abundance. Franklin (2002) engages in a broader analysis of the factors that affect the strategies employed by opposition parties by using data on 51 parties' protests in 24 non-democratic regimes in 1949 – 1993. Finally, Conrad (2011) develops a theoretical framework for conceptualizing the interactions between a dictator and opposition. He classifies opposition into three types (potential, party, and legislative), and hypothesizes that the dictator will avoid responding to potential opposition with any

concessions, will use rights concessions with party opposition, and material concessions with legislative opposition. As an empirical test, he estimates a 3SLS model using data on 116 dictatorships from 1980 to 1996.

As one can see, there are still large gaps in both the theories that explain elites' behavior in quasi-democratic institutions, and empirical strategies used to test them. In particular, multiple questions about the role of non-ruling parties remain unanswered. What motivates elites to join non-ruling parties? How different are their political goals and beliefs from the goals of the ruling party elites and ordinary citizens? Can the elites from the non-ruling but co-opted parties challenge the dictator? If so, under what conditions do they attack the regime most severely? Finally, are those non-ruling parties real opposition or are they just puppets that dictators use to fool myopic citizens?

This paper aims to help bridge the gap by developing a two-principals theory of non-ruling parties in non-democratic regimes and testing its observable implications using parliamentary speeches from a non-democratic legislature.

3 Theoretical Argument

Political opposition in autocratic regimes is peculiar in many different respects. First, opposition parties typically aim to change the distribution of power or the entire political regime in non-democratic countries (Green 2007). Thus, they cannot be exclusively concerned with office seeking, since otherwise, as Green (2007: 121) argues, “they would have no reason to exist in dominant party systems”.

Another difference is related to the costs the opposition might have to pay for a free choice of its public image and policy positions. When playing an active role in the anti-regime protests, the opposition is running the risk of provoking the regime to move towards repressive authoritarianism. In Brazil, the participation of a relatively small group of the

MDB congressmen (the so-called *grupo dos imaturos*) in mass protests in 1968 pushed the regime into imposing the most severe limitations on democratic practices and political freedoms (the so-called AI-5, Institutional Act No. 5, adopted in mid-December 1968) ever since the military rule was established. Such a shift in autocratic policies might be costly for the opposition for at least two reasons. First, it may lead to repressions affecting the party itself, since repression and intimidation is a tool a non-democratic regime can use with respect to the parties it used to allow (Martinez-Lara 1996). Second, it may result in lower popularity of the party, for the voters may blame the opposition for provoking repressions and questioning political and strategic skills of its leaders.

Besides, opposition parties face an additional challenge in non-democratic regimes, since they might need to convince voters that they are not the pseudo-opposition that the dictator has been allowing in order to create some sort of democratic legitimacy for himself inside the country and abroad. As Kinzo (1988: 124) points out, in late 1960s, the opposition press in Brazil was blaming the MDB for “adhering too strictly to the regime’s slogan of permitting opposition to the government but not to the regime”. This tactics resulted in MDB’s utter defeat in the 1970 parliamentary election. In modern Russia, the new political parties that started emerging during a relative liberalization of the regime in late 2012, just before Vladimir Putin’s third presidential term, made many political experts believe that “the majority of tyros would become spoilers, since the multiparty system has been reestablishing in such a way that it would not create real political competition in the country” (Kommersant 2012).

The popular concern about how oppositional an opposition party is may be well-justified in non-democratic regimes. In the case of Brazil, anecdotal evidence suggests that the Brazilian dictator, Catelo Branco, had to ask one of his friends to become a party leader for the MDB (Kinzo 1988), thus reflecting the fact that the opposition party emerged as loyal opposition. In Russia under Putin, the Just Russia party created in 2006 before the 2007 parliamentary election has been a “regime created parastatal party aimed at providing lim-

ited competition for the main party of power” (March 2009: 505). The party portrays itself publicly as opposition to the ruling United Russia party, although avoids criticizing Vladimir Putin and the political regime in general. Overall, even though the strategy of creating decoy parties is probably not the most common tool among an authoritarian regime’s toolkit of electoral manipulation (Golosov 2015), different regimes may use it occasionally, as Bell (1981) shows for the case of the Dominican Republic, and Quandt (2004) illustrates with evidence from Algeria.

At the same time, it is not only voters who might be concerned with the true type of a non-ruling party and wonder whether it is real opposition. Dictators may also be unclear about that, especially in times of economic crises when their abilities to raise funds, distribute perks and buy elites’ loyalty are undermined. According to Green (2007), who developed a resource theory of dominant party systems, the incumbents’ resource advantage plays a crucial role for the competitiveness of the challenger party. Thus, an economic crisis may undermine the dictator’s control on a non-ruling party unless the latter is a decoy party and cannot exist without the dictator’s backup. Consequently, the dictator also wants to know how loyal a non-ruling party is, i.e. what its true type is.

