University of Freiburg
Department of International Economic Policy
Discussion Paper Series
Nr. 52

Political Cycles of Media Repression

Günther G. Schulze
Nikita Zakharov

February 2025

ISSN 1866-4113

University of Freiburg
Department of International Economic Policy
Discussion Paper Series

The Discussion Papers are edited by:
Department of International Economic Policy
Institute for Economic Research
University of Freiburg
D-79085 Freiburg, Germany
Platz der Alten Synagoge 1

Tel: +49 761 203 2342
Fax: +49 761 203 2414
Email: iep@vwl.uni-freiburg.de

Editor:
Prof. Dr. Günther G. Schulze

ISSN: *1866-4113*
Electronically published: 25.02.2025

Political Cycles of Media Repression

By GÜNTHER G. SCHULZE AND NIKITA ZAKHAROV*

In this paper, we unveil targeted repression against journalists as an elaborate strategy used by modern autocrats to mitigate the risk of mass protests during autocratic elections—a common threat to their rule. Repression is deployed to discipline the media before elections to secure favorable media coverage of the incumbent, thereby discourage public dissent. In contrast, the reigns are loosened during off-election periods to allow the media's credibility to be rebuilt. This dynamic creates distinct electoral cycles of media repression in autocracies. Our empirical study establishes these cycles using a unique granular dataset on the harassment of journalists in Putin's Russia and the predetermined, staggered timing of local elections. We then demonstrate the disciplinary effects on reporting about incumbents using a novel media coverage index. Finally, employing survey data, we show that media repression is extremely effective when it comes to dwarfing the threat of anti-government protests.

JEL codes: D72, H10, P43
Keywords: Autocracy, elections, media repression, political cycles, protest

"Fear will keep the local systems in line."

— Grand Moff Tarkin, Star Wars: Episode IV – A New Hope

* Nikita Zakharov (corresponding author), University of Freiburg, Department of International Economic Policy, Rempartstraße 16, Freiburg 79098, (e-mail: nikita.zakharov@vwl.uni-freiburg.de; telephone number *+4917626175884*). Günther G. Schulze, University of Freiburg, Department of International Economic Policy, Rempartstraße 16, Freiburg 79098, and Center for Economic Studies (CESifo), München. (e-mail: guenther.schulze@vwl.uni-freiburg.de)

…if we take the number of journalists killed or injured around the world, … Russia is unfortunately not the only country where this is happening, and this is the result of the internal development of the country and its democratic processes. But I would hardly find any other country where the media is financed by the state and takes such an oppositional stance towards the authorities as we have (in Russia). Gazprom funds one of our radio stations, which has radical positions on any issue and where every second journalist has a foreign passport. The station is working, no problem, and it is fine. Of course, when journalists cross certain boundaries, they take risks. Our job is to protect them; unfortunately, we do not always succeed at it. It is true.

- Vladimir Putin at the plenary session of the Russian Energy Week international forum, October 13, 2021, upon being asked about the persecution of journalists by the state.

1. Introduction

Recent decades have seen the advent of a new type of "smart" dictator who secures their power through the creation of an air of competence and problem-solving skills, leading to high popularity and less of a need to rely on intimidation, brute force, or strong ideologies (Guriev and Treisman 2019, 2022). Such autocrats uphold the illusion of liberal democracy and their own personal competence and integrity through the skillful manipulation of information and by mimicking democratic institutions but preventing them from functioning as genuine accountability mechanisms. This form of "smart" autocracy has a distinct advantage in that the ruler's popularity makes the formation of an effective domestic opposition and the implementation of international sanctions significantly more difficult; high approval ratings and a quasi-democratic institutional setup grant the ruler legitimacy, at least among the domestic population at large (Rozenas 2016). Moreover, smart autocracies avoid the costs associated with large-scale repression and the alienation of large swathes of the population.

The most prominent pseudo-democratic institutions in smart autocracies are elections. In fact, four in five autocratic regimes hold elections (Hyde and Marinov 2012), and they are instrumental in securing the regime's durability (Schedler 2006). They provide the government with legitimacy (Rozenas 2016) while also allowing the regime to co-opt elites through effective power-sharing agreements (Boix and Svolik 2008; Gandhi 2008), improving information (Malesky and Schuler 2011; Gehlbach et al. 2025), disciplining local leaders and

bureaucrats (Geddes 2018; Gehlbach and Simpser 2015), and demonstrating the regime's popularity and stability (Knutsen et al. 2017), thereby thwarting attempts to remove the autocrat from power (more below). These dynamics make elections an integral element of "smart" autocracies (Ghandi and Lust-Okar 2009). Still, autocrats must win elections by a significant margin to demonstrate their power and resolve. Even though they have all instruments of electoral fraud at their disposal, they need to maintain an image of competence and legitimacy, meaning that there can be no semblance of obvious manipulation or brute force.[1] Notably, the political activity of both the opposition and the public is often concentrated during election seasons (Harish and Little 2017; Knutsen et al. 2017), making them focal points for protest (Shirah 2016), which the autocrat must prevent. Thus, while autocratic elections help to alleviate the long-run stability issue for "smart" autocrats, they open up a window of vulnerability that the autocrats must address in a smart way.

Their method of choice is the targeted harassment of journalists in the lead-up to elections. This sends a clear message to the journalist/blogger community to "improve" their reporting on the incumbent. While journalist harassment intimidates the influencers, it remains largely under the radar of the general population; thus, it does not taint the image of the "smart" dictator. Of course, for favorable reporting during election periods to resonate with the electorate, the media needs credibility. This credibility is acquired during off-election periods when harassment is far lower, and the media are given much more leeway in reporting. As critical coverage outside the confines of politically sensitive periods is far less likely to mobilize people to protest, this investment in believability is relatively cheap for the ruler. Thus, "smart" autocracies have two of the key ingredients of modern democracy — relatively free media and elections — but they are not allowed to work simultaneously and, as a result, are defunct as accountability mechanisms.[2]

[1] A recent study by Reuter and Szakonyi (2021) finds that electoral fraud is costly for autocrats due to its detrimental effect on the regime's electoral base since the core supporters normally perceive elections as free and fair and become disgruntled by visible manipulation.

[2] Autocratic elections are therefore unfree, not because the government actively interfered in the election procedure as such (which it could), but because the media are intimidated, biased and thus people are disallowed to make informed choices. This argument solves the seeming puzzle of independent media being much more common in electoral autocracies than in other types of autocratic regimes (Stier 2015).

In this paper, we analyze the targeted repression against journalists in Russia prior to the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, a prime example of informational autocracies (Frye 2021). Focusing on subnational elections, we employ a novel, detailed dataset on city-level incidents of media harassment over the period 2004 to 2019 with monthly frequency. Our estimation strategy takes advantage of a staggered and idiosyncratically predetermined electoral calendar for local and regional elections. We uncover several key findings.

First, we find strong electoral cycles of media repression featuring harassment against journalists concentrated within the three months preceding elections. These cycles are more pronounced for high-stake elections (governors and mayors) and less so for elections to regional legislative bodies. Moreover, in line with the theory of informational autocracies (Guriev and Treisman 2019, 2020, 2022), we show that forms of media harassment that do not directly implicate the autocrat are more common.

Second, we reveal that media harassment is a very effective tool for disciplining journalists. Using a novel monthly media tonality index of news reports on regional governors (based on over 67,000 pieces of traditional and online news media), we show that an episode of media repression in the months leading up to gubernatorial elections significantly and substantially improves the tonality of news coverage of the incumbent. This suggests that the repression of just a single journalist or media outlet can send a powerful signal to journalists at large, coercing them to provide more favorable coverage on the incumbent in the lead-up to the election.

Third, using survey evidence from the highly reputable independent polling institute *Levada Center*, we find that the improved tonality of media coverage translates into a significantly lower likelihood of individuals taking part in protests against the government. In other words, journalist harassment serves to eliminate or at least mitigate the threat of anti-government protests, which constitute a tangible danger to the autocrat's rule. We thus reveal this form of media repression to be a key instrument used by "smart" dictators to retain power.

This paper speaks to several strands of the literature. Most notably, it is linked to the political business-cycle literature (PBC; Bohn 2019; Nordhaus 1975; Rogoff 1990; Shi and Svensson 2006; Wang et al. 2023). While the PBC literature focuses on incumbents seeking to influence voters' perceptions of their competence by manipulating the real economy, we

focus on the incumbents' manipulation of the media. The incumbents may share similar motivations in both scenarios, but the institutional setups are very different: media manipulation is particularly characteristic of autocratic regimes that rule via skillful propaganda and censorship, but it is rare (and illegal) in democracies.[3]

Our findings advance the literature on the political economy of non-democracies, specifically the informational autocracy theory of Guriev and Treisman (2019, 2020, 2022), by providing novel empirical evidence of information control – (i.e., the targeted repression of the press) and by identifying its cyclical nature. In doing so, we detail an essential governance technique of informational autocracies.

We also contribute to the literature on determinants of violence and harassment against journalists. Previous works have largely focused on the prime determinants of violence against journalists, including corruption (Bjørnskov and Freytag 2016; Hughes and Márquez-Ramírez 2018), regime duration (Solis 2020), and major internal conflict (VonDoepp and Young 2013).[4] We identify subnational elections as a major determinant of violence against the media, establishing the cyclical nature of this violence due to the asynchronous and exogenous timing of local elections. In contrast to the existing literature, our focus is on the systemic nature of cyclical media intimidation in informational autocracies and its role as a key tool for retaining power.

Our results on the disciplining effect of media repression on news coverage add to the literature on the various forms of state manipulation in news reporting. These include state-sponsored advertising (Di Tella and Franceschelli 2011), defamation legislation (Stanig 2015), and physical violence against journalists (Salazar 2019).

Finally, our findings on the link between media manipulation before elections and protest potential speak to the burgeoning literature on determinants of protest activity—especially

[3] The availability of this autocratic instrument may explain why so little evidence of traditional PBC is found in autocracies (Grier and Grier 2000).

[4] Mazzaro (2020) looks at elections as a motivation for violence against media. He finds a positive correlation between the intensity of electoral competition and violence against the media in local elections in Venezuela. Because the elections studied are synchronous, his analysis is correlational rather than causal.

the role of information (e.g., Carter and Carter 2021; Tertytchnaya and Lankina 2020; see Cantoni et al. 2024 for a review of the literature).

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. Section 2 details the mechanism of rule, framing media manipulation as a central instrument and setting forth our testable hypotheses. Section 3 introduces the data on media repression, local elections, media tonality, and protest potential in Russia. Section 4 presents the main results on political cycles. Section 5 investigates the disciplining effect of targeted media repression on news coverage and its subsequent effect on protest potential. Section 6 concludes.

