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How to cite this publication

Please cite the final published version:

Tolstrup, J. (2015). Black Knights and Elections in Authoritarian Regimes: Why and How Russia Supports Authoritarian Incumbents in Post-Soviet States. *European Journal of Political Research*, 54(4), 673–690. DOI: [10.1111/1475-6765.12079](https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12079)

Publication metadata

Title:	<i>Black Knights and Elections in Authoritarian Regimes: Why and How Russia Supports Authoritarian Incumbents in Post-Soviet States</i>
Author(s):	<i>Jakob Tolstrup</i>
Journal:	<i>European Journal of Political Research</i>
DOI/Link:	10.1111/1475-6765.12079
Document version:	Accepted manuscript (post-print)

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**Black Knights and Elections in Authoritarian Regimes:
Why and How Russia Supports Authoritarian Incumbents in Post-Soviet States**

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Abstract

In the last decade, studies have documented how autocrats use elections as a way of legitimizing and stabilizing their regimes. Simultaneously, a literature on negative external actors (aka Black knights) has developed, emphasizing how various international actors use anti-democracy promotion strategies to undergird authoritarian regimes. In this article, these two literatures are fused in an attempt to shed light on the external dimension of authoritarian elections and what I term black knight election bolstering. First, I elucidate five mechanisms through which external assistance increases the chances of “winning” elections in authoritarian settings (signaling invincibility, deterring elite defection, undermining opposition activities, dealing with popular protests, and countervailing pressure from foreign democracy promoters). Second, I argue that external actors are most likely to offer election bolstering when they face a particularly acquiescent partner or when electoral defeat is perceived to lead to radical and undesired regime change. The relevance of both factors is augmented when uncertainty of the electoral outcome is high. Finally, four cases of Russian interventions during elections in three authoritarian neighbour countries (Ukraine (2004), Belarus (2006) and Moldova (2005 and 2009)) are analysed. The case studies corroborate the theoretical arguments; not only does Russia engage in all five types of black knight election bolstering, but it does so only when one or more of the three explanatory factors are present.

Keywords: Black knight; Elections; autocracy; Russia; post-Soviet region

INTRODUCTION

The global spread of democracy in recent decades has not washed away authoritarianism. Even if one applies a minimalist yardstick of democracy, around forty percent of the countries in the world remain autocratic today (Møller and Skaaning 2013). During the last fifteen years, scholars have strived to better understand the determinants of authoritarian persistence and breakdown (for an overview, see Art 2012).

One strand of this rapidly expanding literature on authoritarian regimes has been preoccupied with the peculiar fact that many autocracies hold elections regularly despite their undemocratic character (Schedler 2002a; Levitsky and Way 2010). Some have argued that such elections do not serve as mere window dressing, but in fact constitute an effective stabilization tool for authoritarian regimes (Geddes 2005; Magaloni 2006; Gandhi and Przeworski 2007). Others contend that holding elections is a risky business, more often fostering regime breakdown than reinforcing autocratic power (Lindberg 2006; Howard and Roessler 2006; Hadenius and Teorell 2007; Lindberg 2009).

Another part of the literature has emphasized the importance of what has been termed black knights or negative external actors (Ambrosio 2009; Tolstrup 2009; Levitsky and Way 2010; Tolstrup 2014). Here, the argument is that if we are to understand authoritarian persistence, a focus on domestic factors does not suffice – the external dimension must be included as well. External interventions need not only originate with democracy promoters attempting to weaken authoritarian rule. Equally often actors from the outside play a crucial role in protecting and sustaining authoritarianism.

In this article, I combine the two perspectives. Election periods can indeed be the site of serious challenges to authoritarian stability, but they need not lead to authoritarian breakdown. Sometimes, incumbents are strong enough to deal with emerging threats to their power; at times, they are even so powerful that they do not face substantive threats at all during election periods. Variation in domestic conditions of course explains a large part of such differences in “authoritarian success”. However, authoritarian elections are not shaped by domestic conditions alone, but can also be influenced from the outside. I argue that external actors, through what I term *black knight election bolstering*, can make authoritarian regimes more resilient towards electoral challenges, thus increasing their chances of successfully controlling and winning elections.

The article proceeds in three steps. First, I spell out five mechanisms through which black knights can increase the chances of “successfully” conducting elections in authoritarian settings: helping incumbents signal invincibility, deterring elite defection, weakening the opposition, dampening popular protests, and countervailing pressure from foreign democracy promoters. Second, I offer an explanation for when black knight support is most likely to materialize. Essentially, black knight election bolstering is motivated by two factors: the geopolitical acquiescence of the incumbent and the degree to which electoral defeat is perceived to lead to radical and undesired regime change. A third factor, high uncertainty of the outcome of elections, augments the relevance of both. Finally, four illustrative cases of Russian interventions during elections in three authoritarian neighbour

countries – Ukraine (2004), Belarus (2006) and Moldova (2005 and 2009) – are analysed. The case studies lend clear support to the theoretical arguments; not only does Russia repeatedly engage in all five types of black knight election bolstering, but it does so only when either one of, or a combination of, the two sufficient conditions are present, and more forcefully so when the augmenting factor applies as well.