Thus, one can think of different types of non-ruling parties as agents having different principals whom they repeatedly signal about their true type. Voters are the principal for one type of non-ruling parties which I call real opposition. Dictator is the principal for the other type of parties which I call decoy.¹

Real opposition aims to come to power by changing the regime and winning elections. This does not necessarily mean that the real opposition is pro-democratic. Instead, it might want to win elections in order to gain power and then use it to suppress new opposition together with political freedoms. This grievous scenario illustrates politics of Albania in early 1990s, where the Democratic Party first lost the 1991 elections and then used popular unrest to oust Enver Hoxha’s successor Ramiz Alia and win the 1992 elections. However, the

¹The term was originally suggested to me by Michael Laver.

new regime did not respect democratic freedoms and used its powers to attack and intimidate the opposition that used to be the ruling party a few years ago (Levitsky and Way 2010). Nevertheless, even though real opposition is not necessarily pro-democratic, winning elections by gaining popular support is the only legal tool parties of this type can use for gaining power. Thus, these parties view voters as their principal.

On the contrary, decoy parties are created by dictators and are accountable to them. The reasons why a dictator might want to create such a party are various, including stealing votes from real opposition, avoiding clashes between different elite groups within a single ruling party, diversifying or easing ways to distribute perks among elites, etc. Besides, having multiple parties resembles a democratic multi-party system which might allow the dictator to get at least a partial credit for mimicking a democratic leader in both domestic issues and foreign affairs (on the domestic side, the Russian state propaganda claimed in early 2000s that the Russian regime is a “sovereign democracy” which is not inferior to liberal democracies of the West) (Casula 2013). These parties are not rivals for the ruling party, since it would be myopic for the dictator to allow a decoy party to steal votes from the ruling party. That would split pro-regime popular support and could negatively affect regime stability by increasing uncertainty about its ability to win elections. Instead, these parties fight for stealing votes from real opposition without really putting in danger the prominent position of the ruling party.

Having different principals and goals motivates real opposition and decoy parties to pursue different observable strategies. Although providing a complete account of their strategies is far beyond the scope of a single paper, I do characterize here those aspects of party strategies that can be observed from parliamentary speeches.

Since winning elections is the only way for the real opposition to come to power, it should strive to make as many voters as possible think that the opposition party is both worth being supported and capable of ruling the country. The most straightforward and observable (at least, for voters) way to achieve this goal is to set the parliamentary agenda. Indeed, the

party that is able to set the agenda would enjoy a broader presence in media (at least those that are not fully state-controlled, for example social media) and more chances to implement some of its electoral promises. On the other hand, decoy parties should not be expected to strive for setting the agenda. Otherwise they would be putting the ruling party in the danger of losing control over the legislature and thus destabilizing the regime. In terms of legislative speeches, setting the agenda means raising as many *own party's topics* as possible, where an *own party's topic* is a topic on which a given party dominates in speeches. My first hypothesis summarizes this argument:

H₁: Real opposition dominates in speeches on more topics than decoy parties.

Besides striving to set the agenda, the real opposition should also be trying to undermine the regime foundations by either revealing its non-democratic nature or at least raising public awareness of the imperfections of its quasi-democratic institutions. Indeed, public awareness of that is capable of provoking mass popular unrest and rebellion around the time of election, as it happened during the 2003 Rose Revolution in Georgia, the 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine, the 2011 – 2013 mass protests in Russia, etc. My second hypothesis follows:

H₂: Real opposition talks on the floor about elections more often than other parties, whereas decoy parties do not raise this topics in their speeches.

Although I expect decoy parties not to raise topics related to the foundations and the nature of the regime, they need to talk about issues that are considered to be weak points of the government. Actually, criticizing the government (rather than the regime or the dictator himself) is largely the only way decoy parties can persuade malcontent voters to vote for them, which is their goal. Obviously, real opposition will be also raising topics related to problematic aspects of government performance. Thus, I hypothesize that

H₃: Both decoy parties and real opposition raise topics related to critical aspects of government performance.

Since all three hypotheses assume prior knowledge of non-ruling parties' types, the next section provides the rationale for my coding of the parties in the Russian parliament under study.

4 Non-Ruling Parties in the Russian Parliament

Testing empirical implications of the theory I presented above requires establishing the type of every non-ruling party. Since parties do not either explicitly declare their type or reveal internal documentation that would ease researchers the endeavour, such a coding necessarily involves elements of expert judgement. In this section, I provide background information on the parties with representatives in the *5th* Russian State Duma (2007 – 2011) and explain my coding of their types.

After the 2007 parliamentary election, four parties had their representatives in the Russian legislature, including the ruling United Russia (UR), the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF), the Liberal–Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR), and the Just Russia (JR).

The *5th* State Duma voted, among other things, on two major pieces of legislation with important political implications. First, the Duma voted on the appointment of the Prime Minister in May 2008. President Medvedev nominated Vladimir Putin, his predecessor as President, for the position of the Prime Minister. Thus, the issue was reportedly about supporting Putin's prolonged stay in power (Levy 2007). The other crucial piece of legislation considered by the Duma in November 2008 was the constitutional reform that extended the terms of the next President and parliament from four to six and five years respectively. Those amendments were seen as having potential for extending Dmitri Medvedev's or Vladimir Putin's future office terms even further (Levy 2008).