2. The Mechanism of Rule

A central threat to any dictator's survival is public protest, as protests can, over time, snowball into revolutions (DeFronzo 2021) and may give way to regime change or the replacement of the current with a new autocratic ruler (Celestino and Gleditsch 2013).[5] Examples of this phenomenon include the Arab Spring, the protests in East European countries (e.g., Poland, East Germany) that led to the downfall of communist rule, and the 1998–2005 post-communist color revolutions. The role of protests in democratic transitions—especially non-violent protests—has been widely detailed in the literature (e.g., Bermeo 1997, Bratton and van de Walle 1992; Celestino and Gleditsch 2013; della Porta 2014).[6] Kim and Kroeger (2019) identify four pathways through which protests may undermine an incumbent's rule: They can directly overthrow the autocratic regime; force the regime to accept democratic reforms; lead to elite splits, thereby reducing the ruler's chances of survival; or initiate the replacement of one autocratic ruler with another. However, even if the protests do not succeed in removing the autocratic ruler, their violent suppression is costly, especially for

[5] Empirical evidence for Russia in the 2011-12 election period suggests that protests changed attitudes significantly in favor of the protesters' demands (Tertytchnaya and Lankina 2020).

[6] Of course, protests are no guarantee for the autocrat to be overthrown (e.g., Hale 2013) and there are other factors conducive to the removal of the incumbent autocrat such as economic inequality (Alesina and Perrotti 1996, Acemoglu and Robinson 2001, 2006), institutional quality and economic crises and other critical junctures (Acemoglu and Robinson 2001, 2006), or the structure and size of government finances (Bueno de Mesquita and Smith, 2010). Moreover, public protests are not the only threat to the autocrats' survival as they need to secure the support of the ruling elite (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003), which however may be in jeopardy if protests signal waning public support. The point here is that public protests are a major threat to the autocrats, especially to the smart dictators, that they need to avert.

"smart" dictators; public repression destroys their image of competence and public consent upon which their legitimacy is based (Curtice and Behlendorf 2021).

Effectively mobilizing the masses requires a solution to the collective action problem: Individuals are much more inclined to protest if they are confident that many others will turn out to protest alongside them (Hollyer et al. 2015). The most prominent coordination device for potential protesters is (relatively) independent media (Acemoglu and Robinson 2006; Bueno de Mesquita and Smith 2010), as such media makes grievances public, provides information about government policies and past and planned protests, and spreads and intensifies anti-government sentiments. Significant empirical evidence underscores the influence of independent media on protest and voting behavior in autocracies (e.g., DellaVigna et al. 2014; Enikolopov et al. 2020; Enikolopov et al. 2023; Kim et al. 2015).[7] Consequently, if an autocrat wants to avert protests, they must disallow the media's coordination function, including that of social media. This is precisely what China has done, allowing some critique in the media but prohibiting collective expression (King et al. 2013). A similar logic applies in pre-war Russia, but the instruments that the Russian autocracy employs are more subtle, as we will show.

A "smart" dictator must create and sustain the sense that they are in control through competence and problem-solving skills, which secures his public support and popularity. Openly applying brute force taints this image, as it comes off as a sign of weakness and undermines their authority. Therefore, the media must be manipulated effectively but in a way that is not obvious to the general public (Guriev and Treisman 2020). This is especially important in the lead-up to an election.

Elections constitute an integral part of the "smart" dictator's rule mechanism (Ghandi and Lust-Okar 2009). Autocratic regimes that hold elections have greater durability than those that do not, as elections serve multiple functions for autocrats (e.g., Leventoğlu et al. 2023; Schedler 2006). Most notably, they grant legitimacy to the regime—both domestically and internationally—as the ruler can claim that they have been democratically elected, even if elections are not fair and free (Levitsky and Way 2010; Rozenas 2016). Elections can also be used to co-opt political elites, including party members or other societal groups in power-

[7] An extreme example of the mobilization of the masses through the media is the role of Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines in the Ruandian genocide (Yanagizawa-Drott 2014).

sharing agreements that bolster the regime's durability as they allow the autocrat to credibly commit to sharing power and resources (Boix and Svolik 2008; Gandhi 2008; Magaloni 2008; Reuter et al. 2016). Moreover, elections help the autocrat to control local officials whose behavior could otherwise alienate the public, thereby jeopardizing the autocrat's rule (Geddes 2018). Decisive electoral victories are also important for the ruler because they foster loyalty throughout the bureaucracy (Gehlbach and Simpser 2015) and demonstrate popularity and authority to the members of the selectorate. Elections concentrate public political activity within a relatively short period of time (Harrish and Little 2017); thus, pre-election periods represent focal points for the mobilization of anti-regime protests (Shirah 2016). Even though elections may have a regime-stabilizing function in the medium term, they tend to destabilize the regime in the short term by increasing the likelihood of protests, opposition take-overs, and coup d'etats from within the support coalition to preempt such a take-over (Knutsen et al. 2017). All the more is it important to the autocrat that protests are prevented during these critical times and comfortable electoral victories are secured. While electoral fraud is always available as a means of securing victory (at least in principle), obvious electoral fraud may ignite protests and erode legitimacy and support, especially among core supporters of the regime (Reuter and Szakonyi 2021).

Therefore, electoral victory is secured through effective but subtle manipulation of the media that creates a favorable image of the ruler in the lead-up to the election—when it really matters. For such a positive image to resonate with the general public, the media must have some credibility; they must not be regarded as a mere propaganda tool of the state (Carter and Carter 2023). Thus, the media is granted more space in off-election periods to build up the necessary reputation of being independent and critical; in other words, the media enjoys some degree of freedom in times that are far less critical to the survival of the autocrat (Stier 2015). Thus, "smart" autocracies have two of the key ingredients of modern democracy—relatively free media and elections—but they are not allowed to work simultaneously and, as a result, are defunct as accountability mechanisms. Media outlets are given some leeway during off-election periods only to be disciplined prior to elections.

The instrument of choice for this discipline is the harassment of journalists. Such harassment represents a surgical intervention that only affects a small number of people while leaving the general public unaffected and unintimidated. This targeted harassment of select journalists sends a clear message to the entire community of journalists, bloggers, and other media

workers: Transgressions of implicit rules will be severely punished. Harassing a few is sufficient to intimidate and discipline the entire media community. This strategy largely flies under the radar of the masses, making it cost-effective and subtle; most importantly, it does not taint the image of a competent, popular, "enlightened" ruler. Therefore, we should expect *political* business cycles in journalist harassment.

A very similar logic applies to the choice of harassment method. Harassment can range from prohibitions to publish certain articles or banning individual newspaper issues to removing critical journalists from the picture through beatings, arrests and incarcerations on fabricated charges, to even extrajudicial killings. The actors behind this wide range of harassment options may include politically connected owners of media outlets (self-censorship, layoffs), hired thugs and gangs (physical violence, killings), and law enforcement agents and the judiciary (criminal investigations, incarcerations, physical violence). Again, the autocrat prefers actors and methods that effectively intimidate critical journalists without implicating themself or raising awareness and concerns among the public. Notably, firing, removal from editorial responsibilities by media owners, and violence for hire are all means of harassment that do not directly implicate political leadership. In contrast, police detention and especially criminal prosecution directly involve the authorities, even if the charges are unrelated to the journalist's professional activities.

The autocrat runs the risk of destroying his image of competence, sovereignty, and popularity if he exhibits too much brutality, eroding their authority. Thus, they face a trade-off between destroying their own appeal and insufficiently disciplining journalists' pre-election reporting when selecting the optimal degree and method of harassment. We should, therefore, expect less harassment if the expected gain from harassment is lower for the autocrat (i.e., if the election is less important). Such less important elections include the local parliamentary elections as opposed to the mayoral and gubernatorial elections. We should also expect methods of harassment that do not implicate the ruler directly to be more common.

This leads to our first set of testable hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: (a) Journalist harassment exhibits a cyclical pattern with high levels in pre-election periods and medium to low levels in off-election periods.

(b) Cycles are more pronounced for violent repression and censorship and less so for criminal prosecutions.

(c) Cycles are more pronounced for mayoral and gubernatorial elections than for elections for province parliaments or city councils.

We implicitly assumed that the harassment of journalists represents an effective tool for the "smart" autocrat to manipulate elections. Of course, if we observe political cycles in media harassment, this suggests that this harassment serves a purpose for the autocrat—that purpose being to improve their electoral outcomes. Otherwise, cyclical harassment would not make sense. Fortunately, this is a testable assumption.

As the most immediate effect of media harassment, the tonality of news coverage of the incumbent should improve. If the image that the media portrays resonates with the public, the more favorable reporting should translate into higher approval ratings. This dynamic is summarized in the second hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: (a) News coverage about the incumbent becomes more favorable following instances of journalist repression.

(b) This increased favorability in reporting increases the incumbent's approval rating.

Finally, the improvement in media reporting may affect the individuals' perceptions about the ruler as such; it should also affect individuals' perceptions of the incumbent's popularity. In this way, it signals to them that fewer people will participate in protests and, in turn, reduces their individual-level inclination to consider participating themselves, thwarting the potential for mass mobilization. The collective action problem of mass protests is thus solved in favor of the autocrat. This gives us our final hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3: More favorable media reporting decreases people's willingness to participate in political protest.

Overall, we hypothesize that media harassment in pre-election periods creates more favorable images of autocrats, improves their popularity, and thwarts efforts to mobilize against them, effectively eliminating one of the biggest threats to their rule. The reigns are loosened on media outlets during off-election periods, to give them more credibility, boosting the effectiveness of media harassment in influencing public opinion when it matters most.

3. Data

Russia represents an ideal setting to test our hypotheses. Local elections in the country are staggered and exogenously predetermined (see below), enabling us to clearly identify electoral cycles. Russian monthly data on media repression are high-frequency, allowing for the detection of even short-lived cycles.[8] Moreover, we are able to use a unique dataset on journalist harassment that categorizes harassment by type. A unique measurement of the tonality of the news coverage of regional governors then enables us to determine whether media repression has an effect on the favorability of reporting on incumbents and whether this higher favorability translates into higher popularity. Finally, independent and localized survey data allow for the assessment of whether media harassment—and the consequently improved tonality of reports on the powers that be—reduce respondents' inclination to participate in protests.