ELECTIONS IN AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES

Today an ever-increasing number of authoritarian regimes, in one way or another, attest to holding national elections. The trend of “electoral authoritarianism” (Morse 2012) has caught both the more pluralistic authoritarian regimes that Levitsky and Way (2010) term competitive authoritarian regimes and hard-core autocracies such as Belarus and Zimbabwe. Unlike in democracies, elections in authoritarian regimes are not free and fair. In fact, most often an unlevel playing field biases the outcome, sometimes vote fraud is widespread, and at times, hard repression is used to discipline oppositional forces and to smother popular demonstrations (Levitsky and Way 2010). Though autocrats skilfully resort to a menu of manipulation (Schedler 2002a), and even sometimes use elections as a way to strengthen and stabilize their regimes (Magaloni 2006; Gandhi and Lust-Okar 2009), authoritarian elections do not always come out as the incumbent had hoped for. Occasionally, the election process spins out of control, and the autocrat and sometimes even the regime itself is forced from power, if not through the ballot then by other means.

The main reason why elections often lead to authoritarian breakdown is to be found in the unique character of voting. An election is a temporally confined event that, at least formally, has an open-ended outcome. It opens a window of opportunity for the transfer of political power (Schedler 2002b, 109) and elite insiders, opposition groups, the electorate and even external democracy promoters often try to make use of this opportunity by challenging the status quo. No matter what motivates autocrats across the globe to introduce and uphold electoral institutions, the fact remains that if the incumbent decides to hold elections he has to make sure that the election process is effectively controlled. Otherwise, it will trigger regime crisis.

Scholars on authoritarian elections have spelled out the tasks that incumbents must pay due attention to if elections are to be successful in the sense that they stabilize rather than undermine authoritarian rule. First, elections must signal invincibility, meaning that the vote must be won with a comfortable margin, and the result must be perceived as fairly legitimate, or at least irreversible. A secure victory sends a strong signal not only to the population but also to the political opposition (Geddes 2005, 3). Faced with prospects of spectacular victories, regime opponents are likely to become disillusioned, even sometimes causing splits in the opposition’s ranks (Magaloni 2006, 9).

Second, elite insiders should be deterred from defection. All authoritarian leaders base their power on a group of dominant elite supporters and no autocrat can survive without such backing (Bueno

de Mesquita et al. 2003). Elections represent an alternative non-violent way for dissatisfied elites to alter the balance in the ruling group (Reuter and Gandhi 2011). To alleviate this threat from within the ranks of the regime the incumbent must make sure that his supporters are content with the rent-flows attributed to them and that no credible alternative to the incumbent exists.

Third, elections may also become a focal point for the opposition as they offer an opportunity for various groupings to temporarily put differences aside and join forces in an attempt to topple the existing regime (Howard and Roessler 2006). Consequently, the incumbent must fight to keep the opposition fragmented and weak. The trick is to make it look bad in the eyes of the voters and to further complicate its collective action problems either through targeted repression or through cooptation-strategies aimed at splitting the coalition by offering the more moderate groups socio-economic or political benefits in return for regime allegiance (Lust-Okar 2005).

Fourth, the controlled character of the authoritarian election is known to trigger the sense of grievances that is a necessary condition for popular protests (Bunce and Wolchik 2011). In case voters take it to the streets, the incumbent must be ready to deter further mobilization and if necessary apply coercive measures to dissolve the demonstrations before they trigger uncertainty among the inner ranks of the regime.

Finally, elections offer external democracy promoters an opportunity to intensify the pressure for democratic concessions at a time when the authoritarian regime is more vulnerable than normal (Levitsky and Way 2010, 42). Such pressure may include political and financial support for pro-democratic opposition groups, criticism of faulty voting procedures and regime repression, and perhaps the introduction of sanctions targeted against the incumbent and his cronies. To mitigate this challenge, the incumbent must be able to reject external criticisms by intensifying efforts to legitimize the elections and to minimize the repercussions of sanctions by effectively shielding regime insiders.

Obviously, these various challenges are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. For instance, the risk of elite defection will be higher in cases where there is a strong opposition or the ability of the regime to signal invincibility is weak. This, however, only further emphasizes the crucial point made here; to control elections, autocrats must be able to deal with multifaceted challenges arising from both within and outside the regime. If they fail, the elections introduced to ensure regime stability are likely to backfire.

BLACK KNIGHT ELECTION BOLSTERING

The research on the international dimension of regime change has developed rapidly during the last decades. But only in the last five years have we started to meticulously study the external challengers of democracy that Levitsky and Way (2010, 41) term black knights.¹ In particular,

scholars have emphasized how authoritarian great powers hinder democratization and stabilize authoritarianism in their respective neighbourhoods (Ambrosio 2009; Tolstrup 2009; Levitsky and Way 2010; Tolstrup 2014). But also democratic external actors may behave as black knights, evident from US support to military dictatorships in Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s (Muller 1985), its long-time support for autocratic Egypt (Brownlee 2012) and Bahrain (Ambrosio 2014), or from French support to former colonies like Cameroon and Gabon (Levitsky and Way 2010, 258–265). With these works as reference points, I define black knights as external actors, be they democratic or authoritarian, great powers or regional powers, states or international organizations, that act as guardians of autocracy or challengers of democracy in specific contexts. Acting as a black knight is thus not something that is intrinsic to particular international actors but must rather be understood as a specific role that any actor for different reasons might resort to towards a particular target state at a particular point in time (cf., Tolstrup 2009).

