

Pseudo-Democratic Innovations and Genuine Regime Support in Russia

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1 Introduction

Over recent decades, many countries around the world have implemented democratic participatory innovations – instruments designed to increase public engagement with politics beyond periodic elections. While democratic countries led the way, many modern authoritarian regimes, such as Russia and China, followed suit and developed participatory instruments that mimic democratic practices. Although some researchers link the adoption of such tools in autocracies to improved policy acceptance and state capacity, few studies explore the real-world impact of pseudo-democratic tools in autocracies.

This argument paper outlines theoretical expectations and an empirical strategy for a research project. The final project aims to contribute to the literature on modern authoritarian regimes and democratic innovations by studying the effect of pseudo-democratic citizen participation on regime support in Russia. To complete the analysis, it will use an original data set on citizen participation in the Urban Environment Enhancement Program (UEEP; *Formirovaniye Komfortnoy Gorodskoy Sredy*) and the electoral performance of the Russian ruling party, United Russia, in Novosibirskaya Oblast, a large Russian region. The main hypothesis is that citizen participation in the UEEP strengthens the positive effect of the public goods provided through the program.

2 Theoretical Expectations

The modern Russian state experiments with pseudo-democratic innovations. From the early 2010s, citizen co-governance became a popular tool for many state agencies and regional governments, taking the form of feedback platforms, public consultations, symbolic voting campaigns, and similar initiatives. The diversity and consistency of these measures suggest that they address a real concern within the Russian state apparatus. This subsection argues that pseudo-democratic innovations are implemented in Russia, at least partly, to improve the regime's image and may be effective in doing so.

2.1 The Instrumental Use of Citizen Participation

In a highly centralized state, such as modern Russia, it is hard to disentangle strategic calculations from the idiosyncratic preferences of the political leadership. Several competing hypotheses can therefore exist as to why pseudo-democratic innovations are adopted in Russia. A view preferred in

this paper is that citizen co-governance is used, at least partly, to address the mistrust between state and society.

As outlined in Owen (2020), the early push for citizen co-governance initiatives in Russia came from the federal center and can be attributed directly to the president and his administration. While the decisions to adopt pseudo-democratic tools are oftentimes taken by individual state departments and regional governments, their operational dependency on the federal center questions the autonomy of these policies. For Russian officials, ‘citizen co-governance’ can therefore be a buzz word policy feature that is preferred or demanded by the higher-ups but is otherwise devoid of a strategic meaning.

However, the history of the adoption of citizen co-governance in Russia and the official narrative speak against this interpretation. In the early 2010s, Moscow pioneered citizen co-governance through the Active Citizen (*Aktivniy Grazhdanin*) platform, allowing local residents to provide feedback on municipal services and vote on urban development projects. The city’s officials portrayed the platform as a way to improve trust between the citizens and the authorities and to invite citizens’ contributions¹. Moscow’s ‘digital democracy’ policies were celebrated as a major success in generating genuine political support for local authorities and a contributor to the popularity of the capital’s mayor (Owen, 2020; Schlaufer, 2020). Over the 2010s, this experience also inspired the adoption of similar policies – including the UEEP scheme – across the country, which was accompanied by similar rhetoric from the authorities.

That the adoption of citizen innovations is driven by the intent to improve the public image of the regime is also supported by the electoral context. In the 2010–2020s, the Russian political regime and especially the ruling United Russia party struggled to secure genuine support in the population and was searching for new tools to improve its image. The spike in support of the United Russia after the 2014 annexation of Crimea faded by the end of the 2010s, and the state struggled with anti-regime voting and protests at the federal and regional levels. Citizen co-governance is well-perceived by the Russian population and is exploited for political PR and campaigning.²

Accordingly, the evidence suggests that the efforts to cultivate trust and bolster regime support explain at least some of the adoption of pseudo-democratic innovations in Russia. This naturally leads to the question of the effectiveness of these policies.

2.2 The Conflict Between ‘Pseudo-Democratic’ and Genuine Support

What sets citizen co-governance in Russia apart from similar initiatives in the Western democratic states is the controlled nature of citizen participation and an overtly undemocratic character of elections for representative institutions. It is therefore not clear whether the use of pseudo-democratic innovations – even with an explicit intention to promote trust – can achieve the objective of improving regime support.