The largest non-ruling party was KPRF with 13% of seats. The party emerged at dawn

of the Russian multi-party system formation in 1993 and was consistently gaining plurality or near plurality² in the Russian parliament until 2003 when the UR became the dominant party. Organizationally, KPRF inherited the structure of the CPSU and retained considerable organizational strength and partial autonomy from Kremlin even under Putin’s regime (Hale and Colton 2010; Gel’man 2008; Golosov 2014). In the 5th Russian Duma, all members of KPRF voted against Vladimir Putin during the Prime Minister voting in May 2008. The party also voted “nay” on the 2008 constitutional reform.

The second largest non-ruling party was LDPR with 9% of seats. LDPR is the oldest Russian party and was the first and the only party registered on the whole territory of the USSR besides the CPSU in late 1989 (Golosov 2006). However, it has been always characterized as organizationally weak and ideologically loose (Chaisty 2012). The party’s popularity is largely based on the bright personality and provocative public behavior of its leader, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy (Golosov 2014). In the 5th Duma, LDPR voted in favor of Vladimir Putin’s nomination for Prime Minister and the constitutional reform.

The smallest non-ruling party, although with only a tiny difference in the number of parliamentary seats from LDPR, was the JR with 8%. The party emerged in 2006 as a result of a merge of three other parties, Russian Pensioners Party, the Russian Party of Life, and Rodina – all three “consciously orchestrated by the authorities in order to split the communist vote” (Golosov 2014: 276). With respect to JR’s predecessor, Rodina, Sakwa claimed with respect to the 2003 parliamentary election that “the Kremlin’s divide and rule policy was more effective than anticipated, and Rodina was able to siphon off a significant part of the communist electorate” (Sakwa 2005: 377). Not surprisingly, the party fully supported Vladimir Putin during the vote on Prime Minister, as well as the constitutional reform.

²In 1993, KPRF was officially the third largest party in the Duma, however the Agrarian faction was tightly related to KPRF and its leaders were even members of the leading body of KPRF (Golosov 2006). When considered together with the Agrarian faction, the communists had plurality. In 1999 KPRF was the largest party in the legislature until the factions “Edinstvo” and “Otechestvo - Vsyaya Rossiya” united to form United Russia in 2001.

Based on the history of the three non-ruling parties and the expert evaluations found in the literature, I code KPRF as the only real opposition party present in the parliament, whereas LDPR and JR are coded as decoy parties. I expect that the differences in parties' type and loyalty to the political regime revealed itself not only in the three most important votes in the 5th Duma, but also in the way party representatives communicated publicly to their principals during parliamentary speeches. Next section describes the data and methods I use for empirical analysis.

5 Data and Methodology

Even though academic literature on authoritarian institutions has so far ignored issues of legislators' voting and speech patterns in the parliament, extensive literature on these topics exists for democratic countries. Up until recently scholars have mainly focused on voting patterns and agenda in democratic legislatures (Carey 2007; Carey 2009; Hix et al. 2007; Poole and Rosenthal 2008), but new advances in both communication technology and machine learning have led to a spike in political science interest in analyzing various political texts (Grimmer and Stewart 2013), including legislators' speeches (Proksch and Slapin 2012, 2015). As Proksch and Slapin (2012) claim, legislative speeches are a tool for position taking for legislators, and they use their speeches to send signals to their voters. They also show that the constitutional regime (parliamentarism vs. presidentialism) and the type of the electoral system affect the incentives party leaders have to regulate the speech-making process on the floor. Following this literature and in line with my two-principals theory of non-ruling parties in non-democracies, I also conceptualize speeches in the Russian legislature as a position-taking and signaling tool parties use to send signals to their principals.

I analyze data referring to the 5th Russian parliament (State Duma of the Federal Council of the Russian Federation) that was working from December 2007 to December 2011. The

choice of the 5th State Duma is motivated by the fact that this is the most recent Russian parliament for which we have access to parliamentary speeches up until the next elections.

I employ a newly collected dataset of parliamentary speeches that were recently made available for scraping on the official Web-page of the State Duma³. I organized the data by legislator – day, so that every observation represents all speeches that a legislator made on a given day. I have also information on party affiliation for every speaker. Table 1 presents some summary statistics for the data.

Table 1. Summary statistics for speech data

	UR	JR	LDPR	KPRF
Num. obs (deputy–days)	4869	1499	1181	3063
Num. of deputies ^(a)	322 (315)	38 (38)	43 (40)	61 (57)
Num. of deputies who never spoke ^(b)	45 (14%)	2 (5%)	9 (21%)	6 (10%)
Num. of days party spoke	238 (100%)	228 (96%)	236 (99%)	238 (100%)
Num. of deputies speaking per day ^(c)	20.46 (7.15)	6.57 (2.87)	5.00 (2.28)	12.87 (3.81)

Note: Summary statistics are given for each party separately. UR stands for the “United Russia” (the ruling party); JR refers to the “Just Russia” party; LDPR is the Liberal–Democratic Party of Russia; KPRF denotes the Communist Party of the Russian Federation.

^(a) Numbers of parties’ seats in the State Duma are in parentheses. They may be smaller than main entries because new deputies were getting mandates in case of other deputies’ deaths or resignations for taking a different office.