Even though several authors have argued that external actors may help authoritarian neighbours win elections, a systematic study of this phenomenon is still lacking. I argue that to understand what black knight election bolstering is and how it works, we must first tease out the exact mechanisms through which external support works. To do this, I draw explicitly on the insights from studies of authoritarian elections presented above. Recall that authoritarian regimes holding elections need to pay careful attention to at least five potential pitfalls if they want to preserve power. Table 1 shows how black knights can help authoritarian incumbents deal with each of these challenges.

--- Table 1 about here ---

As a rule, black knights can improve the odds of authoritarian survival in two ways: by boosting various material and strategic resources available to the autocrat or by undergirding and solidifying regime legitimacy. Both support strategies are relevant for all five challenges. With regards to *signalling invincibility*, black knights can help incumbents plan and run effective election campaigns, provide them with financial resources useful for implementing populist policies or buying votes, or they can offer advice on how to manipulate the voting process. That is, they can help incumbents win elections (comfortably). But elections need not only be won with a secure margin; they must also be accepted as fairly legitimate. Black knights can help portray the vote as free and fair by endorsing both the process and the results, most often by backing and reproducing the incumbent regime's official framing of events.

As for the threat of *elite defection*, regime supporters most often renounce allegiances either as a result of grievances built up over a longer period or as a result of acute crisis (Reuter and Gandhi 2011). Black knights can of course never prevent elite defection entirely, but they can help the incumbent make it less attractive to break ranks. One strategy is to provide cash-strapped autocrats with the finances necessary for cooptation. Another is to send a clear signal that only the incumbent will be accepted as the leader of the country, what I term a “no alternative to the incumbent” policy. Even in case of highly contested elections, such external support is likely to reduce the fear among regime supporters that the incumbent will not be able to withstand pressure. And in case it is backed up by threats of redrawing generous bilateral agreements or introducing sanctions it makes power

alternation more costly and it will therefore be more difficult for potential challengers to win the support of other insiders.

With regards to keeping the *opposition* at bay, black knights can use various diplomatic and media-based channels to affect the perception voters have of the incumbent and his political opponents. By discrediting and scolding opposition parties and candidates and by formulating a “no alternative to the incumbent” policy that makes it clear that opting for a new leadership will be costly for the country, the black knight can help make the opposition look less attractive. In addition to such negative branding, black knights can further tilt the balance in favour of the incumbent by providing technical assistance on how to set up legal barriers against anti-regime activities, or to provide the technology, material or personnel to effectively repress opposition activities.

In the case of large *popular protests*, black knights can help dampen frustration by providing financial resources useful for boosting social spending. Even though this may not quell discontent with flawed elections, it does help to reduce socio-economic grievances, which in itself is often a strong impetus for protesters. Alternatively, black knights can help make violent crack-downs successful either by providing the necessary security-related personnel and equipment to carry out such an operation or by reproducing the regime’s framing of events; for example, by discrediting the unruly demonstrators and supporting the firm hand that effectively disperses the crowds.

Finally, black knights can reduce some of the *external democracy promotion pressure* that often intensifies during elections. Black knights can openly disagree with and discredit negative evaluations of independent election observation missions, potentially cancelling out, or at least taking some of the bite off the criticism. In case democracy promoting powers introduce sanctions or withhold benefits, a black knight can criticize (and perhaps even veto) the decision or reduce the economic and political costs by offering financial compensation or by increasing political cooperation in an attempt to re-boost regime legitimacy.

Summing up, black knights can indeed help authoritarian leaders deal with the many challenges that may arise during insecure election periods. However, just like attempts to promote democracy may have unintended consequences or simply not be strong enough to spur change, so does black knight election bolstering not guarantee that the incumbent will always emerge victorious. Sometimes interference triggers anger and defiance amongst the electorate and the elites, making them turn against, not support, the incumbent regime. At other times, election bolstering does work according to intentions but is simply crowded out by more powerful domestic or international drivers of change. That is, a wide range of conditional factors are likely to shape the degree to which black knight election bolstering actually works. In the case-studies later in this article I discuss a number of these factors.

WHY OFFER BLACK KNIGHT ELECTION BOLSTERING

Not all authoritarian regimes that hold popular elections are privileged with black knight bolstering, and not all autocrats that are granted external protection will receive the same degree of support. What determines such differences? What spurs external actors to take on the role of black knights and come to the rescue of authoritarian regimes?

External actors, be it autocracies or democracies, will not spend resources on bolstering an autocrat unless there is something to gain from it. Gains associated with maintenance of particular regimes must be understood broadly, meaning that both direct benefits connected to incumbent success as well as evasion of undesired side effects connected to incumbent failure are likely to shape an external actor's assessment of costs and benefits. In particular two factors weigh heavily in these calculations: 1) the geopolitical and economic value attached to the incumbent leadership; and 2) the probability that a successor institutes undesired regime-change. Whether it is the former, the latter, or a combination that makes an external actor engage in election bolstering the likelihood of actually doing so increases if a third condition is present as well: 3) elections are highly contested and there is a real danger that the incumbent will lose power.

As for the first factor, external actors will be more inclined to stand up for autocrats if a good relationship to the country's leadership is deemed crucial for strategic purposes such as counterbalancing other powers, gaining access to strategic locations or maintaining military bases (cf., Levitsky and Way 2010). Likewise, economic conditions such as favorable market access or dependency on the import of vital goods like oil and gas can be a strong impetus for external actors to protect authoritarian incumbents. Often, such privileged relations between an external actor and a particular country will survive leader-changes and even regime-changes. However, sometimes a change of power also leads to a reevaluation of foreign relations (cf., Tolstrup 2013). Due to this uncertainty of what will follow in case of leadership change and regime breakdown, external actors will often have strong incentives to protect particularly acquiescent partners.