Citizen co-governance in Russia is characterised by firm control of agenda setting, participation, and outcome realisation. A recent 2025 symbolic vote on a new banknote design provides an illustrative example. The vote was initiated by the Central Bank, was restricted to a fixed set of possible

¹An endeavor that existed in a stark contrast with the political violence against actual political participation in the 2010–2020s.

²Citizen participation is a major emphasis of the United Russia electoral platform and is mentioned throughout its promotional materials. For instance, the 2025 campaign manifesto is branded as a “National Programme” (*Narodnaya Programma*) that was allegedly designed from contributions by common citizens. For the 2025 elections in NSO, the UEEP participation was widely used for the United Russia’s promotional materials.

designs, and took place at a government-controlled online voting platform. When the voting led to a political conflict and negative media coverage, the initiative was suspended, and the results were decided by the Central Bank itself. Citizen co-governance is normally restricted to safe and non-conflictual topics, such as urban space development, feedback provision, and symbolic choices. When some criticism is allowed, such as with the *regulation.gov.ru* platform, citizen votes are not legally binding.³

The current literature on democratic innovations disagrees on the implications of such limitations. On the one hand, Fung and Wright (2001) and Mayka (2019) argue that the institutional design of democratic innovations is crucial to its effects on citizen empowerment. To be truly effective, democratic innovations must enable citizens to make real decisions on salient political issues that are legally binding. This way democratic innovations align policy outcomes with citizen preferences, build political trust, and serve as ‘schools of democracy’. Indeed, some studies provide evidence that citizen participation may decrease political trust when institutional design is weak (see Theuwis, Van Ham, and Jacobs, 2025 for discussion).

This, however, does not imply that deficient citizen participation cannot produce trust or improve policy satisfaction. A 2021 paper, Chapman found that Russian citizens exhibited greater trust in the political system if they were aware about the president’s annual programme that involved direct communication with citizens (*Primaya Linia*) – a citizen participation instrument that lacks most of the elements of an empowering democratic innovation.⁴ It can be that citizens in an authoritarian context cannot credibly tell the difference between high- and low-quality participation, or that they prioritise policy output efficiency over procedural fairness.⁵ As long as citizens perceive participation as genuine, the actual institutional design of democratic innovations might be less important.

In this case, even limited and controlled citizen participation in Russia might bring along the benefits of increased trust and support for the political system that the state can capitalize on. In the remaining part of this paper, I suggest a research design to test this theoretical expectation.

3 Empirical Strategy

To study the impact of pseudo-democratic innovations on regime support in Russia, I will analyse the UEEP federal scheme in Novosibirskaya Oblast (NSO), a large Russian region in western Siberia. The uneven roll out of the scheme creates a natural experiment that can be used to isolate the impact of participation on regime support using a difference-in-differences model. The elections to regional parliament provide a useful proxy for regime support on the municipal levels.

3.1 Context

The UEEP policy was first introduced in 2018 as part of a presidential programme that aimed to improve the urban environment (*blagoustroystvo*) in Russian towns and rural areas and operated in all Russian regions. Under the scheme, the federal government provided additional funding for the renovation of public spaces, such as parks, green areas, playgrounds, and recreation areas in Russian municipalities. Since 2022, some UEEP projects were decided through an online voting platform

³This is typical for authoritarian regimes that implement citizen co-governance. See He and Warren (2011) for a discussion on China, and Kneuer and Harnisch (2016) for an overview.

⁴See Truex (2016) for similar findings in China.

⁵Yeung and Wang (2024) provide evidence that citizens in authoritarian states may rate their country’s democracy more positively when exposed to redistributive policies or propaganda, even when procedural fairness is weak.

that allowed citizens to select from a list of pre-approved projects in their municipal district or area.⁶ De jure, the decisions of the citizens were legally binding.

In the NSO, this created four groups of municipalities: (i) that received UEEP projects and participated in online voting, (ii) that received UEEP projects but did not participate in online voting, (iii) that did not receive UEEP projects and participated in online voting, and (iv) that did not receive UEEP projects and did not participate in online voting. The third group exists because online voting may happen at a municipal district level (*rayon*), while projects are still too small to have an effect outside of their immediate neighborhood.