3.1 Media Repression

We measure media repression by leveraging a unique database that comprehensively covers cases of journalist harassment in Russia. The data are collected by two major non-governmental organizations (NGOs) dedicated to the protection of journalists' professional rights and the promotion of press freedom.[9] The first is Russia's oldest human rights-focused NGO, the Glasnost Defense Foundation (GDF). The other is the Russian Union of Journalists (RJU), one of Europe's largest journalist trade unions with over 100,000 members. The large regional networks of GDF and RJU and the active involvement of the journalist community permit a continuous and complete collection of information on incidents of media repression throughout Russia.[10] The data are available starting from 2004, which coincides with Russia's transition to electoral autocracy (Gill 2006; McFall 2021; Silitski 2009). Our analysis covers the 16 years from 2004 to 2019. We exclude the subsequent years defined by the COVID-19

[8] Given that the official campaigning period is limited to only a few months, high-frequency data are essential for our analysis. Using high-frequency data, Akhmedov and Zhuravskaya (2004) identify sizable, but extremely short-lived, political budget cycles in Russian regions when the country was still a transitional democracy.

[9] The database is published online at http://www.mediaconflicts.org/.

[10] Journalists are very likely to be motivated to report their cases as it may help them with crucial legal and other professional assistance from the GDF or RJU.

pandemic, as protests (like all other public gatherings) were prohibited due to safety concerns, thus altering incumbents' risks during election periods.[11]

The database's primary units are short stories describing incidents in which the professional or human rights of journalists of media outlets were violated. Critically, the stories include the exact dates and locations (primarily the city names) of the incidents.[12] Our data shows that media repression in Russia is widespread. During our observation period, 4,801 stories (about 300 events per year) were reported. We exclude incidents in Moscow and St. Petersburg, as it is impossible to disentangle local politics from national politics in those cities. Instead, we focus on larger provincial cities (regional capitals and non-capital cities with populations over 100,000).[13] Our sample includes 167 cities, almost all of which (92 %) are the site of at least one incident of media repression.[14]

We aggregate the observations in each city by month, producing a balanced monthly panel dataset (N=32,064). We construct the main variable for media repression as a dummy that equals one if at least one incident has occurred within a given city and month. There are 1,828 non-zero observations, equivalent to 6% of all observations. We opted for the dummy variable because the severity of media repression across different episodes cannot be reliably compared. Moreover, most non-zero city-month observations (82%) feature just a single incident, while only 4% of observations feature three or more incidents.

We improve on previous research on media repression by differentiating between different types of media repression. The database classifies incidents into eleven groups: 1) journalist deaths (*N of incidents=27*); 2) physical attacks on journalists (*N=519*); 3) attacks on media outlet offices (*N=7*); 4) physical threats (*N=256*); 5) censorship (*N=389*); 6) seizure of of circulating newspapers (*N=108*); 7) lay-offs (*N=108*); 8) website blockages (*N=21*); 9) distributed-denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks (*N=40*); 10) police detentions (*N=444*); and 11) criminal prosecutions (*N=353*).

[11] Additionally, Kofanov et al. (2022) show that the underreporting of COVID-19 mortality rates was tightly connected to regional politics.

[12] In a small number of cases, the location was identified only generally as a region or was missing. We do not include these cases in our analysis.

[13] There are very few incidents of media repression reported for small cities. This may simply reflect the scarcity of local news media.

[14] As is standard for subnational studies of Russia, we exclude the city of Grozny in the Chechen Republic (e.g. Schulze et al. 2016).

For our analysis, we group these into four broader categories. First, we identify the violent incidents, summing together physical attacks, threats, and deaths (groups 1–4). The category "*Violence*" is the largest group of such incidents, with 723 non-zero month-city observations, suggesting that violence against journalists constitutes the primary tactic of press intimidation.[15] We expect this type of media repression to be particularly effective in signaling to the journalist community the heightened risk of critical news coverage.

The second category, "*Censorship*," aggregates instances of media repression aimed at silencing journalists by non-violent means (groups 5–9). There are 594 non-zero observations of censorship in our sample.

Finally, we are interested in media repression by public authorities, particularly the police and the judicial system. We assemble two categories, "*Detention*" and "*Criminal Prosecution*," which incorporate groups (10) and (11), respectively; these two types of media repression exhibit similar frequencies in our sample, at 376 and 339 non-zero observations, respectively. The central distinction between the two categories is the manner of the involvement of state power. Criminal prosecution is a public process that engages the entire legal system, including police, prosecutors, and judges, making it more visible. Police detention is a minor and, thus, less noticeable operation that involves only a few police officers. According to the theoretical prediction of Guriev and Treisman (2019, 2020), autocrats prefer to disguise their involvement in targeted repression. Thus, we expect to see no political cycle in criminal prosecutions against journalists (Hypothesis 3).

As with our primary measure, we construct a dummy variable for each category that equals one only if the city-month observation contains an incident of that category.

3.2 Local Elections

We use data on all regular local elections between 2004 and 2019 from the Central Election Commission of the Russian Federation. There are four types of regular local elections in Russia:[16] At the regional level, there are elections for the governor and the regional parliament; at the city level, there are elections for the mayor and the city council. The council

[15] It is worth mentioning that police in Russia often mischaracterize violence against journalists as "general street crime" and is notoriously incapable of solving these violent incidents (CPJ 2009).

[16] We do not include local referenda as they are rare and issue-oriented.

and regional parliamentary elections were held regularly every four or five years depending on local electoral legislation. Regional governor elections were replaced by a presidential appointment system in 2005 before being resumed in 2012, and have since been held every five years. Mayoral elections were held regularly every four or five years in almost every city at the start of the period under investigation, but they were gradually replaced by an appointment system, leaving only ten cities with direct mayoral elections in 2019. The gradual elimination of mayoral elections represents a potentially endogenous decision. Recent research by Reuter et al. (2016) shows that mayoral elections only persisted in cities with strong political machines of the local elites (i.e., less contested elections). Given that highly contested elections (which often require political manipulation) were eliminated, our estimates likely understate the actual persistence of the media repression cycles for this type of election. Additionally, the presence of political appointments for gubernatorial and mayoral positions in our timeframe allows us to use them as a placebo treatment, as critical reporting is unlikely to sabotage appointments. We present the frequency of local elections by year in the Appendix (Figure A.1).

Our estimation strategy takes advantage of the exogenous timing of local elections in Russia, which abide by an established, staggered electoral calendar. The calendar is the product of an administrative reform introduced in the early post-Soviet period, which enabled sub-national units to introduce local elections on an ad hoc basis. In the case of gubernatorial elections, the calendar endured the introduction of the appointment system and the subsequent re-introduction of elections: Appointments took effect at times when elections were previously held (Sidorkin and Vorobyev 2018); when elections resumed after 2012, they continued to follow the traditional, idiosyncratic schedule. The timing of each election within the year is predetermined by a "single voting day"—a day reserved for holding local elections in all subnational units for which elections are due.[17] The use of a single voting day eliminates concerns about local elites' strategic maneuvering of electoral timing.

Finally, local elections in Russia have a relatively short pre-election period. The announcement of the election and the registration of the candidates may not commence

[17] The “single voting day” concept was legislatively introduced in 2005. Initially, the second Sunday in March and the second Sunday in October were designated as election days for all due elections. Since 2012, voting has been limited to a single day, the second Sunday in September. In 2016, the date was moved to the third Sunday in September.

earlier than 100 to 90 days prior to the voting day.[18] Thus, we expect the media repression cycle to manifest within this three-month period.

3.3 Media Reporting

To test whether media repression in the lead-up to gubernatorial elections makes reporting on incumbents more favorable, we employ an index of media coverage about regional governors assembled and published by *Medialogia*, a leading Russian news-monitoring agency. This index, initially called *MediaIndex*, is a monthly measure based on the daily monitoring of over 67,000 sources of registered mass media sources, including national and local TV channels, newspapers, websites, radio, and blogs. The monitoring automatically identifies each piece of news mentioning the name of a regional governor, weights it by the size of the potential audience (e.g., newspaper readership, TV viewership, approximate view count for websites or blogs), and categorizes it as positive or negative based on the tonality. As a result, each news item is assigned a value of -1000 to +1000, where a higher value indicates a more favorable news item. The media index is a sum of the values of all individual news pieces over one month, which we divide by 1000 for the sake of convenience.[19] The index is available for all regional governors for 2017–2019.[20]

In addition to the MediaIndex data, Medialogia also releases the monthly number of mentions of each governor in the news, enabling us to estimate the effect of repression on not just the tonality but also the volume of news coverage on incumbents. If tonality improves but the overall volume falls, for example, we can interpret the result as evidence of a silencing effect on the journalist community; however, if the volume remains the same or increases alongside improved tonality, we would interpret this as evidence of the disciplinary effect of repression on journalists' coverage.

[18] Local electoral regulations govern whether it is 100 or 90 days before the election.

[19] The methodology of the index is available at Medialogia website: https://www.mlg.ru/about/technologies/#mediaindex

[20] The values for December months are unavailable since, by the end of the year, Medialogia publishes only an aggregate yearly index instead of a monthly one. However, because the single voting day took place in September, our analysis is not affected by the missing observations for the December months.

3.4 Protest potential

We utilize public opinion data from a highly reputable independent Russian pollster—*Levada Center*—that routinely interviews Russians on political issues as part of their monthly Courier Survey, a nationally representative telephone interview with about 1600 respondents. However, questions on protest participation are not specifically aligned with a single-voting day (September) and are instead included in the October or November rounds, as is the case for the years 2018 and 2019; fortunately, however, in 2017, the survey was conducted just a few days after regional elections, offering a unique opportunity to measure post-election potential for mass mobilization.[21]

Our survey contains 1602 interviews from across the 52 largest Russian regions. To ensure consistency with the previous analysis, we exclude observations from Moscow, St. Peterburg, and the illegally annexed territories of Crimea and Sevastopol, leaving us with a final sample of 1342 observations.

Two questions served to estimate protest potential. The first one—"*If political protests were to take place, would you take part in them?*"—offered three possible answers, "*most likely yes*," "*most likely not*," and "*I do not know*," which were chosen by 10.7%, 83.3%, and 6% of respondents, respectively, indicating some protest potential among the Russian population. We construct the variable *Political protest* to take a value of one if the respondents answer that they are likely to participate in political protests and a value of zero otherwise. This is our main measure of political protest potential, which we expect to decline as political coverage improves due to the disciplinary effect of journalist repression on the media community.