This leads me to the second motivational factor. If the external actor is certain that electoral defeat of the incumbent will lead to radical, and undesired, regime change then black knight engagement may be provided even to the autocrats that do not behave in a particular acquiescent way. While Western democratic external actors may take on the role as black knights out of fear that electoral defeat of an authoritarian incumbent will bring radical Islamists to power, non-democratic external actors are likely to bolster an incumbent if authoritarian breakdown and democratization is the anticipated outcome simply because there is a risk that such events will spill over onto the borders of other authoritarian regimes, and perhaps also those of the black knight itself. History is rich with examples of such diffusion processes, and there is plenty of evidence showing that autocrats truly fear such developments and do their utmost to shore up against them (see, e.g., Herd 2005; Colombo 2012).

Though either of these motivational factors may be enough to trigger black knight support, a third condition raises the probability of intervention even further. As external actors are unlikely to protect all of their favored autocrats with equal strength or necessarily try to prevent undesired regime-change wherever it seems pertinent they will prefer investing resources where it is most needed and perceived to be most effective. In cases where the opposition appears strong and the

outcome of the elections is indeed uncertain, authoritarian incumbents will not only be more open to receive external support but it is also more likely that black knight bolstering will actually be the thing that tips the balance in favor of the incumbent (Tolstrup 2014, 258).

RUSSIAN ELECTION BOLSTERING IN UKRAINE, BELARUS AND MOLDOVA

In this section, I analyse four cases of Russian interventions in elections in three countries in its immediate neighbourhood: Ukraine (2004), Belarus (2006), and Moldova (contrasting the 2005 and 2009 elections). In the literature on external actors, Russia is often regarded as the black knight *par excellence* and therefore constitutes a particularly advantageous starting point for exploring the causal mechanisms of election bolstering. With regards to the specific countries and elections, they are chosen as they display illuminating variation on the three explanatory factors highlighted above. One could argue that it does not make sense to compare controlled elections in a consolidated Belarusian autocracy with the competitive voting in a soft authoritarian Moldova. But the point here is exactly that elections in all non-democratic regimes, no matter how “autocratic” they are, are points in time in which incumbents are particularly vulnerable. Perhaps leaders of entrenched dictatorships need not fear the ballot itself, but there is still the risk that vote fraud and repression will trigger popular demonstrations, elite defection, or increased pressure from democracy promoters. As Table 2 shows, the different combinations of the explanatory factors produced various responses from Russia, sometimes leading to very strong election support (Ukraine 2004 and Belarus 2006), sometimes to moderate support (Moldova 2009), and sometimes even to punishment of, not assistance to, the incumbent regime (Moldova 2005). Note also that the compared cases vary on the other outcome of interest – persistence or breakdown of the authoritarian regime. Not surprisingly, black knight election bolstering does not guarantee authoritarian incumbents a favourable outcome. As I show in the case-studies, other factors, such as bad economic performance, a strong opposition and forceful Western intervention may crowd out and thus diminish the black knight effect. However, I also show that wherever provided Russian election bolstering did bring incumbents substantial advantages, and it did help them alleviate at least some of the challenges that arose during these elections.

--- Table 2 about here ---

Presidential elections in Ukraine in 2004

The prime example to date of Russian election bolstering is the massive interference in the Ukrainian presidential elections of October and November 2004 – the vote that eventually led to the Orange Revolution. All three conditions stipulated above seem to have been decisive in driving Russia’s decision to offer its support.

First of all, there were several indications that President Viktor Kuchma, who had gradually pushed Ukraine closer to authoritarianism, would not be able to successfully transfer power to his chosen successor, Viktor Yanukovich. As elections drew closer, many regime supporters defected (Kuzio

2005a, 34), the democratic opposition united behind a common candidate, Viktor Yushchenko, civil society groups intensified their activities, and protest rallies around the country attracted larger and larger crowds (Wilson 2005, 74–75). In addition, external pressure for change from the United States and the EU intensified (Tolstrup 2014, 156–160).

Second, the 2004 elections were taking place in a period marked not only by the historical EU enlargement into the recently democratized East-Central Europe, but also by a wave of electoral protests so far bringing down dictators in Croatia, Serbia and Georgia (Bunce and Wolchik 2011). There was a strong pro-democratic drive in these years, making it highly likely that regime change in a large and important state such as Ukraine would automatically trigger emulation efforts elsewhere in the post-Soviet space, possibly including Russia itself.

Finally, Russia had good geopolitical and economic reasons to defend the existing regime. During the 2000s, President Kuchma had put a brake on rapprochements with the West and willingly facilitated exclusive business deals for Russian companies with close connections to the inner circles in the Kremlin. In return, Moscow provided stable energy supplies at predictable prices, favourable trade conditions, and consistent political support (Tolstrup 2014, 150–153). With vital opposition forces heralding European integration and economic reforms, the Kremlin saw no alternative to securing the survival of authoritarianism if it was to maintain Ukraine as an acquiescent partner.