^(b) Percentages in parentheses are computed using main entries from the previous row.

^(c) Main entries are mean values. Standard deviations are in parentheses.

As one can see from Table 1, the Just Russia party had the smallest proportion of deputies who never spoke on the floor, which might be due to a relatively small total number of its

³The Python code for scraping the official Web-page of the State Duma is available from the author upon request.

deputies. However, the party with the largest fraction of deputies who never spoke is LDPR, rather than UR. (For more descriptive information about legislative speeches, see Appendix 1).

The overall party activity in making speeches was relatively even, at least in terms of the number of days parties had a speaking representative. However, the average number of party representatives who had a chance to speak on a given day differed a lot and, obviously, depended on the total number of deputies in the party. All in all, the summary statistics of the Speech Data do not reveal any evidence of non-ruling parties' members being discriminated in their right to make speeches.

I use this dataset to perform topic modeling, which is a class of unsupervised learning methods developed to reveal structure in a corpus of documents (Grimmer and Stewart 2013). A topic here is a probability distribution over a set of words called vocabulary. Different topics are represented by different probability distributions, and the interpretation of a topic is based on the words that get higher probabilities within the topic. For instance, if a distribution assigns high probabilities to words like pensions, insurance, retired, and elderly, one might argue that that distribution (topic) is related to the social care for the retired.

The classical *bag-of-words* approach assumes that there are no links among words whatsoever except their topic membership. Thus, it performs topic modeling on the document–term matrix containing frequencies for separate words. Here, I go beyond this classical approach and augment the document–term matrix with *collocations*, i.e. word combinations that have a specific meaning (for instance, the collocation “United States” has a different meaning than the words “states” and “united” per se). Such an approach allows me to identify more meaningful topics and narrow the gap between the real-life use of language and its computational model applied for topic modeling.

In order to find collocations in my corpus of texts, I compute the variances of distances between every pair of words in all sentences and select those pairs that appear at least 300 times in the corpus and have the lowest variance. The motivation for this method is

straightforward: if the variance of distances is low, than a given pair of words tend to appear on given distance from each other, thus there is something that makes them bound together in some sense. This method allows me to identify such collocations as “Russian Federation”, “State Duma”, “federal law”, etc.

Although topic modeling is a powerful exploratory tool to analyze textual data, it was not originally designed to test hypotheses. In order to overcome this limitation and empirically test implications of my theory, I use a special topic modeling technique that is called the Structural Topic Model (hereinafter, STM) and was specifically developed to incorporate statistical hypothesis testing into the topic modeling framework (Roberts et al. 2013). The STM incorporates document-level covariates of interest into the topic model by modeling prior distributions as functions of document-level information. Here, I model the frequency of different topics in documents (a.k.a. topical prevalence) as a function of speakers’ party affiliation. This allows me to compare topic frequencies for opposition and decoy parties.

Since the STM uses the logistic-normal linear model for priors on topical prevalence (Roberts et al 2013), I specify a linear model as follows:

$$prevalence_{d,k} = \gamma_0^{(k)} + \gamma_1^{(k)} party_d + \varepsilon_{d,k},$$

where d indexes documents, and k indexes topics; coefficients $\gamma_0^{(k)}$ and $\gamma_1^{(k)}$ are topic-specific, and $party_d$ is a document-level covariate.

Estimation results allow me to both create a topic profile for every party (i.e. frequency distribution of topics for every party) and test whether the observed differences in topic prevalence are statistically significant across parties.

Since the STM is an unsupervised learning model, it requires the researcher to specify the number of topics to be estimated. I employ topic exclusivity (Bischof and Airolidi 2012) for selecting the number of topics. I run models multiple times for a range of numbers of topics (from 50 to 200) and pick the number that has a high average value and a low standard

deviation for this criterion (Appendix 2 presents this information graphically). As a result, I select a model with 125 topics summarized in the next section.