The second question—"*If protests against declining standards of living were to take place in your city or district, would you take part in them?*"— similarly asked about participation in economic protests linked to economic decline and offered the same response options. The positive answer ("*most likely yes*") was provided only slightly more often (13.3%) than it was in the question on political protests; most people chose "*most likely not*" (80.8%), while 5.9% chose "*I do not know*." The *Economic protest* variable is constructed similarly to *Political protest*: It takes a value of one if respondents answer that they are likely to participate in economic protests and a value of zero otherwise. Since economic protests are naturally less

[21] The survey was carried out on September 14-19 after the single-election day taking place on September 10.

political, we use this measure as a placebo test, expecting it to be less associated with the political cycle.

The survey also contains questions regarding approval of the president and regional governor—"*Do you generally approve or disapprove of Vladimir Putin's performance as president of Russia?" or — Do you generally approve or disapprove of performance of your regional governor?* The questions offered two options as answers: "*approve*" or "*disapprove*" options. Again, we use the answers with "*approve*" to construct the dummy variables for the approval of the governor as our main variables of interest. This variable is expected to correlate positively with media coverage. The president's approval serves as a placebo, as media coverage of the governor is irrelevant to evaluations of the president.

4. Empirical Approach and Results

4.1 Main Results on Political Cycles

Our estimation strategy follows the approach commonly used in the political business cycle (PBC) literature, most notably by Akhmedov and Zhuravskaya (2004), who produced the only other subnational study on the PBC in then-democratic Russia.[22]

We estimate the change in the risk of the incidence of media repression using a modified Poisson regression with high-dimensional fixed effects and standard errors clustered at the regional level (Correia et al. 2020).[23] The estimation equation is:

$$Y_{it} = \sum_{j\in\{-12;12\}} a_j \, Election_{jit} + \beta\,(L)Y_{it-1} + \tau_t + \lambda_{is} + \varepsilon_{it}\,, \qquad (1)$$

where *i* and *t* identify cities and time in months, respectively; Y_{it} is the occurrence of media repression in a city-month; $Election_{jit}$ is a dummy that equals one if *t* is *j* months away from elections (*j* equals zero in the month of the election, takes negative values before elections

[22] We improve upon the approach of Akhmedov and Zhuravskaya (2004), who also use monthly data, in several aspects. First, we focus on cities rather than on regions, and thus on more numerous, and more fine grained entities, and cover a period twice as long. Second, we investigate the effect of all types of local elections and not only governor elections. Third, and most important, we can treat the timing of elections as truly exogenous due to a fixed single-voting day policy that had not yet been introduced in the period investigated by Akhmedov and Zhuravskaya (2004). Also note, that Russia at the time of study by Akhmedov and Zhuravskaya was still a transitional democracy. Most importantly, however, we use a different outcome variable.

[23] Modified Poisson regression is a preferred estimation technique for correlated binary data with a large number of clusters and high-dimensional fixed effects (e.g. Zou and Donner 2013). The alternatives – the logistic regression and linear probability models – produce very similar results.

and positive values after elections); τ_t is a full set of time fixed effects, one for each month *t*; λ_{is} is a dummy for each of the twelve calendar months in each city that accounts for city-specific seasonality and city-specific fixed effects. We include the lag polynomial of the dependent variable, $\beta\ (L)Y_{it-1}$, to account for autocorrelation (where *L=5*).[24]

We present our main results in Figure 1 by plotting the coefficients for the election month and twelve months before and after the election. We find a large and statistically significant electoral cycle in the lead-up to local elections: Media repression is more than 1.5 times more likely in the month of an election and the month prior. The magnitude of the increase in risk is also remarkable. The average risk of a journalist or media outlet being harassed increases from 5.7% (in any given month) to 9% in the lead-up to elections. Thus, our results support the first hypothesis, H1a. For a tabular presentation of the results, see the Appendix, Table A1, Column 1.

4.2 Cycles by Type of Repression

Figure 2 presents the results of our disaggregation of journalist harassment by type. We observe sizable electoral cycles for "*Violence,*" the largest category of media repression (Panel A). A significant increase in the risk of violence against journalists is observed in each of the three months during the pre-election period; this aligns with our expected cycle length, as the election period officially starts about 90 days before election day. Violence against journalists in Russia is already quite frequent, with a roughly 2.3% risk of occurring in any given city in an average month. That risk rises to almost 4% in the lead-up to an election. For a tabular presentation of the results, see the Appendix, Table A1, Column 2.

"*Censorship*" is our second most common category of media repression, with an incidence risk of 1.9% in an average month. In Panel B, we see positive and significant coefficients for the election month and one month prior to the election—a nearly two-fold increase in the risk of a journalist being actively silenced.

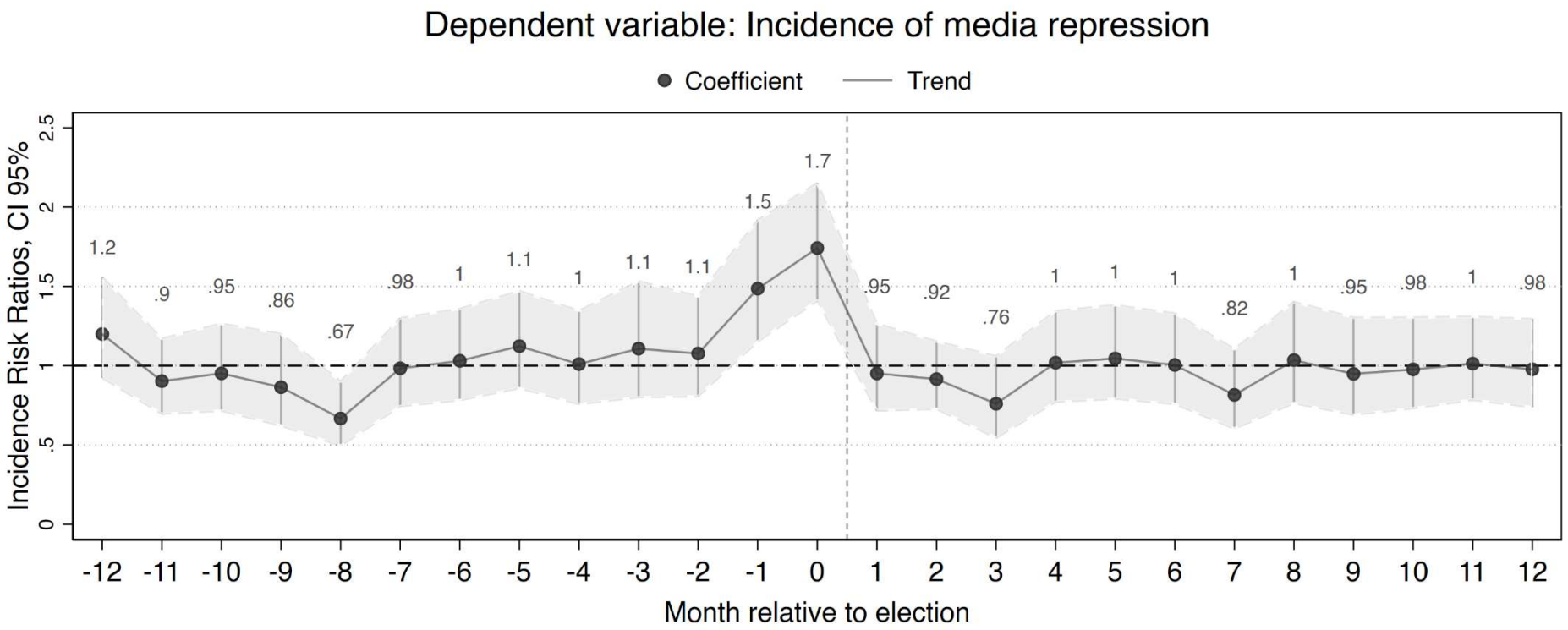
Media repression for both categories, "*Detention*" and "*Criminal Prosecution*" requires the direct involvement of law-enforcement authorities. Detentions are primarily carried out by

[24] The optimal number of five lags is calculated using the Akaike criterion (as in Akhmedov and Zhuravskaya, 2004). We use this number of lags for all specifications for the sake of uniformity, but changing the number of lags to the optimal for other estimations separately does not affect the results. Omitting the lags completely does not alter the results significantly either.

police, while legal actions against journalists also involve judges and prosecutors. In line with Guriev and Treisman's (2019: 102) hypothesis that autocrats seek to camouflage state involvement in targeted repression, we expect political cycles in both categories to be less prominent. The estimation results are presented in Panels C and D for "*Detention*" and "*Criminal Prosecution,*" respectively. We find a statistically significant but relatively short-lived electoral cycle for police detentions of journalists. The risk of being detained increases from 1.2% to 2.5% only in the month of the election. In contrast, journalists' risk of criminal prosecution is not statistically different in the pre-election period than it is in an average month. All regressions are also reported in the Appendix, Table A1

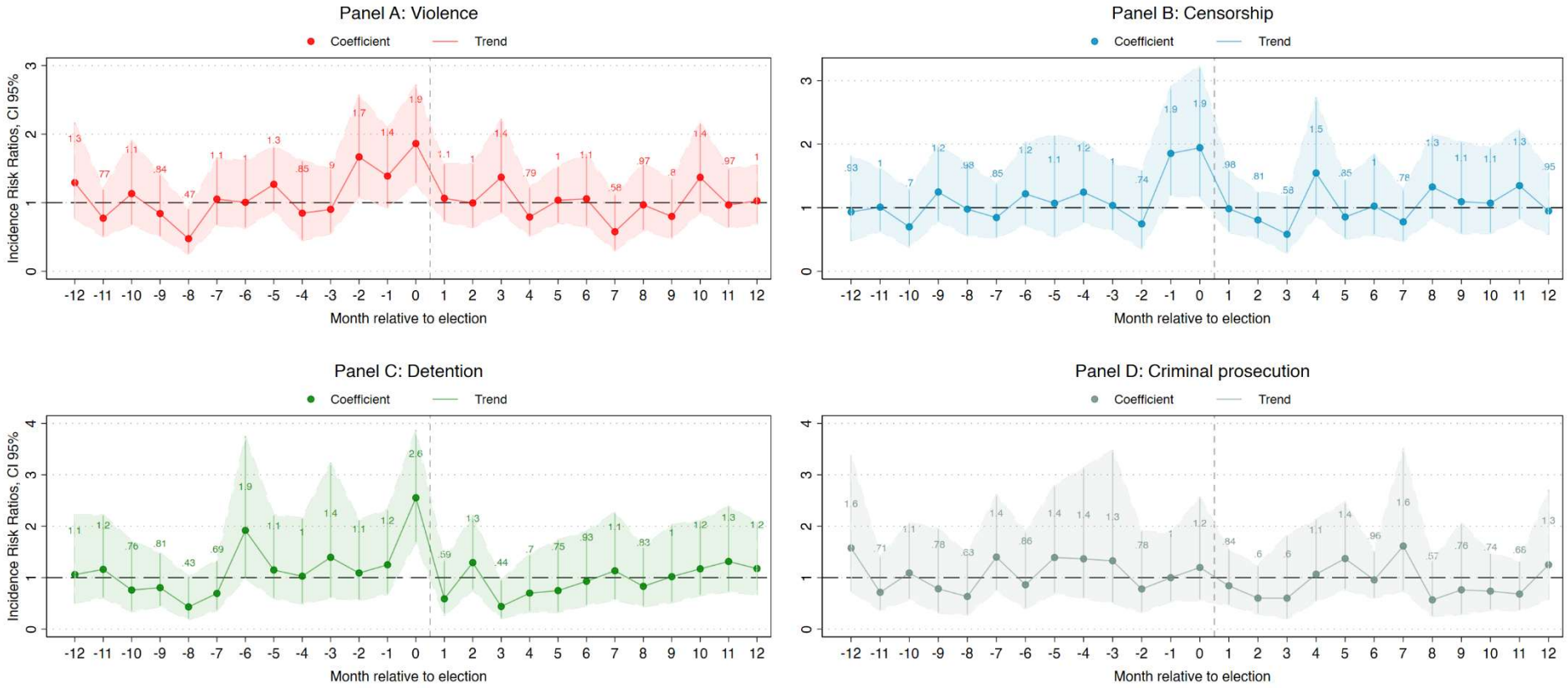
In summary, cycles are more pronounced for forms of repression with less discernible state involvement. This finding supports Hypothesis H1b.

