# Data Secrecy and Data Manipulation in Russia

**Journal Issue**

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**Publication date:**
2024-06-27

**Permanent link:**
https://doi.org/10.3929/ethz-b-000681149



**Originally published in:**
Russian Analytical Digest (RAD) 314

No. 314 27 June 2024


www.css.ethz.ch/en/publications/rad.html

## DATA SECRECY AND DATA MANIPULATION IN RUSSIA



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ANALYSIS

# Russia's Arc of Secrecy in the Twenty-First Century

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DOI: 10.3929/ethz-b-000681149

## Abstract

Russia has returned to a system of secretive rule. Compared to the Soviet-era "regime of secrecy," official secrecy in modern Russia shows similarities and differences. A similarity is the secrecy applied to Kremlin politics. Data censorship is less comprehensive than in Soviet times, it has been spreading in military affairs and foreign economic relations. Overall, there is less censorship and more disinformation. An underlying factor is that information-sharing among citizens has been decentralized by digital technologies.

In August 1999, Russia's ailing President Boris Yeltsin needed a new prime minister, the fifth in 15 months. He appointed Vladimir Putin, then director of the FSB (domestic security police). Putin took office at a critical moment. A few days earlier, Russia's internal war against Chechen separatists had spread into Dagestan. A few days later, apartment buildings in Moscow and two provincial cities would be bombed, causing many casualties. Responding to these events, Prime Minister Putin mobilized Russian opinion in support of war against the insurgents. At the end of the year, Yeltsin resigned the presidency and Putin assumed his duties. Standing for election as president in March 2000, Putin won a large majority.

At the end of the 1990s, Russia's political order was more transparent than it had been at any time in its history. The lives and actions of the Russian elite were largely open to scrutiny. Laws set limits on state secrecy and made government officials answerable to private citizens and to the courts in ways that, while familiar in the West, were entirely new to Russia. Russian citizens had access to an unprecedented range of media sources, foreign as well as domestic. They could travel, study, and work abroad without attracting suspicion.

Even so, where the light shone, there were also shadows. One example is the apartment bombings that sparked both the Second Chechen War and the wave of national feeling that carried Putin to electoral victory. While Chechen separatists were blamed for the bombings, the FSB played a role behind the scenes that has never been convincingly documented. Other examples are the political murders that started in the 1990s and continued from time to time with, at best, no more than superficial investigation.

Since then, Russia has returned to secretive rule. This was a gradual process. The first and second Putin administrations (2000–2008) saw measures to widen military secrecy by penalizing open-source intelligence gathering (OSINT) and the sharing of OSINT with foreigners. Financial privileges associated with secret work were restored and budget secrecy began to return.

Under the Medvedev administration (2008–2012), Putin stepped down from the presidency and became prime minister. During this time, the government announced some positive initiatives: a campaign against corruption, increased public oversight of the security agencies, and accession to the Open Government Partnership for transparent budgeting and forecasting overseen by the IMF. But the government also took an important step in the other direction, restoring the legal status of the "secret departments" overseen by the FSB in all agencies and companies involved in secret government business.

With Putin's return to the presidency in 2012, Russia withdrew from the Open Government Partnership and took more steps toward greater secrecy. State news media were brought under the government's editorial control. Independent media suffered harassment or were bought up by government supporters. The work of scholars whose investigations contradicted the government's narrative of Russia in the twentieth century was increasingly criminalized. Important nongovernmental sources of independent information, such as the Levada Center, a polling organization, and Memorial, a human rights group, were stigmatized as "foreign agents." The same fate befell the Anti-Corruption Foundation (FBK) set up by Alexei Navalny. While the government was against corruption in theory, in practice it protected its supporters and targeted only opponents. Military and budget secrecy became more encompassing. Data secrecy could not be applied comprehensively, as it had been in Soviet times, but it increasingly came to apply to those data of which government agencies were the main source, especially those related to budget spending and foreign relations. The strictest secrecy was applied to the decisions to invade Georgia (2008), Crimea and Eastern Ukraine (2014), and Ukraine again (2022).

There have been various attempts to find external triggers for Russia's return to secretive rule. One candidate is the world price of oil. Oil prices rose steeply in the 2000s, giving the Russian state easier access to oil revenues. This might have led politicians to lose inter-

est in other sources of economic improvement, such as competitive markets and media freedom. Consistently with this, the rise in oil prices was followed, within a few years, by the rise of anti-corruption campaigners such as Alexei Navalny. Perhaps government officials and the wealthy people with whom they were connected found an increasing need for secrecy to hide their assets and transactions.