An area is hence defined as treated by public good provision when a UEEP project is completed within the boundaries of an electoral territorial unit (*selsovet*) within an electoral cycle. Similarly, an area is defined as treated by participation when its citizens have had a chance to vote on a UEEP project within an electoral cycle.⁷

3.2 Hypotheses

The uneven roll out of the program allows me to isolate the effect of participation from the effect of simply receiving a public good. Still, public goods are likely to improve the regime support in areas near the DCUE projects. In the framework of Gandhi and Lust-Oskar (2009), authoritarian states may choose to provide concessions to the public to secure genuine support. As such, my first hypothesis is:

H1: Receiving a UEEP project improves regime support in the areas that benefit from the project.

Following the discussion in the previous section, it should, however, matter whether the project was selected with or without citizen participation. Citizen participation is likely to increase trust in the political system, improve the quality of urban renovation projects, and promote awareness about the government's renovation efforts. As such, I should expect a greater effect of the UEEP projects in areas that participated in online voting:

H2: The positive effect of UEEP projects on regime support is greater in areas that participated in online voting.

Some positive effects of participation may persist even when the area did not receive a UEEP project. This leads me to my third and final hypothesis:

H3: Participation in voting on a UEEP project improves regime support even in areas that do not benefit from the project.

3.3 Data

On the municipal level, the best available proxy for the support of the political system is electoral data. While Russian elections are not competitive and the electoral campaigns are primarily focused on the mobilisation of core supporters and state-dependent voters through local networks, some voters do perceive elections as democratic (Reuter and Szakonyi, 2022; Hutcherson, 2018). The

⁶There is little evidence that UEEP projects were allocated to loyalist areas. It is, however, unclear why some projects are decided through online voting and some are approved by a bureaucratic mechanism, indicating a source of potential endogeneity.

⁷An underlying identification assumption is that UEEP projects do not have a spillover effect on neighboring electoral units. This is justified by the small scale of public goods projects, but can be addressed by an alternative specification that uses continuous distance from UEEP projects, rather than a binary treatment.

compliance with network mobilisation is not strictly monitored, and the efforts to bolster support are also likely to be more effective when the government is perceived more positively. As such, abnormal fluctuations in the support for the United Russia – a party that is universally perceived as the party of government – are likely to capture genuine support for the regime.

Electoral data for the NSO is available at the website of the regional electoral commission at the district and precinct levels. For the baseline mode, I will use the data for the regional parliament elections of 2015, 2020, and 2025. Elections to the NSO parliament offer a particularly credible insight into citizens’ political views for two reasons. First, the NSO is a ‘protest region’ where electoral data has historically been seen as more reliable than in the rest of the country. Second, regional parliament elections are second-tier elections for the Russian state and are less likely to suffer from outright manipulations and artificial results than Duma and presidential elections. Removing major cities from the analysis, electoral data can be aggregated to 428 municipal areas (*selsovet*) that are consistent between elections.

The data on the location and implementation of UEEP projects is provided by the regional government. The official dataset contains the location, type, and status of all UEEP projects in NSO. Data on voting for the UEEP projects and the outcomes of the votes are available online at the official voting platform.

3.4 The model

Below, I provide a baseline model specification for a dif-in-dif model.

$$\Delta voteshare_{id} = \alpha + \beta_1 project_{id} + \beta_2 participation_{id} + \beta_3 (project_{id} \times participation_{id}) + \varepsilon_{id}$$

Here, $\Delta voteshare_{id}$ is the difference in the vote share of the United Russia party at regional legislative elections between 2020 and 2025 for an electoral unit i , in an administrative district d . $project_{id}$ is a dummy variable that takes 1 when a UEEP project was completed within the boundaries of an electoral unit i and 0 otherwise; $project_{id}$ is the main outcome of interest for H1. $participation_{id}$ is a binary indicator that takes 1 when citizens of an electoral unit i had a chance to vote on a UEEP project and 0 otherwise; $participation_{id}$ is the main outcome of interest for H3. β_3 is the interaction effect and is central for H2. It shows how much additional change in vote share is associated with having both a UEEP project and citizen participation.

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