FIGURE 1. POLITICAL CYCLES OF MEDIA REPRESSION



Note: Coefficients represent incidence risk ratios with CI 95%. Modified Poisson regression with mitlidimensional fixed effects includes time FE and city-calendar month FE. Robust SE are clustered at the region level.

FIGURE 2. POLITICAL CYCLES BY TYPE OF REPRESSION



Note: Coefficients represent incidence risk ratios with CI 95%. All regressions include five lag-polinomial, full set of time dummies and fixed effects for each city-calendar month. Robust SE are clustered at the region level.

4.3 Cycles by Election Type

We next investigate whether election type is a relevant factor. We modify estimation equation (1) by replacing the monthly dummies for the occurrence of any local election with dummy variables for the pre-election period (three months, including the election month) for each of the four types of local elections. We also add similar dummy variables for three months prior to the appointment of mayors and governors where applicable. This gives the following equation:

$$Y_{it} = \beta\ Governor\ election_{it} + \gamma\ Mayor\ election_{it} +$$
$$\delta\ Regional\ parliament\ election_{\ it} + \zeta\ City\ council\ election_{it} +$$
$$\eta\ Governor\ appointment_{it} + \mu\ Mayor\ appointment_{it} + \beta\ (L)Y_{it-1} + \tau_t + \lambda_{is} + \varepsilon_{it}\ . \quad (2)$$

Figure 3 presents theestimation results. Elections for governors and mayors (executive positions) exhibit the most pronounced political cycles.[25] The likelihood of media repression rises by 48% and 72% in the three months prior to gubernatorial and mayoral elections, respectively. These political cycles occur in violent incidents, censorship, and detentions by police but not in criminal prosecutions. When we look at the effect of mayoral and gubernatorial appointments as a placebo test, we find no such pattern, as demonstrated by the bottom panel of Figure 3 (estimations are also presented in Table A2 in the Appendix).

Elections to regional parliaments produce statistically significant political cycles in media repression as well, but these cycles are smaller in scale and largely limited to violent repression. These elections are still important to the ruling elite, of course, as winning elections provides significant monetary and political benefits. Nevertheless, these benefits must be shared among a large set of participants, which likely explains the relatively small size of the cycle.

The coefficients for city council elections slightly exceed one but are never statistically significant. These elections are of minor importance since the political power in a city council is not only shared among council members but is also relatively marginal. As expected, we find no political cycles in such cases. Overall, cycles of political harassment are more pronounced for top-official elections (those for governors and mayors) than for regional parliamentary elections, as the former fill more important positions. This finding supports Hypothesis H1c.

[25] As some of the mayors' and governors' elections were early elections for various reasons (e.g., the death of the incumbent), we performed a robustness check by excluding those observations. Our results remained largely unaffected (available on request).

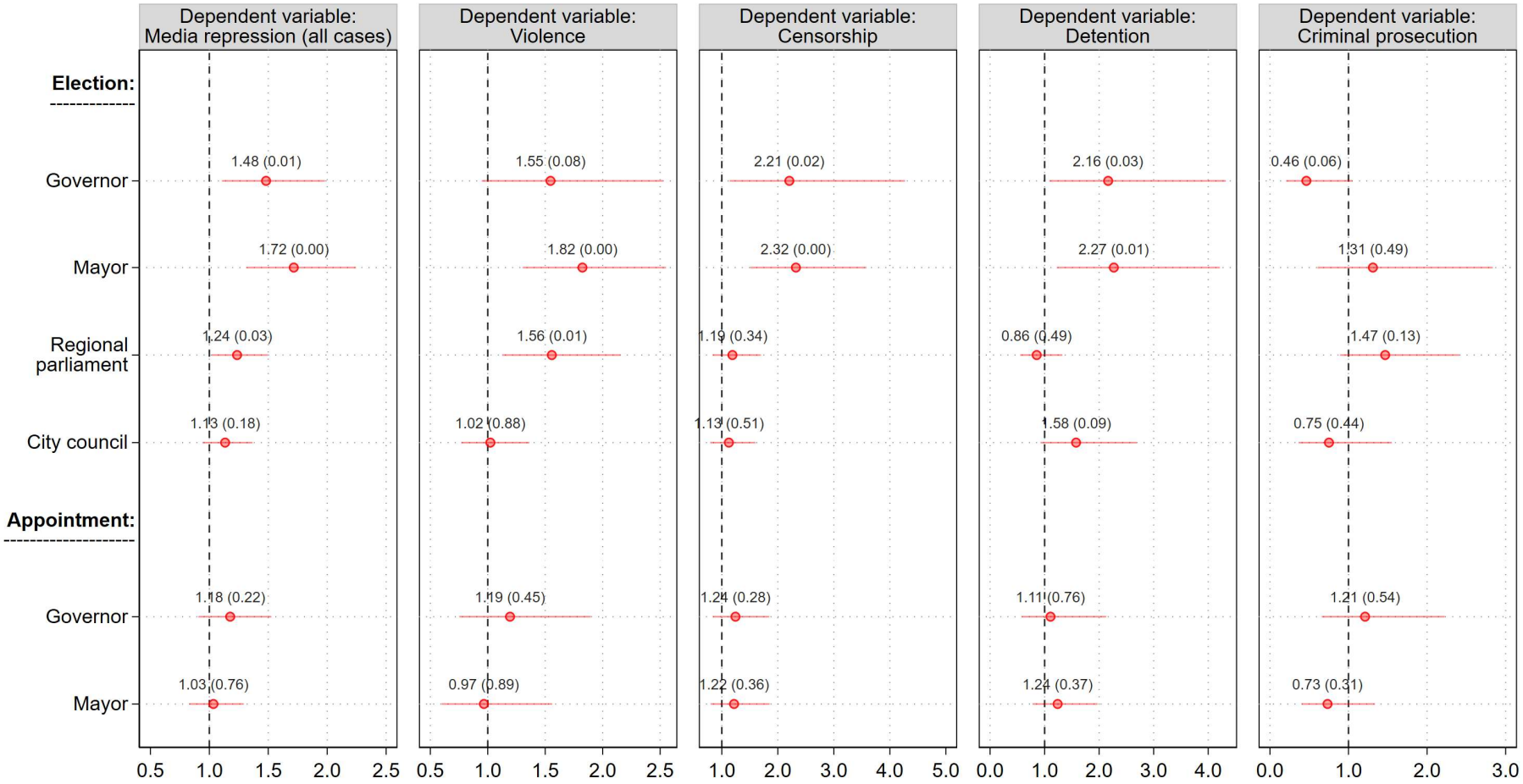
5. Effectiveness of Media Repression

Having established the persistence of political cycles in Russian media repression, this section investigates their effectiveness on media reports and public protest mobilization.

5.1 The Disciplinary Effect on Media Reporting

Does media repression positively affect how the local press reports on politicians during an election period? More frequent harassment before elections would make little sense if it was ineffective; therefore, its persistence suggests that media harassment works. We test the effectiveness of repression directly by employing a novel monthly dataset on the popularity of regional governors in media. These data are available for 2017–2019, during which 51 out of Russia's 79 regions held gubernatorial elections; 17 (33%) of those elections were preceded by at least one instance of media repression within the three pre-electoral months. Thus, we can analyze how media repression in pre-electoral periods influences reporting. This timeframe also featured 24 regional parliamentary elections in Russia, seven (23%) of which were preceded by at least one instance of media repression within the three months before the election day. We include these elections in our analysis as a placebo test, as media repression associated exclusively with parliamentary elections should not affect the tonality of news reporting on governors.

FIGURE 3. POLITICAL CYCLES BY TYPE OF LOCAL ELECTION



Note: Coefficients represent incidence risk ratios with CI 95%; p-values are in parenthesis. Independent variables are dummies that equal one in the election month and two preceding months. All regressions include five lags, full set of time dummies and fixed effects for each city-calendar month. Robust SE are clustered at region level.