Another candidate as a trigger for Russia's return to secretive rule is the Western sanctions imposed on Russia after its invasion of Crimea and Eastern Ukraine in 2014: because of these measures, the Russian government became more interested in hiding legal and illegal transactions from international monitors.

Without completely discounting such explanations, it seems beyond doubt that Russia was already returning to secretive government before the annexation of Crimea, and before anti-corruption campaigning took off. There was an underlying factor at work: the determination of the military and security elite, following Vladimir Putin's lead, to centralize authority and limit challenges from the new business class, the regions, and the electors.

How does secrecy in Putin's Russia compare with the Soviet era? The Wagner Group mutiny of June 23–24, 2023, illustrates both change and continuity.

First, what has changed? The uprising was announced on social media by Yevgeny Prigozhin, commander of the Wagner Group mercenaries fighting for Russia in Ukraine. He denounced the reasons for the war as lies and demanded the handover of Russia's defense minister, Sergei Shoigu, and its chief of the general staff, Valery Gerasimov, to his custody. As the world watched, the insurgents occupied the headquarters of the Southern Military District in Rostov-on-Don and moved along the highway toward Moscow. Putin denounced Prigozhin's moves as treason and positioned regular troops to defend the capital. Armed clashes, in which regular soldiers were killed and air force helicopters and planes were shot down, were filmed and broadcast around the world, some in real time. While traditional print and broadcast media played a role, it was secondary to that of social media. There, ordinary participants and bystanders shared their photos and videos, to be picked up, interpreted, filtered, and reshared by open-source intelligence analysts.

All of this was unimaginable in Soviet times. If the same events had taken place under Brezhnev or Stalin, the world might not have found out for decades. Before the 1990s, there were no mobile phones or internet. Journalists and ordinary citizens could look for a landline, but in the Soviet Union there was no dial-up telephony between provincial towns, let alone across international borders, so calls could be placed only with the help of a human telephonist. In the Soviet Union, most people relied for their news on the state press, radio, or TV. These were highly centralized, tightly controlled, and strictly censored. Travelers could tell tales, but cross-border travel was a rarity by modern standards. Rumors circulated but were unverifiable and were often hard to tell from disinformation or provocation. In short, most major events became widely known, against the wishes of the Soviet authorities, only if the consequences spilled over foreign borders (as in the case of the Chernobyl disaster) or if foreign eyewitnesses were directly involved and returned to tell their stories.

By contrast, the way the Prigozhin mutiny ended shows how Russia has returned to the Soviet past. Behind the scenes, negotiations allegedly brokered by President Aliaksandr Lukashenka of Belarus concluded the rebellion. No one outside the Kremlin knows exactly what was agreed between Putin, Lukashenka, Prigozhin, and their respective circles, or whether the terms were ever adhered to—in part or whole—by anyone on either side. After that, as in Soviet times, leading participants reappeared or vanished without explanation. The cause of the plane crash in which Prigozhin and other Wagner leaders died two months later remains undocumented. A conspirative silence reigns.

Secrecy in Russia today is thus much the same as before, although different. The difference is that the old regime of secrecy was all-encompassing. It was developed for an economy owned by the state, and for information-sharing technologies with high fixed costs that were conducive to centralized monitoring and censorship. These were the postal service and sorting office, the printing press, radio and TV transmitters, and the telephone exchange. Regular citizens could pass information from person to person only in workshops, bars, and shop queues, which were open to eavesdropping, or by letters and phone calls, which could be monitored as they passed through centralized hubs. Under Soviet rule, aware of government surveillance and fearful of the costs of indiscretion, ordinary people learned to be as tight-lipped as bureaucrats bound by the official code of secrecy.

The design of communist states was an effective match for the old world of centralized information-sharing. Already during the Cold War, however, communication technologies were developing in ways that began to subvert the old world. Examples are photocopying and long-distance dial-up telephony. Both facilitated private information-sharing. Both became commonplace in Western societies in the 1970s but were restricted in the Soviet Union.

Two things overturned the old world. One was the collapse of state ownership, which privatized and decentralized economic and political business. The other was the digital revolution, which did the same for information. Today, information-sharing has been decentralized to the point where most people in the world have a pocket computer networked not only to major news

networks, but also to social media and to most friends and relatives. A state that controls only the printing presses and the broadcast studios can no longer hope to monopolize public information.