Russia pursued election bolstering in several important ways. First of all, Moscow's favoured candidate, Yanukovych, was given substantial political support in an attempt to help him signal invincibility. Putin, who was extremely popular not only at home but across the post-Soviet space, held numerous high-profile meetings with Yanukovych, each time praising his political skills and portraying his premiership as the vehicle behind the country's impressive growth rates (see overview of chronology in Åslund and McFaul 2006; Petrov and Ryabov 2006, 147; Balmaceda 2008, 30). The endorsement campaign climaxed only five days before the elections, when Putin praised the presidential candidate in a speech on Ukrainian national TV, and even calmed concerned Ukrainian voters during an one-and-a-half-hour-long Q&A broadcast (Åslund 2009, 182–183).

Second, the Kremlin further tried to boost the popularity of Yanukovych by helping organize and finance his campaign, and by making it possible for him to pursue populist policies. Tapings of the Security Services of Ukraine (SBU) has testified that in late July 2004, the Kremlin, along with some of Russia's largest companies that benefitted from the privileged access to the Kuchma regime, committed to co-financing Yanukovych's campaign (Petrov and Ryabov 2006, 152; Åslund 2009, 170, 182–183). Various estimates have been made of the total Russian contribution, ranging from \$50m to \$600m (for an overview, see Wilson 2005, 118–121). No matter what the exact numbers were, Russia helped ensure that Yanukovych had enough money to spend an enormous sum on advertising, smear campaigns and bribing of officials (Kuzio 2005a, 40). At around the same time, Kremlin-affiliated political technologists arrived in Kiev to help run Yanukovych's campaign (*Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 22 Sep. 2004). Prominent members of this group such as Gleb Pavlovsky, Marat Gelman, Vyacheslav Nikonov, and Sergei Markov appeared frequently on

Ukrainian and Russian TV, slandering Yushchenko and praising Yanukovych (Åslund 2009, 183). To further boost the popularity of the pro-regime candidate, Putin declared that VAT on oil exports to Ukraine would be removed. This immediately lowered petrol costs by an amount equivalent to \$800m, helping Yanukovych raise the resources to lubricate voters by doubling pensions just two months before the first round of the elections (Petrov and Ryabov 2006, 150). This move, for the first time, brought Yanukovych into the lead in the presidential race (Wilson 2005, 89–90).

Third, the Kremlin repeatedly attacked the democratic opposition in an attempt to weaken its standing with the electorate and through targeted repression force its leaders to back down. Apart from the general scolding from Russian officials and the reproduction of the incumbent regime's smear campaigns, Moscow also played a dominant role in attempts to eliminate front figures of the opposition. In September, Russian prosecutors out of the blue reopened a case of embezzlement charges against the second-most popular opposition leader and later prime minister, Yulia Tymoshenko, sending a request to Interpol for her arrest. In addition, speculations exist that Russia was involved in several assassination attempts on Yushchenko (Kuzio 2005b, 498; Wilson 2005, 23, 77, 96–104).

Fourth, through a “no alternative to the incumbent” policy, Russia signalled to both regime insiders and voters that Moscow was ready to invest considerable resources in a successful power transfer and that alternation in power would carry significant costs. During the latter part of 2004, the Kremlin made a number of political and economic concessions to show what was to gain from maintaining good relations with Russia. In July, it was announced that the otherwise often “politically volatile” gas prices would remain stable throughout the year (Åslund 2009, 170, 182–183), and in August, along with the removal of VAT on oil exports, registration procedures for the large number of Ukrainians working in Russia were eased considerably (Wilson 2005, 89–90).

Finally, the Kremlin sought to influence developments in-between the two election rounds as well as in the heated aftermath when hundreds of thousands of demonstrators took to the streets in Kiev. Before the run-off vote between Yanukovych and Yushchenko, President Putin met with Yanukovych and allegedly advised Yanukovych to use “smarter” rigging by inflating turnout in trusted regions instead of focusing on falsifying the votes cast. This was indeed the strategy followed in the marred run-off elections a week later (Petrov and Ryabov 2006, 157). In contrast to Western observers, the Russia-controlled CIS election observation mission fully endorsed the elections (Fawn 2006, 1144), and Putin himself tried to legitimize the vote by congratulating Yanukovych on his victory even before the official results were announced. And when public protests swirled, the Russian president advised Kuchma to stop demonstrations by either introducing a state of emergency or transferring power to Yanukovych to let him do the dirty work (Wilson 2005, 95, 136). Only in the last minute, with armed troops heading towards the centre of Kiev, did the EU and the United States succeed in pressuring Kuchma and Yanukovych to refrain from using violence and definitively accept the EU-brokered compromise that, despite Russian efforts to derail it, had been reached a few days earlier. A month later, new elections were held in which opposition candidate Yushchenko came out as the winner (Tolstrup 2014, 160–162).

Summing up, Russia offered substantial election bolstering throughout all phases of the 2004 elections in Ukraine. But with such strong external backing, why was the regime not capable of securing the desired outcome? Obviously, either the black knight support had unintended consequences or it was simply outweighed by other factors. Most likely, Russia's blatant interference did anger and harden a proportion of Ukrainian voters. But note that popular support for Yanukovich was growing in the last months before the elections (Wilson 2005, 89–90) and support for EU and NATO integration dropped (Sushko and Prystayko 2006, 125), and this at a time when Russian interference was peaking. Rather, it seems to be the case that Russian election bolstering did help Yanukovich some of the way. However, the combination of a fractious elite coalition, a well-resourced and united domestic opposition in control of independent media and an independent national election monitoring organization, massive and persistent demonstrations, and not least a strong Western response at the right time meant that the authoritarian regime in Ukraine was put under immense pressure (McFaul 2007) – a pressure that not even the potent Russian intervention could shield it against.