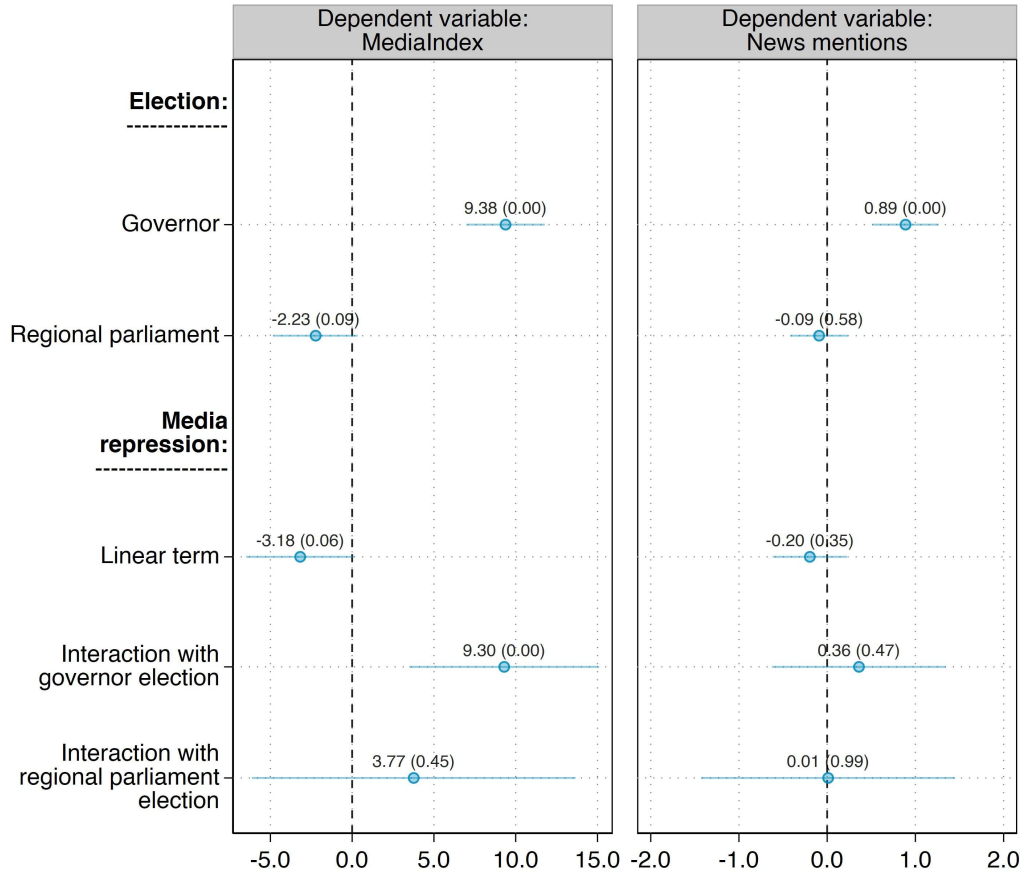
We estimate tonality and extent of media reporting on governors using OLS with monthly regional data and robust errors clustered at the regional level. In line with our earlier approach, this estimation includes a full set of time dummies, city-calendar month fixed effects (to account for city-specific seasonality), and a five lag-polynomial to account for autocorrelation, resulting in the following estimation equation:

$$Y_{it} = \alpha\, Governor\ election_{it} + \sigma\, Regional\ parliament\ election_{\ it} + \mu\, Media\ repression_{it} + \eta\, Governor\ election_{it} \times Media\ repression_{it} + \zeta\, Regional\ parliament\ election_{it} \times Media\ repression_{it} + \beta\,(L)Y_{it-1} + \tau_t + \lambda_{is} + \varepsilon_{it}\,, \quad (3)$$

where Y_{it} is either the tonality index (*MediaIndex*) or the number of mentions of the governor in the news (*News Mentions*, see Section 3.3) in each region *i* and month *t*; $Governor\ election_{it}$ and $Regional\ parliament\ election_{\ it}$ are dummies that equal one in the election month and the two months prior to it. The interaction of media repression with an electoral campaign (the three-month period prior to the governor's election) is our variable of interest; a positive coefficient would confirm media repression's disciplinary effect on reporting. The interaction of media repression with the three-month period prior to regional parliamentary elections serves as a placebo, as the spillovers of media repression in the lead-up to these elections should not affect media reporting about the governor.

The estimation results are plotted in Figure 4 (also in Table A3, in the Appendix). Unsurprisingly, the tonality of reports on governors increases significantly in the three months prior to gubernatorial elections: by 9.4 points, or about 29% of its mean value (left panel of Figure 4). The elections to regional parliaments slightly decrease the tonality index, with the effect being statistically significant at the 10% level. In normal times, media repression is negatively associated with governor-related media tonality, suggesting that unfavorable reporting itself may be a driving factor behind the repression. In the pre-election period, media repression coincides with a large increase in how favorably media outlets report on the governor. The magnitude of this effect is almost identical to the increase in tonality as a result of the upcoming elections. In other words, repression doubles the positive effect of the campaign period on the tonality of reporting on the incumbent. As expected, repression in the lead-up to regional parliamentary elections has no effect on the tonality of news concerning governors.

FIGURE 4. THE DISCIPLINING EFFECT OF MEDIA REPRESSION ON PRESS REPORTING



Note: OLS regression, CI 95%; p-values are in parenthesis. All regressions include five lags, full set of time dummies and fixed effects for each city-calendar month. Robust SE are clustered at region level.

Notably, the number of news items mentioning the governor does not change following incidents of media repression in the lead-up to gubernatorial or regional parliamentary elections, or outside election times (right panel of Figure 4). As expected, governors get more media coverage during election periods.

Our findings confirm our second hypothesis (H2a): Media repression in the pre-election period improves the tonality (but not the quantity) of media reports.

5.2 The Demobilization Effect

Finally, better news coverage of governors should reduce the public's willingness to partake in post-election political protests, as individuals may not only have a more favorable view of their governor but also perceive their peers to be less likely to protest. To test this, we use a nationally representative public opinion survey (N=1342) fielded a few days after the single-day election in 2017. Respondents were asked whether they would attend a political protest if it were happening. We expect affirmative responses to be *less* common in regions with *more favorable* media reporting about their governor due to the imposed media repression in the lead-up to the election. We first estimate a simple cross-sectional OLS model:

$$Y_i = \beta \, \Delta \, MediaIndex_i + \lambda \, X_i + \varepsilon_{it} \,, \qquad (4)$$

where Y_i is an outcome dummy variable indicating whether respondent *i* would join the protest if it were happening; $\Delta \, MediaIndex$ is a regional measure of recent improvement in media coverage of the governor, calculated as the first difference between the monthly average MediaIndex for the three pre-election months (July, August, and September) and the monthly average MediaIndex for the three months preceding that period (April, May, and June). X_i is a vector of individual control variables available in the survey data, including age, age squared, higher education, income group, and number of children in the household.

Second, we instrument $\Delta \, MediaIndex$ by an instance of media repression before the election to focus on the political instrument that informational autocrats use. Therefore, Equation (5) is as follows:

$$\Delta \, MediaIndex_i = \gamma \, Media \, repression * Governor \, Election + \omega \, Governor \, Election + \theta \, X_i + e_{it} \qquad (5)$$

where $Governor \, Election$ indicates that the region held a governor's election on the single voting day in 2017; and $Media \, repression * Governor \, Election$ is a dummy that equals one if the region had at least one incidence of journalist harassment during the pre-election period.

The first stage in Table 1 (column 5) provides results similar to our previous estimates for the full sample in Figure 4 in terms of both sign and magnitude: Reporting tonality significantly improves when elections are held, but much more so when media repression is aditionally

imposed during the electoral campaign; media repression in off-election times is not correlated with media reporting.

Our main results for the OLS and IV (columns 1 and 2) suggest that the likelihood of individuals participating in political protest declines significantly when reporting becomes more favorable for their governor. This effect is statistically and economically significant: A 14.2-point increase in $\Delta\, MediaIndex_i$ which is equivalent to an increase from having a governor's election and journalist harassment, implies a 7.1% decline in people's willingness to join political protests. The estimation coefficients for economic protests (columns 3 and 4) are also negative but insignificant at conventional levels, suggesting that it is effectively people's political motivation that is affected by media manipulation rather than their economic motivation. This finding supports our third hypothesis.

TABLE 1: MEDIA POPULARITY AND LIKELIHOOD TO JOIN PROTEST

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Estimation:	OLS	IV	OLS	IV	First stage
Dep. Var.:	Political protest		Economic protest		Δ Media_Index
Δ Media_Index	-0.007**	-0.005**	-0.006*	-0.004	
	(0.003)	(0.002)	(0.004)	(0.003)	
Media repression * Governor Election					9.12***
					(3.233)
Governor Election					5.09**
					(2.245)
Media repression					-0.59
					(1.873)
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	1342	1342	1342	1342	1342
N of regions	48	48	48	48	48
1st stage F-stat		23.8		23.8	

Notes: Standard errors clustered at the regional level in parentheses, * p < 0.1, ** p < 0.05, *** p < 0.01. Controls include education, income group, age, and age squared.

Finally, we perform a similar estimation for the approval of the governor and the president, the results of which are in Table 2. Improvements in the media index (calculated for the governor)

are clearly associated with a higher approval rating for the governor but not one for the president (thus validating our placebo test). This result indicates that media repression gives way to substantial political gains, corroborating Hypothesis 2b.

TABLE 2: MEDIA POPULARITY AND POLITICAL APPROVAL

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Estimation:	OLS	IV	OLS	IV	First stage
Dep. Var.:	Governor approval		President approval		Δ Media_Index
Δ Media_Index	0.009**	0.015***	0.004	0.004	
	(0.004)	(0.005)	(0.003)	(0.003)	
Media repression * Governor Election					9.12***
					(3.233)
Governor Election					5.09**
					(2.245)
Media repression					-0.59
					(1.873)
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	1342	1342	1342	1342	1342
N of regions	48	48	48	48	48
1st stage F-stat		23.8		23.8	

Notes: Standard errors clustered at the regional level in parentheses, * p < 0.1, ** p < 0.05, *** p < 0.01. Controls include education, income group, age, and age squared.

6. Conclusion

This paper focused on a central mechanism that "smart" dictators use to secure their rule. In pursuit of an image of competence and adherence to democratic principles, such dictators allow for a free press and general elections (two key elements of functioning democracies) to exist—

just not at the same time. Through the temporal decoupling of critical institutions, smart dictators prevent these elements from working as effective accountability mechanisms. The press is given leeway to function in relative freedom during off-election periods, conferring credibility on their reporting, but it is closely monitored and effectively disciplined in the lead-up to elections. In other words, critical voices are silenced during critical times.

Using pre-war Russia as a prime example of an informational autocracy (Guriev and Treisman 2022), we show that the heightened harassment of journalists is leveraged to effectively bring the journalist/blogger community in line in the lead-up to elections. This violence leads to reporting on incumbents adopting a significantly more positive tone, substantially eroding people's preparedness and willingness to take part in anti-government protests. With little effort, the autocrat yields large returns: They retain power without tainting their carefully crafted image of competence and pseudo-democratic appeal.

We unearth a central "smart" mechanism of modern autocrats' efforts to retain power—one that we believe is by no means limited to the Russian case. Russia, however, presents a unique case to empirically identify the mechanism due to its predetermined and staggered elections, the uniquely rich panel data on journalist harassment in the country, and the two Russian datasets on reporting tonality and individuals' intentions to take part in anti-government protests. In other words, we have uncovered the most relevant political business cycle for autocracies: the political cycle of media repression.