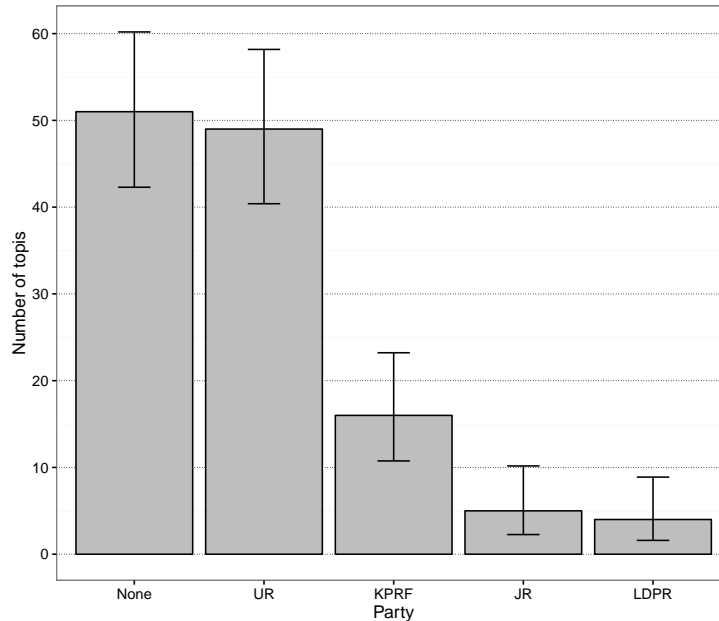
6 Results

Following Dearing and Everett (1996), I define agenda as “a set of issues that are communicated in a hierarchy of importance at a point in time.” Affecting parliamentary agenda can be described in terms of parliamentary speeches as raising peculiar topics that a party is a leader in talking about. Indeed, if a party is known by its position on a topic, raising it repeatedly in speeches will emphasize its salience and thus promote discussion of the party’s agenda. On the other hand, if a topic is typical of all the parliamentary parties, its promotion would not help a party to set the agenda different from what other parties promote. Hence, in order to quantify parties’ attempts to set the agenda in the 5th State Duma, I focus on topics that are “owned” by a party in the sense that one can predict with high confidence the partisanship of a deputy talking about that topic. Formally, *party i is said to own topic j if for any deputy d talking about that topic $Pr(d \in i | d \text{ talks about } j) > 0.5$.*

Figure 1 shows the distribution of the “owned” topics across parties. As one can see, around 40% of topics are not owned by any party since they are topics common for all of them. The ruling UR owns around the same proportion of topics winning the agenda setting fight to all other parties with a large margin. Such a situation is rather expected for an authoritarian legislature with a dominant ruling party. Figure 1 also provides moderate support for H_1 , since the real opposition party owns more topics than decoy parties at 90% confidence level.⁴ In absolute numbers, the observed difference between KPRF and decoy parties is more than three-fold (16 vs 5 and 4). At the same time, there is no difference among decoy parties in the number of topics they own.

⁴Although this result does not hold at 95% or higher confidence levels, switching to 90% is justifiable due to a low number of observations.

Figure 1. Distribution of “owned” topics across parties.



Note: Bars represent the number of topics owned by a party (out of 125) with 90% confidence intervals. Confidence intervals for frequencies are computed using the Agresti–Coull intervals for proportions and multiplying their bounds by the total number of topics.

One can get a deeper understanding of the way parties use speeches for strategic purposes by studying topics themselves. For this purpose, I label topics by studying sets of the most common words in every topic. Since topics are distributions over a vocabulary that are identified in a corpus of texts without any training set, some of the topics are not necessarily political. Instead, some of them refer to procedural issues, whereas others accumulate interjections, prepositions and adverbs. Finally, a few topics were not clear enough to assign them a specific label, since their most common words had quite little in common. In order to reveal party profiles, I present on Figure 2 party probabilities given a topic for 68 topics that do not belong to any of these groups.

As one can see from Figure 2, although there are topics that obtained a lot of attention by more than one party (thus, party probabilities are close to each other; for example, topics 17 and 19), many of them have uneven coverage by different parties. One can also identify party profiles from the graph. For instance, KPRF focused a lot on Russian economic problems,

including rural economy (topic 56), the balance between economic sectors (topic 20), and the budget (topics 5, 6, and 8). The party also paid large attention to education (topics 21 and 22) which has been a hot topic in Russia since the educational reform and the introduction of the United State Exam in 2009.⁵ The party also talked about regional problems (topic 54), armed forces and the relations with the U.S. (topic 44), and issues of the Soviet history (topic 60).

Decoy parties had a different profile. Members of LDPR mainly talked about negative consequences of the 1917 Russian Revolution, thus criticizing KPRF (topic 61), prices (topic 52), and party itself (topic 36). To a smaller degree, but still more than other parties, it talked about neighboring countries and problems of people with disabilities (mixed topic 47), as well as regional problems (topic 54).

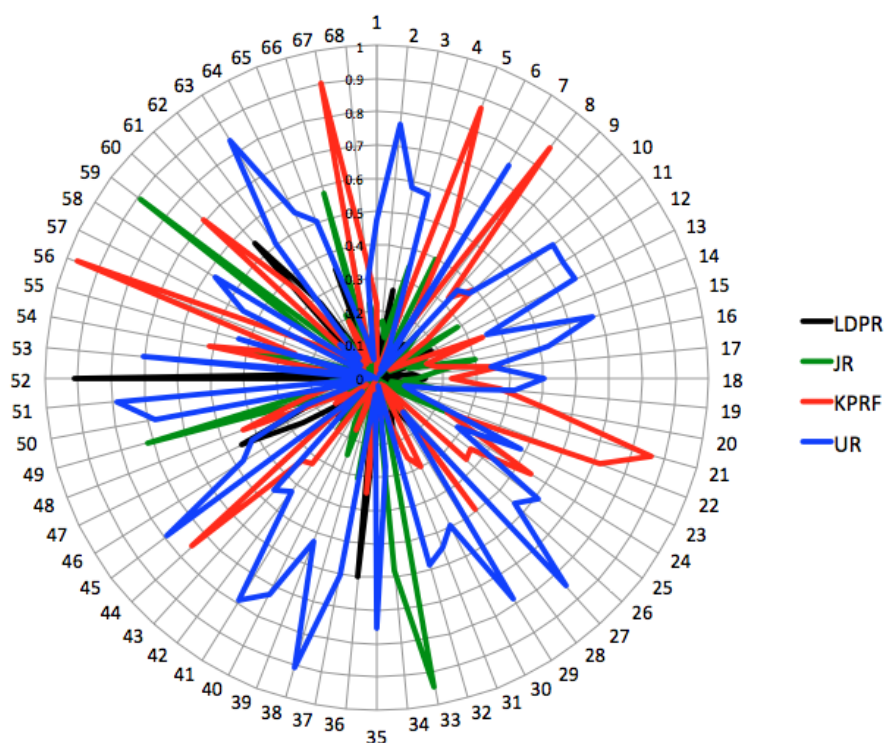
The topic profile of JR is more social oriented than the one of LDPR due to the party's declared socialist ideology. This decoy party focused in its speeches on housing issues (topics 33 and 34), pensions (topic 49), drugs and terrorism (topic 59), as well as the use of soft and hard power by Russia abroad (topic 59).