Presidential elections in Belarus in 2006

Following the Orange breakthrough in Ukraine in late 2004, neighbouring Belarus entered a period of political suspense. After more than a decade of dictatorial rule under Alyaksandr Lukashenka, the democratic opposition showed a hitherto unseen activity and unity, hoping to use the March 2006 presidential elections to foster change, if not through the ballot box then perhaps through popular protests. However, not only the opposition but also President Lukashenka had learned a lesson or two from the revolutionary events unfolding in Ukraine and elsewhere in the neighbourhood. During 2005 and 2006, Lukashenka stepped up repression, trying to prevent a colour revolution scenario from playing out in the streets of Minsk (Burger and Minchuk 2006, 29, 33). Throughout the election period, Russia supported these efforts through a committed strategy of election bolstering.

From the outset, the main motivation for Russia's intervention was to pursue damage control; making sure, first of all, that the wave of popular protests flooding the post-Soviet space was effectively stopped before it hit Russia as well. Even though the Belarusian regime was perceived to be much more robust than Ukraine in 2004, there was a genuine fear among the Russian elite that even consolidated autocracies were at risk and, hence, that not only was yet another regime breakdown likely, but in case it materialized, it would also produce catastrophic demonstration effects elsewhere in the region (Herd 2005). The imminent threat of yet another colour revolution seemed to have trumped the concern that the Kremlin was having with Lukashenka only showing moderate acquiescence during the last few years (Tolstrup 2014, 211–213).²

Russia's election bolstering contained several elements. First, Moscow tried to boost Lukashenka's standing with the Belarusian voters in an attempt to secure a comfortable victory for the incumbent. For example, Lukashenka was backed up by the official Russian media, still widely watched in Belarus, and several top Russian politicians praised him and emphasized a "no alternative to the incumbent" position by which good bilateral relations would be preserved only if the incumbent was re-elected (Trenin 2006, 81; Ambrosio 2009, 115–116). Alongside, the Kremlin's principal

spin doctor, Gleb Pavlovsky, who had also been in Kyiv in 2004, frequently travelled to Belarus around the time of the elections, and he, together with several other Russian political technologists, seemed to have been involved in planning and co-running the president's campaign (Silitski 2007, 11).

Second, Moscow bolstered Lukashenka financially. Russian businesses profiting from the close connections to the Belarusian dictator provided ample financial assistance to his campaign (Kononczuk 2008, 37), and Putin promised that gas prices would not be raised beyond the heavily subsidized 2005-level of \$48 per 1000cbm, this even at a time when prices in neighboring Russian regions were raised beyond that level. With these fiscal injections Lukashenka was able to hike public wages shortly before the vote and thereby polish his image as the guarantor of economic stability (*RFE/RL Newslines*, 8 April 2006; Marples 2007, 95).

Third, the Kremlin collaborated with the regime in discrediting and harassing the democratic opposition. The Russian FSB cooperated closely with the Belarusian KGB in targeting opposition activists, and Russian publishing houses were ordered to consequently shut out the Belarusian independent press, which was desperately trying to print their material across the border. Moreover, once the Belarusian incumbent secured his re-election with little trustworthy 82.6 percent and mass protests broke out in central Minsk, Russian media reproduced the official line, characterizing opposition demonstrators as extremist bullies sponsored by the West (Silitski 2007, 11–12). A poll conducted at the time by the independent agency ISEPS indicated that the biased information campaign was quite effective as only 20.4 % of Belarusians approved of the protests, while 46% disapproved (Silitski 2006, 145).

Fourth, the Belarusian regime was consistently protected against Western attempts to promote democracy and de-legitimize Lukashenka's autocratic rule. As the rhetoric of the West intensified in the aftermath of the Orange revolution, Putin and the Russian foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, stood up for the Belarusian incumbent, sharply rejecting accusations in bilateral meetings (*RFE/RL Newslines*, 22 April 2005) and in international forums, such as the Council of Europe (Ambrosio 2009, 121). Simultaneously, Lukashenka's strategy of portraying the democracy promotion of the West as attempts to overthrow him and take over the country was intentionally reinforced through statements by various Kremlin-controlled people and institutions: be it when the Russian FSB made it public that Western attempts to use terrorist organizations to finance the opposition had been "exposed" (Silitski 2007, 11); when Russian ministers warned the West not to meddle in the elections or use the OSCE to produce an assessment "coloured by ideology" (*RFE/RL Newslines*, 13 March 2006); or when the Russian Duma issued a special resolution in objection to "the disrespect shown by some Western states for the Belarusians' choice" (Kononczuk 2008, 38).

Summing up, Russia engaged in extensive election bolstering in Belarus in 2006 primarily out of fear of undesired spill-over effects. This time the operation proved successful. President Lukashenka held on to power in spite of bad economic performance, Western pressure, potent opposition activity, and a strong region-wide democracy drive. It is likely that the incumbent could singlehandedly have orchestrated the crack-down on the post-election protests in Minsk and conceivably the Belarusian dictatorship was strong enough to prevail in spite of mounting internal

pressure. But what the above does tell us is that Russian financial assistance did make it easier for Lukashenka to satisfy his core voters, it did help him polish his own appearance while discrediting that of the opposition, and it definitely did help shield him against Western criticism. All together this meant that the Belarusian dictator was able to uphold his image as a competent and legitimate statesman and that to a degree that would have been much more difficult had Moscow not intervened on his side.