FUNDING AND CONFLICT OF INTEREST

We declare no conflict of interest that could influence or be perceived as potentially influencing the scientific findings, analysis, or conclusions presented in this article. The research project has not received any specific funding or sponsorship from any individual, organization, or other entities.

REFERENCES

Acemoglu, D., and Robinson, J. A. (2001). A theory of political transitions. *American Economic Review, 91*(4), 938-963.

Acemoglu, D., and Robinson, J. A. (2006). *Economic origins of dictatorship and democracy*, Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.

Akhmedov, A., and Zhuravskaya, E. (2004). Opportunistic political cycles: Test in a young democracy setting. Q*uarterly Journal of Economics*, *119*(4), 1301-1338.

Alesina, A., and Perotti, R. (1996). Income distribution, political instability, and investment. *European Economic Review, 40*(6), 1203-1228.

Bermeo, N. (1997). Myths of moderation: Confrontation and conflict during democratic transitions. *Comparative Politics* 29(3): 305–322.

Bjørnskov, C., and Freytag, A. (2016). An offer you can't refuse: Murdering journalists as an enforcement mechanism of corrupt deals. *Public Choice*, *167*(3), 221-243.

Bohn, F. (2019). Political budget cycles, incumbency advantage, and propaganda. *Economics and Politics*, 31(1), 43-70.

Boix, C., and Svolik, M. W. (2013). The foundations of limited authoritarian government: Institutions, commitment, and power-sharing in dictatorships. *Journal of Politics, 75*(2), 300-316.

Bratton, M., and van de Walle, N. (1992). Popular protest and political reform in Africa. *Comparative Politics* 24(4): 419–442.

Curtice, T. B., and Behlendorf, B. (2021). Street-level repression: Protest, policing, and dissent in Uganda. *Journal of Conflict Resolution, 65*(1), 166-194.

De Mesquita, B. B., and Smith, A. (2010). Leader survival, revolutions, and the nature of government finance. *American Journal of Political Science, 54*(4), 936-950.

Bueno de Mesquita, B., Smith, A., Siverson, R., and Morrow, J. (2003). *The logic of political survival*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Cantoni, D., Kao, A., Yang, D. Y., and Yuchtman, N. (2024). Protests. *Annual Review of Economic*s, 16, 519-543

Carter, E. B., and Carter, B. L. (2021). Propaganda and protest in autocracies. *Journal of Conflict Resolution, 65*(5), 919-949.

Carter, E. B., and Carter, B. L. (2023). *Propaganda in autocracies - Institutions, information, and the politics of belief*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Celestino, M. R., and Gleditsch, K. S. (2013). Fresh carnations or all thorn, no rose? Nonviolent campaigns and transitions in autocracies. *Journal of Peace Research, 50*(3), 385-400.

Correia, S., Guimarães, P., and Zylkin, T. (2020). Fast Poisson estimation with high-dimensional fixed effects. *Stata Journal*, *20*(1), 95-115.

CPJ (2009). *Anatomy of injustice: Unsolved killings of journalists in Russia*. *A special report of the Committee to Protect Journalists.* United Book Press: New York.

Curtice, T. and Behlendorf, B. (2021) Street-level Repression: Protest, Policing, and Dissent in Uganda, *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 65(1): 166-194.

dellaPorta, D. (2014) *Mobilizing for Democracy: Comparing 1989 and 2011*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

DellaVigna, S., Enikolopov, R., Mironova, V., Petrova, M., and Zhuravskaya, E. (2014). Cross-border media and nationalism: Evidence from Serbian radio in Croatia. *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics, 6*(3), 103-132.

Di Tella, R., and Franceschelli, I. (2011). Government advertising and media coverage of corruption scandals. *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics*, *3*(4), 119-51.

Enikolopov, R., Makarin, A., and Petrova, M. (2020). Social media and protest participation: Evidence from Russia, *Econometrica* 88 (4): 1479–1514.

Enikolopov, R., Rochlitz, M., Schoors, K. J., and Zakharov, N. (2023). The effect of independent online media in an autocracy. Available at SSRN 4346225.

DeFronzo, J. (2021) *Revolutions and revolutionary movements*. 6th ed. New York: Routledge.

Frye, T. (2021). *Weak Strongman: The limits of power in Putin's Russia*. Princeton University Press.

Gandhi J. (2008). *Political institutions under dictatorship*. New York: Cambridge Univ. Press

Gandhi, J., and Lust-Okar, E. (2009). Elections under authoritarianism, *Annual Review of Political Science*, 12:403-422.

Geddes, B. (2018) Why dictators hold semi-competitive elections and encourage the use of semi-independent courts: A comment on Thornhill and Smirnova's "Litigation and political transformation", *Theory and Society*, 47:595–601

Gehlbach, S., and Simpser, A. (2015). Electoral manipulation as bureaucratic control. *American Journal of Political Science*, *59*(1), 212-224.

Gehlbach, S., Luo, Z., Shirikov, A., and Vorobyev, D. (2025). Is there really a dictator's dilemma? Information and repression in autocracy. *American Journal of Political Science*, *forthcoming.*

Gill, G. (2006). A new turn to authoritarian rule in Russia? *Democratization*, *13*(1), 58-77.

Grier, R. M., and Grier, K. B. (2000). Political cycles in nontraditional settings: Theory and evidence from the case of Mexico. *Journal of Law and Economics*, *43*(1), 239-264.

Guriev, S. and Treisman, D. (2019). Informational autocrats. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, *33*(4), 100-127.

Guriev, S., and Treisman, D. (2020). A theory of informational autocracy. *Journal of Public Economics*, *186*, 104158.

Guriev, S., and Treisman, D. (2022). *Spin dictators: The changing face of tyranny in the 21st century*, Princeton: Princeton University Press

Hale, Henry (2013) Regime Change Cascades: What we have learned from the 1848 revolutions to the 2011 Arab uprisings, *Annual Review of Political Science*, 16:331–53.

Hollyer, J. R., Rosendorff, B. P., and Vreeland, J. R. (2015). Transparency, protest, and autocratic instability. *American Political Science Review, 109*(4), 764-784.

Hughes, S., and Márquez-Ramírez, M. (2018). Local-level authoritarianism, democratic normative aspirations, and antipress harassment: Predictors of threats to journalists in Mexico. *International Journal of Press/Politics*, *23*(4), 539-560.

Hyde, S. D., and Marinov, N. (2012). Which elections can be lost?. Political analysis, 20(2), 191-210.

Kim, H., Whitten-Woodring, J., and James, P. (2015). The role of media in the repression-protest nexus: A game-theoretic model. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, *59*(6), 1017-1042.

Kim, N. K., and Kroeger, A. M. (2019). Conquering and coercing: Nonviolent anti-regime protests and the pathways to democracy. *Journal of Peace Research, 56*(5), 650-666.

King, G., Pan, J., and Roberts, M. E. (2013). How censorship in China allows government criticism but silences collective expression. *American Political Science Review, 107*(2), 326-343.

Kofanov, D., Kozlov, V., Libman, A., and Zakharov, N. (2023). Encouraged to cheat? Federal incentives and career concerns at the sub-national level as determinants of under-reporting of COVID-19 mortality in Russia. *British Journal of Political Science*, 53(3), 835-860.

Knutsen, C. H., Nygård, H. M., and Wig, T. (2017). Autocratic elections: Stabilizing tool or force for change?. *World Politics, 69*(1), 98-143.

Leventoğlu, B., Malesky, E., and Wen, T. (2023). *Authoritarianism with elections*. Duke University, https://people.duke.edu/~bl38/articles/AuthoritarianElections.pdf

Levitsky, S., and Way, L. A. (2010). *Competitive authoritarianism: Hybrid regimes after the Cold War*, Cambridge. Cambridge University Press.

Magaloni, B. (2008) Credible power-sharing and the longevity of authoritarian rule. *Comparative Political Studies* 41:715–41

Malesky, E., and Schuler, P. (2011). The single-party dictator's dilemma: Information in elections without opposition. *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, 36(4): 491-530.

Mazzaro, K. (2020). Orchestrating silence, winning the votes: Explaining variation in media freedom during elections. *Electoral Studies*, *66*, 102172.

Nordhaus, W. D. (1975). The political business cycle. *Review of Economic Studies*, *42*(2), 169-190.

Reuter, O. J., Buckley, N., Shubenkova, A., and Garifullina, G. (2016). Local elections in authoritarian regimes: An elite-based theory with evidence from Russian mayoral elections. *Comparative Political Studies, 49*(5), 662-697.

Reuter, O. J., and Szakonyi, D. (2021). Electoral manipulation and regime support: Survey evidence from Russia. *World Politics, 73*(2), 275-314.

Rogoff, K. (1990). Equilibrium political budget cycles. *American Economic Review*, 80: 21-36.

Rozenas, A. (2016). Office insecurity and electoral manipulation. *Journal of Politics*, *78*(1), 232-248.

Salazar, G. (2019). Strategic allies and the survival of critical media under repressive conditions: An empirical analysis of local Mexican press. *International Journal of Press/Politics*, *24*(3), 341-362.

Schedler, A. (2006). The logic of electoral authoritarianism, in: *Electoral authoritarianism: The dynamics of unfree competition*, edited by Andreas Schedler, Boulder, USA: Lynne Rienner Publishers, pp. 1-24.

Schulze, G. G., Sjahrir, B. S., and Zakharov, N. (2016). Corruption in Russia. *Journal of Law and Economics*, *59*(1), 135-171.

Shi, M. and Svensson, J. (2006) Political budget cycles: Do they differ across countries and why? *Journal of Public Economics*, *90*(8-9): 1367-1389.

Shirah, R. (2016) Electoral authoritarianism and political unrest. *International Political Science Review*, *37*(4), 470-484

Sidorkin, O., and Vorobyev, D. (2018). Political cycles and corruption in Russian regions. *European Journal of Political Economy*, *52*, 55-74.

Silitski, V. (2009). Reading Russia: Tools of autocracy. *Journal of Democracy*, *20*(2), 42-46.

Solis, J. A. (2021). The press-safety paradox of democracies: Regime-type duration and journalist killings. *Foreign Policy Analysis*, *17*(1), oraa007.

Stanig, P. (2015). Regulation of speech and media coverage of corruption: An empirical analysis of the Mexican press. *American Journal of Political Science*, *59*(1), 175-193.

Stier, S. (2015). Democracy, autocracy and the news: The impact of regime type on media freedom. *Democratization*, *22*(7), 1273-1295.

Tertytchnaya, K., and Lankina, T. (2020). Electoral protests and political attitudes under electoral authoritarianism. *Journal of Politics, 82*(1), 285-299.