What do these party profiles tell us about H_3 ? Is it true that both real opposition and decoy parties raise topics related to critical aspects of government performance? In order to answer this question, one needs to identify those topics. One possible solution would be to perform sentiment analysis. However, routine parliamentary speeches are not the best possible raw data for sentiment analysis, since one can express anti-government feelings not only by using specific words and word combinations, but also by referring to some objective information (numbers, for instance) that characterize the situation in the country in a negative way. Taking this into account, I address the problem from a different perspective and use opinion polls to identify the problems that have been consistently considered by the Russians as the major problems of Russia. I use four opinion polls made in 2007 – 2008 and average percentages of people who mentioned a given problem as a major Russian problem.⁶

⁵Russian analogue of the SAT in the U.S.

⁶Importantly, these numbers have almost no variation over time, and thus provide a consistent represen-

Figure 2. Distribution of interpretable topics by party.



Note: Axes correspond to topics. Line lengths represent party probabilities for a given topic (spikes correspond to topics that are dominated by a party). Topic numbers correspond to: agriculture (1), alcohol (2), banks (3), bank debt (4), budget (5), budget (6), budget reserves (7), budget reserves (8), business (9), children (10), citizenship and migration (11), civil society organizations (12), cooperation and country neighbors (13), corruption related issues (14), criminal law (15), culture (16), development goals (17), domestic security (18), Duma and executive branch (19), economic sectors (20), education (21), school education (22), education in universities (23), elections (24), energy (25), far regions (26), federal laws (27), finance (28) gambling (29), government (30), housing (31), housing and construction (32), housing issues (33), housing privatization (34), insurance (35), LDPR (36), lease issues (37), legal (38), legal (39), legal (40), local authorities (41), medicine (42), military (43), military and USA (44), natural resources (45), neighbors and cooperation (46), mix of neighbors and people with disabilities (47), numbers and money (48), pensions (49), pensions (50), pensions (51), prices and LDPR (52), regional authorities (53), regional problems (54), Duma and other branches (55), rural economy (56), mix of security systems and regions (57), social issues for disabled (58), soft and hard power (59), Soviet issues (60), Russian revolution (61), sport (62), tax and budget (63), tax and budget (64), taxes (65), terrorism and drugs (66), trade with Belarus (67), veterans (68).

As one can see from Figure 2 and Table 2, all non-ruling parties highlighted topics that were related to at least some of the major Russian problems. Thus, LDPR’s speeches on prices, JR’s speeches on pensions, and KPRF’s massive discussions of the budget are closely related to poverty, mentioned as a problem by half of the respondents. Furthermore, as we

tation of popular concerns in Russia.

Table 2. Top-10 Problems in Russia

Problems	Percentage
Inflation	74
Poverty	50
Inequality	34
Medicine	32
Unemployment	29
Economic Crisis	29
Drugs	27
Education	27
Crime	26
Crisis of Social Morality	26

Note: Percentages are averaged over (a) March – April 2007, (b) September – October 2007, (c) March – April 2008, (d) July – August 2008. All polls use $N = 1600$ and are representative of the adult population of Russia.

Sources: (Rezultati Oprosov 2007a, 2007b, 2008a, 2008b)