Parliamentary elections in Moldova in 2005 and 2009

In Moldova, Russia pursued two diametrically opposed election strategies towards the same regime within a timespan of only four years. During both the parliamentary elections in 2005 and 2009, Moldova's Communist party, the PCRM, was governing, and its leader, Vladimir Voronin, served as president. But only in 2009 did Russia try to bolster President Voronin's regime. The theoretical argument for when external actors behave as black knights neatly explains why.

At the time of the 2005 elections, the Communists had been in power for four years. During this period, President Voronin gradually turned Moldova into a soft authoritarian regime, and he deliberately expanded geopolitical and economic cooperation with Russia in return for financial and political support for his authoritarian state-building project (Tolstrup 2014, 179–181). But the warm relations turned cold in late 2003, when the Moldovan president – after intense Western pressure – declined to sign the Russian-drafted peace plan, the Kozak Memorandum. The plan was to finally end the frozen conflict between the Russian-backed breakaway-region Transnistria and Moldova proper, but it also included terms that if implemented would increase Russian military and political control over the country (Löwenhardt 2004, 108–110). Moscow soon decided to punish the Moldovan regime by withdrawing its support – even turning to punishments before the March 2005 parliamentary elections (Tolstrup 2014, 223–224). For Russia, the decision to not provide election bolstering was never a risky strategy. The PCRM faced a weak, fragmented and somewhat discredited democratic opposition (*Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 3 March 2005), the EU and the US were not actively pushing for change, and the Moldovan economy was booming. Consequently, the risk of authoritarian breakdown or that Moldova would add to the wave of popular protests in the post-Soviet space was not high (Crowther 2007, 286). As expected, the PCRM won the elections despite Russian punishments, but this time with less than a two-thirds majority.

With the global financial crisis taking its toll on public support for the regime, a powerful democratic opposition began to emerge. President Voronin desperately tried to reinstall support before the 2009 parliamentary elections. Gradually, the *modus vivendi* between Chisinau and Moscow was re-established. Russia put an end to all of its punitive actions and even came around and gave full support to the incumbent in the heated months around the April 2009 vote (Tolstrup 2014, 225–227).

Though less extensive and less comprehensive in comparison to the Ukrainian and Belarusian cases, many of the same elements figured. First, several attempts were made to boost the popularity of the regime. One example is the high-profile meeting between Voronin and Russia's new president,

Dimitri Medvedev held in mid-March. After the meeting, it was signalled from both sides that Voronin had helped bring negotiations closer to solving one of the small country's greatest problems; the Transnistrian conundrum. In return Russia promised to distribute 50,000 tons of fuel oil as humanitarian aid to Moldova's farmers, the voter base of the PCRM, just in time for spring sowing (*RFE/RL Newslines*, 18 and 19 March 2009). The meeting was set up to portray President Voronin as a skilled leader capable of securing political and economic benefits to his core supporters at a time when the economic crisis had hit the Moldovan agricultural production hard.

Second, Russia overtly sought to legitimize the flawed election results as well as the repressive events following it. Even before the electoral commission announced that the Communists had won a comfortable victory Russian President Medvedev congratulated Voronin on his electoral victory (Rodkiewicz 2009, 67), and the Russian Duma declared that what had in fact been a manipulated and biased process was "in full correspondence with democratic and legal norms" (Korosteleva 2010, 1280). The opposition, however, cried foul, and large demonstrations with demands for repeat elections swelled the streets, initiating what has been termed the "Twitter Revolution." As demonstrations grew larger, and the parliament and presidential palace were stormed and set on fire, President Voronin ordered police and special forces to forcefully end the protests (Mungiu-Pippidi and Munteanu 2009). On the same day, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov officially encouraged Voronin to "take measures" to stop the demonstrators, and throughout the heated days, Russian media supported the regime's framing of the revolutionary events as a coup d'état instigated by neighbouring Romania (*Eastweek*, April 8, 2009).

With the electoral victory secured and protests effectively muzzled the PCRM moved to regain the presidency. However, with one parliamentary seat short, the Communists could not singlehandedly elect the president. Voronin probably thought that he, as in 2005, could buy off the last necessary vote from the ranks of his opponents. But the opposition stood firm. And with the EU and the Council of Europe, both highly popular among the electorate, monitoring the situation closely, Voronin was eventually forced to call new parliamentary elections (Rodkiewicz 2009, 62; Renner 2010, 35).

Russia again threw its weight behind the Communists, this time truly fearing that the pro-European alliance could win power in Moldova. In a high-profile set-up a month before the elections, the Moldovan incumbent met with the popular Russian tandem of power, Prime Minister Putin and President Medvedev. It was promised that if the PCRM re-won power, a \$500m loan to Moldova's hard-pressed economy would be disbursed. Additionally, \$20m were immediately donated as a symbolic gesture to overhaul the burned parliament. Taking Moldova's small economy into consideration (GDP in 2009 was around \$5.5bn), the envisioned loan was a very large sum. Voronin took the opportunity to promise voters that the money would be spent on repairing and building roads, gas grids, irrigation networks, and houses (*RFE/RL Newslines*, 29 June 2009). Later on, this "no alternative to the incumbent" policy was further strengthened when the Russian government publicly promised to remove all barriers to Moldovan agricultural exports, but only if the Communists remained in power (Rodkiewicz 2009, 67–68). Thus, Moscow sent a clear signal to the Moldovan electorate: Only the PCRM could secure the financial backing so crucial for the survival of the ailing economy. Though one could expect such blatant interference to backfire, a survey from July 2009, when the repeat elections were held, showed that both Putin and Medvedev

garnered extremely high trust-ratings with Moldovan voters (77.9 % and 73.4 % respectively) (Tudoroiu 2011, 249).