VonDoepp, P., and Young, D. J. (2013). Assaults on the Fourth Estate: Explaining media harassment in Africa. *Journal of Politics*, *75*(1), 36-51.

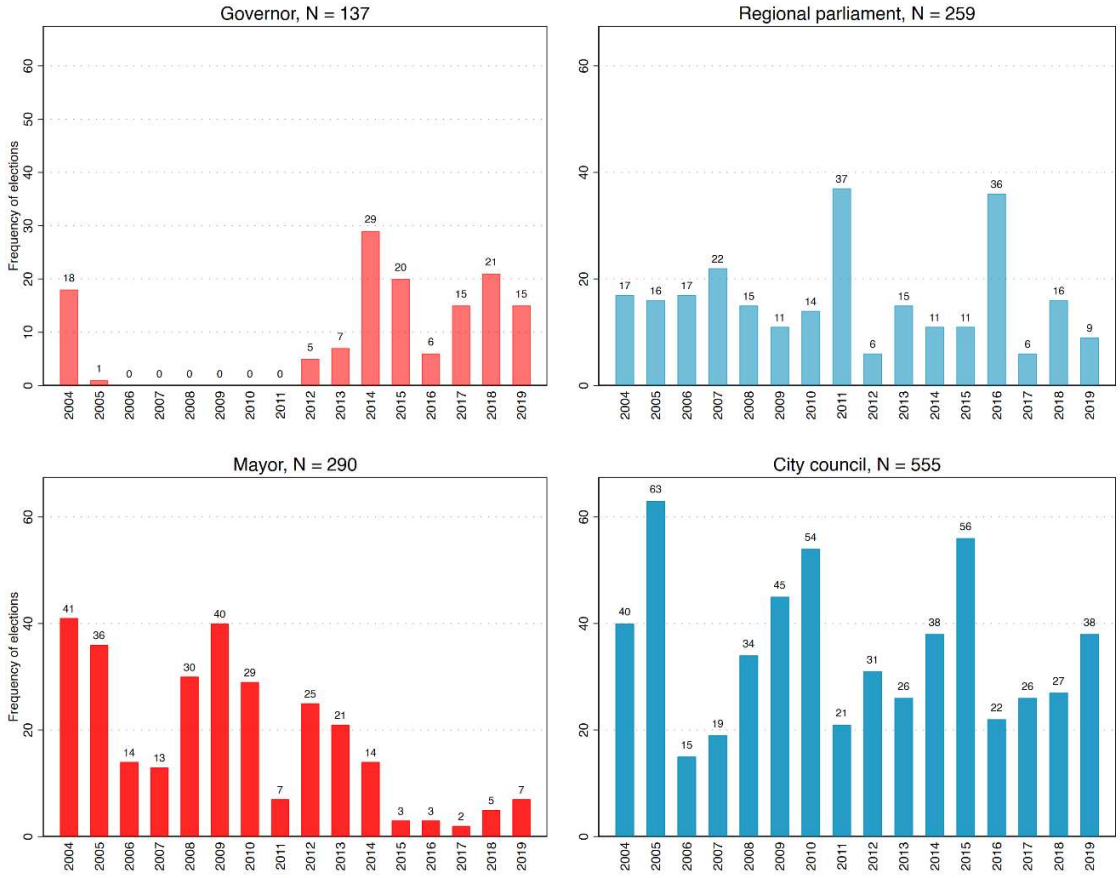
Yanagizawa-Drott, D. (2014). Propaganda and conflict: Evidence from the Rwandan genocide, *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 129 (4): 1947–94.

Wang, X., Bohn, F., and Veiga, F. J. (2023). When do more selfish politicians manipulate less, not more?. European Journal of Political Economy, 77, 102320.

Zou, G. Y., and Donner, A. (2013). Extension of the modified Poisson regression model to prospective studies with correlated binary data. *Statistical Methods in Medical Research*, *22*(6), 661-670.

Appendix

FIGURE A.1. FREQUENCY OF LOCAL ELECTIONS IN RUSSIA.



Note: *The figure reports the frequency of distinct Russian elections occurring by year. Hence, while the number of city-level elections coincides with the number of non-zero city-month observations for respective elections in the dataset, there are almost twice as many non-zero city-month observations for regional-level elections.*

TABLE A1: POLITICAL CYCLES OF MEDIA REPRESSION (FIGURE 1 AND 2)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)

Dep. Var.:	Incidence of media repression	Violence	Censorship	Detention	Criminal prosecution
Election t-12	1.20	1.29	0.93	1.06	1.58
	(0.16)	(0.34)	(0.32)	(0.40)	(0.61)
Election t-11	0.90	0.77	1.01	1.16	0.71
	(0.12)	(0.17)	(0.24)	(0.39)	(0.25)
Election t-10	0.95	1.13	0.70	0.76	1.09
	(0.14)	(0.30)	(0.22)	(0.32)	(0.36)
Election t-9	0.86	0.84	1.25	0.81	0.78
	(0.15)	(0.22)	(0.29)	(0.25)	(0.37)
Election t-8	0.67***	0.47**	0.98	0.43*	0.63
	(0.10)	(0.16)	(0.28)	(0.19)	(0.27)
Election t-7	0.98	1.05	0.85	0.69	1.40
	(0.14)	(0.24)	(0.21)	(0.23)	(0.45)
Election t-6	1.03	1.01	1.22	1.92*	0.86
	(0.15)	(0.24)	(0.32)	(0.66)	(0.34)
Election t-5	1.12	1.27	1.07	1.15	1.39
	(0.15)	(0.24)	(0.38)	(0.39)	(0.50)
Election t-4	1.01	0.85	1.24	1.03	1.37
	(0.15)	(0.28)	(0.32)	(0.39)	(0.58)
Election t-3	1.11	0.90	1.04	1.39	1.33
	(0.18)	(0.23)	(0.26)	(0.60)	(0.65)
Election t-2	1.08	1.67**	0.74	1.09	0.78
	(0.16)	(0.37)	(0.29)	(0.37)	(0.36)
Election t-1	1.49***	1.39	1.85***	1.25	1.00
	(0.19)	(0.29)	(0.43)	(0.40)	(0.32)
Election t	**1.74*** **	**1.86*** **	**1.94** **	**2.55*** **	**1.20**
	(0.19)	**(0.36)**	**(0.51)**	**(0.54)**	**(0.47)**
Election t+1	0.95	1.06	0.98	0.59	0.84
	(0.14)	(0.21)	(0.24)	(0.25)	(0.26)
Election t+2	0.92	1.00	0.81	1.29	0.60
	(0.11)	(0.23)	(0.18)	(0.35)	(0.22)
Election t+3	0.76	1.37	0.58	0.44**	0.60
	(0.13)	(0.34)	(0.21)	(0.17)	(0.34)
Election t+4	1.02	0.79	1.55	0.70	1.07
	(0.14)	(0.18)	(0.45)	(0.26)	(0.38)
Election t+5	1.05	1.04	0.85	0.75	1.37

	(0.15)	(0.21)	(0.23)	(0.32)	(0.41)
Election t+6	1.00	1.06	1.02	0.93	0.96
	(0.14)	(0.26)	(0.31)	(0.34)	(0.23)
Election t+7	0.82	0.58	0.78	1.13	1.61
	(0.13)	(0.20)	(0.20)	(0.40)	(0.64)
Election t+8	1.03	0.97	1.33	0.83	0.57
	(0.16)	(0.24)	(0.33)	(0.28)	(0.25)
Election t+9	0.95	0.80	1.09	1.02	0.76
	(0.15)	(0.21)	(0.35)	(0.36)	(0.39)
Election t+10	0.98	1.37	1.07	1.17	0.74
	(0.14)	(0.33)	(0.33)	(0.35)	(0.26)
Election t+11	1.01	0.97	1.35	1.31	0.68
	(0.13)	(0.22)	(0.35)	(0.40)	(0.23)
Election t+12	0.98	1.03	0.95	1.18	1.25
	(0.14)	(0.22)	(0.24)	(0.34)	(0.49)
City-month FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Time FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	12194	6099	5310	3244	3072

Notes: Standard errors clustered at the regional level in parentheses, * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$. All estimations include city-month and time fixed effects, and five lags of the dependent variable.

TABLE A2: POLITICAL CYCLES OF MEDIA REPRESSION BY ELECTION TYPE (FIGURE 3)

Dep. Var.:	(1) Incidence of media repression	(2) Violence	(3) Censorship	(4) Detention	(5) Criminal prosecution
Governor Election	1.48***	1.58*	2.27**	2.16**	0.46*
	(0.22)	(0.38)	(0.75)	(0.76)	(0.19)
Mayor Election	1.72***	1.84***	2.31***	2.27***	1.31
	(0.23)	(0.30)	(0.49)	(0.72)	(0.52)
Regional Parliament Election	1.24**	1.55***	1.26	0.86	1.47
	(0.12)	(0.26)	(0.23)	(0.19)	(0.37)
City Council Election	1.13	1.03	1.08	1.58*	0.75
	(0.11)	(0.15)	(0.18)	(0.43)	(0.28)
Governor Appointment	1.18	1.2	1.25	1.11	1.21
	(0.16)	(0.28)	(0.24)	(0.37)	(0.38)
Mayor Appointment	1.03	0.96	1.24	1.24	0.73
	(0.12)	(0.23)	(0.26)	(0.29)	(0.22)
City-month FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Time FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	14130	7196	6371	3895	3666

Notes: Standard errors clustered at the regional level in parentheses, * p < 0.1, ** p < 0.05, *** p < 0.01. All estimations include city-month and time fixed effects, and five lags of the dependent variable.

TABLE A3: THE DISCIPLINING EFFECT OF MEDIA REPRESSION ON PRESS REPORTING (FIGURE 4)

	(1)	(2)

Dep. Var.:	MediaIndex	News mentions
Governor Election	9.38***	0.89***
	(1.21)	(0.19)
Regional Parliament Election	-2.23*	-0.09
	(1.29)	(0.17)
Media repression	-3.18*	-0.2
	(1.66)	(0.21)
Governor Election × Media repression	9.30***	0.36
	(2.92)	(0.50)
Parliament Election × Media repression	3.77	0.01
	(4.97)	(0.72)
City-month FE	Yes	Yes
Time FE	Yes	Yes
Observations	1331	1331
R2	0.877	0.918

Notes: Standard errors clustered at the regional level in parentheses, * p < 0.1, ** p < 0.05, *** p < 0.01. All estimations include city-month and time fixed effects, and five lags of the dependent variable.