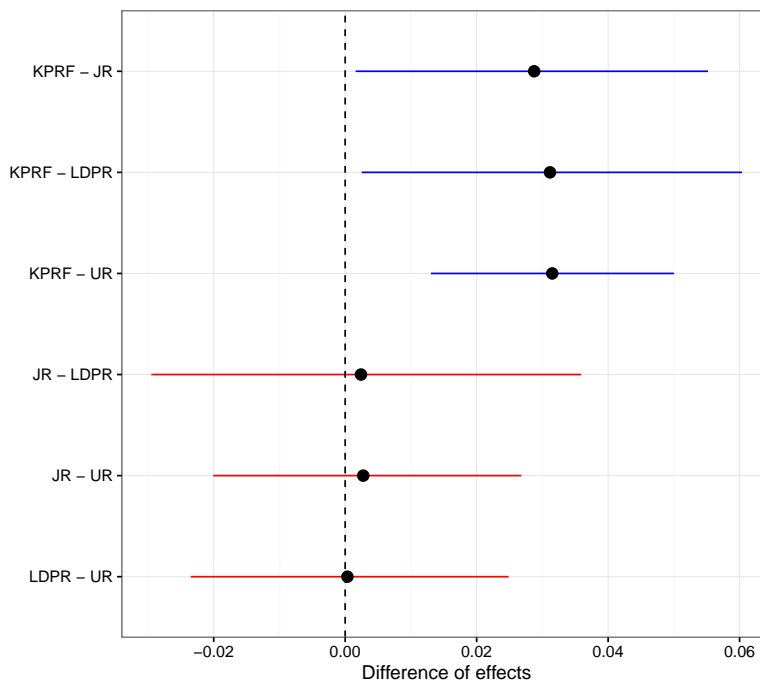
have seen, KPRF emphasized topics related to education, also mentioned by a little less than 30% of the respondents. Thus, empirical evidence supports the expectation that all non-ruling parties should be raising topics related to weak points of government performance.

What is even more peculiar and supports H_2 , is that only the real opposition highlighted the topic about regime foundations (topic 24 about elections). Figure 3 shows the differences in topic prevalence for all pairs of parties.

As one can see from the figure, KPRF talked about elections more often than any other party in the parliament, and these difference are statistically significant at the conventional level. At the same time, the differences among decoy parties and the ruling party are all indistinguishable from zero both as point estimates and statistically.

Thus, although decoy parties tried to mimic some opposition to the government, they did not either challenge regime foundations or try to considerably affect the agenda. All this is however true about real opposition.

Figure 3. Party differences in topic prevalence (topic 24: elections).



Note: X-axis shows the difference of topic prevalence for a pair of parties. Y-axis represents pairs of compared parties. The pair “KPRF – JR” means that topic prevalence for JR is subtracted from topic prevalence for KPRF. Black dots represent point estimates of differences. Horizontal bars show 95% confidence intervals. Blue confidence bars are used for statistically significant estimates, red ones for non-significant.

7 Conclusion

Although there has been vast scholarly research on quasi-democratic institutions in non-democratic regimes, there is still little understanding of why these institutions produce different social, political and economic effects in different contexts. This paper makes a step forward in explaining this variation by developing a two-principals theory of non-ruling parties in autocratic regimes. I claim that differences in the effects of multi-party elections and legislators are due to differences in parties’ goals that are in turn due to whom they are accountable to. Whereas real opposition has voters as their principal and can aim to constraint the dictator or even change the regime, decoy parties are accountable to the dictator and thus do not pose a major threat to him. Neither can they actually constrain him. I test some of the empirical implications of my theory for non-ruling parties’ activity and present

supporting evidence.

First, I show that real opposition is more active in its attempts to affect the parliamentary agenda than decoy parties. Agenda-setting in the parliament is a peaceful way for the opposition to affect political decisions and implement its policy goals, however only real opposition is using this tool. Decoy parties are not trying to set a new agenda, and thus are more alike seat-holders than real political actors in a legislature.

Second, empirical data supports the expectation that only real opposition should be raising issues related to the foundations of the regime. Those are issues that can highlight the quasi-democratic nature of the regime and thus remove the veil of lie. At the same time, decoy parties avoid raising those topics and play the role of compliant participant of the quasi-democratic game suggested by the dictator.

Finally, as expected, decoy parties are trying to hide their nature by raising topics that are critical of government's performance, not the regime. Such a strategy allows those parties to gain votes from those who are disappointed with the regime. At the same time, it also helps the regime to steal votes from real opposition.

Naturally, my analysis is but the first step in understanding the strategic component of public communication involving non-ruling parties in multi-party authoritarian regimes. Further research would need to develop a theory of their direct communication with voters (for example, through social media), and also test the explanatory power of my theory for national-level differences in regime performance.