The support, however, was not enough. Because of intense pressure from the EU, the Communists did not dare to substantially bias the repeat elections in late July 2009 (Tolstrup 2014, 232). Consequently, the pro-democratic bloc outperformed the Communists, but only by a slim margin. Moscow again stood out as the loser, but as in Ukraine, the Moldovan incumbent actually came very close to pulling the trick. Had he succeeded in buying off a few parliamentary votes, new elections would not have been necessary and the PCRM might very well have been able to reclaim power in spite of increasing pressure from the EU and the Council of Europe over the brutal clampdown during the “Twitter Revolution.” As in the other cases, Russian bolstering helped solidify the Moldovan economy at a time when it was in a slump, it helped legitimize the repressive actions taken against the opposition and it deliberately sought to boost the popularity of the incumbent at a time when a large part of the electorate was truly fed up with the Communists and their governing style.

CONCLUSION

Sometimes, authoritarian leaders successfully conduct elections and win votes with a large margin. At other times, elections spin out of control and the incumbent is voted out or forced from power. In this article, I have argued that if we are to better understand the puzzle of authoritarian elections, we need to pay more attention to black knight election bolstering. Support from the outside can help solidify and legitimize authoritarian regimes, making it more likely that they will deal successfully with the internal and external challenges that often arise during elections.

To illuminate how and why black knight election bolstering takes place, a series of case studies of Russian interventions in elections in authoritarian regimes in the post-Soviet region were conducted. The cases demonstrate two important points. First, acting as a black knight is not a given, not even for an authoritarian great power like Russia. The 2005 elections in Moldova clearly attest to this. Rather, an external actor bases its interventionist policy on a rational estimation of the likelihood of regime breakdown and costs associated with it. For Russia, the main motivation for engaging in election bolstering seems to be the “Russia-friendliness”, i.e., the acquiescence, of the incumbent. Whether Russia would also support a non-acquiescent incumbent in the neighbourhood if the risk of authoritarian breakdown and subsequent democratization was high remains to be seen. So far, “Russia-friendliness” and authoritarianism has gone hand in hand in the post-Soviet region. Second, when black knights do decide to engage in election bolstering, they can indeed offer vital support to authoritarian incumbents. Even though black knight bolstering was not enough to secure the authoritarian regimes in Ukraine in 2004 and Moldova in 2009, nor necessarily the only factor behind Lukashenka’s success in Belarus in 2006, the case studies indicate that the Russian interventions did help the incumbents deal with at least some of the challenges connected with the elections.

With that said, a note of caution is needed. With this article, I have taken the first step towards a more systematic analysis of black knight election bolstering. This also means that empirical breadth and depth has been sacrificed to make space for theoretical and analytical innovativeness. Future research must therefore strive at more thoroughly documenting the exact effects of the different types of black knight interventions in various cases across time and space. Here the theoretical claims have only been held up against the actions of one (authoritarian) external actor in one region of the world. But only if we systematically include this external factor on par with other determinants of authoritarian stability and breakdown will we be able to understand what makes the electoral authoritarian regimes endure and what makes them break down.

Table 1: Instruments of black knight election bolstering

Signalling Invincibility	Elite Defection	Opposition Strength	Popular Protests	Democracy Promotion
Campaign assistance	Financial resources for co-optation	Reproduction of regime propaganda	Financial resources for soothing popular dissatisfaction	Framing of criticism as non-objective and illegitimate interference
Financial resources for populist policies and actual vote-buying	Signal of a “No alternative to the incumbent” policy	Signal of a “No alternative to the incumbent” policy	Endorsement of crack-downs	Attempt to veto the introduction of election-related sanctions
Technical assistance on election fraud		Security-related assistance for crack-downs	Security-related assistance for crack-downs	Financial compensation in case of opportunity costs and/or sanctions
Endorsement of flawed elections		Technical assistance on restrictive legislation		

Table 2: Russian interventions in elections in Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova

	Ukraine 2004	Belarus 2006	Moldova 2005	Moldova 2009
Acquiescence of incumbent	High	Moderate	Moderate	High
Fear of undesired regime change and spill-over effects	High	High	Moderate	Low
Incumbency strength	Weak/Moderate	High	Moderate	Moderate
<i>Election bolstering</i>	<i>Strong</i>	<i>Strong</i>	-	<i>Moderate</i>
<i>Election outcome</i>	<i>Failure</i>	<i>Success</i>	<i>Success</i>	<i>Failure</i>

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¹ Originally, the term black knight was coined to describe foreign patrons that undermine the effectiveness of economic sanctions by undergirding the targeted state (Hufbauer, Schott, and Elliott 1990, 12).

² Under Putin, Russia began to roll back the most excessive subsidization schemes while at the same time demanding a more lax attitude towards Russian investments and asset takeovers in Belarus. Lukashenka was fighting tooth and nail to preserve his country's generous privileges and defend his personal control over the Belarusian economy.