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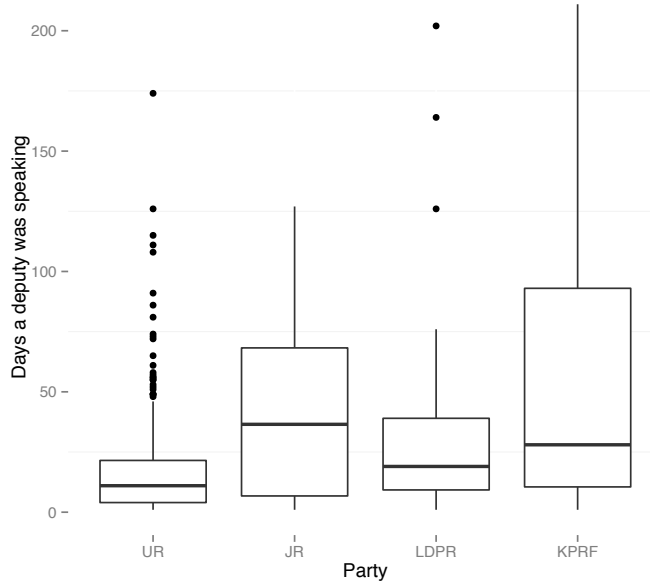
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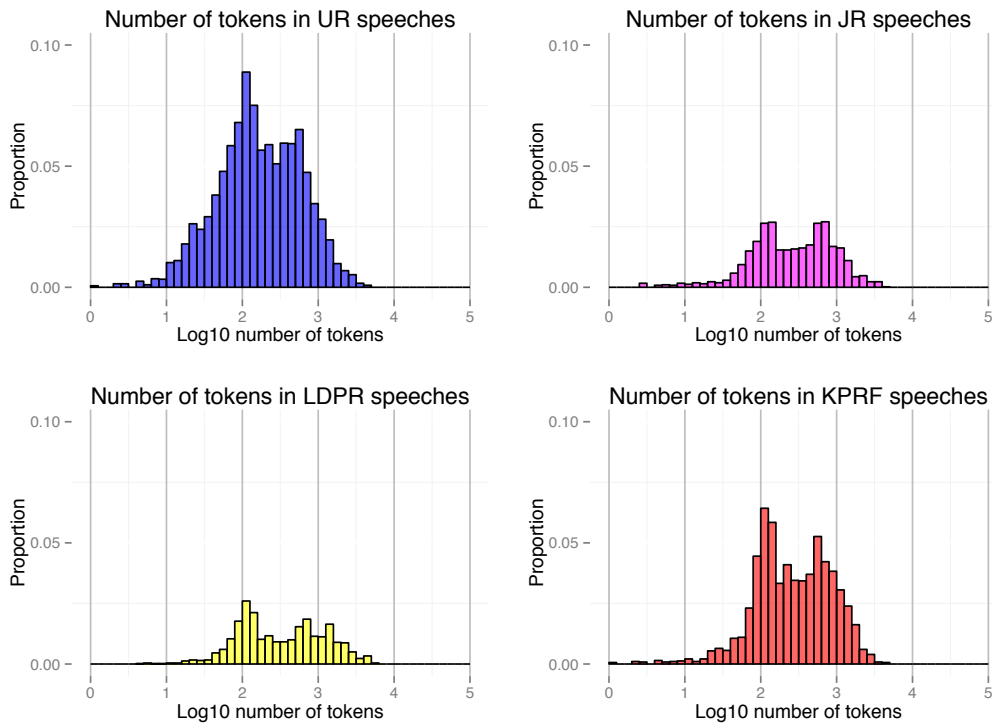
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Appendix 1. Descriptives for Legislative Speeches

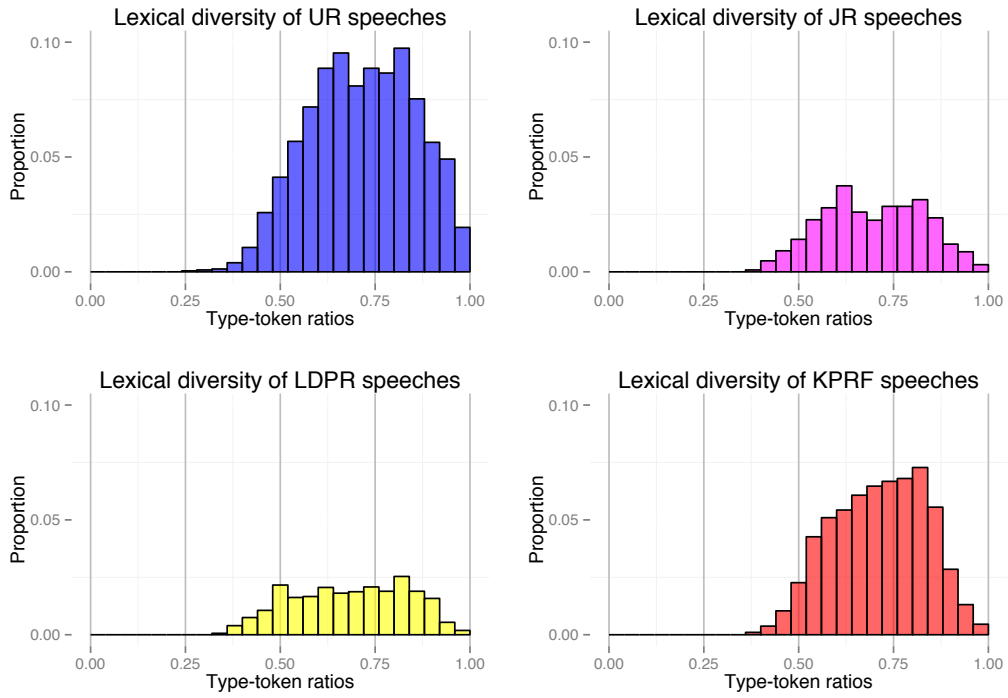
Appendix 1. Figure 1. Number of days deputies were speaking (by party)



Appendix 1. Figure 2. Length of speeches in number of tokens (obs are speaker-days)



Appendix 1. Figure 3. Lexical diversity of legislative speeches (obs are speaker-days)



Appendix 2. Choosing Number of Topics for STM