It is sometimes said that knowledge is power. More specifically, knowledge dispels uncertainty, and uncertainty is disempowering. The value of comprehensive secrecy to the rulers of the Soviet Union was that it disempowered most citizens. It did this by keeping them in a state of uncertainty about what was happening, who was making it happen, why, and with what results. But secrecy is not the only way to achieve this. The other way to spread uncertainty is by disinformation.

During the Cold War, disinformation was the Soviet state's instrument of choice for competing beyond its frontiers with Western media that could not be suppressed. False news stories such as that HIV/AIDS was a U.S. experiment gone wrong, or that Martin Luther King was murdered by the FBI, were calculated to spread distrust of the West and support for anti-Western ideas. Naturally, disinformation could also be exploited at home. On home ground, however, as long as comprehensive censorship remained effective, the Soviet Union's false narratives never had to compete on equal terms with any other view of the world or its history.

Now that Russian citizens have easy access to the world's information, much that the authorities would like to suppress cannot be kept out of the public sphere. Instead, citizens who are curious enough to look for it are shielded from it in two ways. First, internet searches are systematically pointed toward the state's mouthpieces, which provide disinformation. Then, if citizens persist in looking elsewhere, the inconvenient truths may be available, but they are crowded out by the flood of lies, myths, and rumors that the regime and its supporters feed into public discourse through social media.

I began my research career during the Cold War, when the archives of the Soviet period were completely closed. To study the Soviet Union's economic history meant to sift through mountains of censored publications, dominated by a superimposed official narrative and the tedious repetition of officially approved formulae. My work was to find and set aside the rare nuggets of possibly informative data. One month, one nugget. Another month, perhaps another nugget—and, with luck, the value of two nuggets when combined might be greater than when taken separately. We did not know it by the name it carries today, but this was the laborious art of open-source intelligence gathering.

With the 1990s, the Soviet state collapsed, and the study of Russia, its economy and history, became normal. A window opened for scholars to gain access to everyday documents. Today, this window has partly closed. Power is again exercised behind a Kremlin wall of secrecy. Large parts of the Russian economy, especially its defense sector, its strategic industries, their foreign links, and their funding, have been classified as secret. Information about other aspects is not secret, but the skill and patience required to search for the golden nuggets that reveal traces of the secret sphere are once again in demand.

What are the true costs of Russia's war effort? What is the scale of war losses, and where are they being most felt? Are living standards rising or falling? Is Russia's social fabric being maintained? Today, the study of Russia from the outside is not exactly back where I started, but it has a remarkably familiar feel.

*About the Author*

*Mark Harrison* is Emeritus Professor of Economics at the University of Warwick. He is a Fellow of the British Academy and of the Academy of Social Science and a Research Fellow of the Centre for Economic Policy Research.

*Further Reading*

This analysis draws material from Harrison (2023), of which Chapter 1, "Secret Leviathan," provides a short description and history of the Soviet "regime of secrecy"; Chapter 7, "Secrecy and the uninformed elite," describes data secrecy in the Soviet military budget over many years; and Chapter 8, "Secrecy and twenty-first century authoritarianism," discusses how secrecy has evolved in Russia since communism, giving further detail and full references for the material presented above.

On disinformation and modern authoritarianism, see Benkler et al. (2018); Bennett and Livingston (2020); Guriev and Treisman (2022); Lindberg, ed. (2021); and Rid (2020). Cull et al. (2017) and Rid (2020) discuss Soviet uses of disinformation. Dunlop (2014) investigates the terrorist bombings of 1999 that preceded Putin's election to the presidency. Kryshtanovskaya and White (2009) identify the first concerted steps back toward Soviet-era principles in the Russian political system under the first Putin administrations. Cooper (2013) and Andermo and Kragh (2020) describe increasing data secrecy in the Russian military budget.

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ANALYSIS

# State of Open Data in Russia during the War: Between Drone Attacks and Bureaucratic Turf Protection

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DOI: 10.3929/ethz-b-000681149


## Abstract

Since the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the Russian authorities have been regularly removing data from public access. According to our calculations, nearly 600 datasets have been removed from the "open data" sections of official websites of federal executive bodies in the past two-and-a-half years. This number does not include various registries; statistical reporting forms; and textual reports containing macroeconomic, financial, crime, and social benefits indicators that have also been deleted, sometimes retroactively for all previous years. Three main groups of data withdrawn from public access can be identified: 1) economic and financial data that may pose a potential sanctions threat; 2) war-related data used in journalistic investigations; and 3) potentially sensitive data on social and economic problems in the country. However, the rollback of openness initiatives has not yet led to outright data concealment. Despite military censorship, access to many data fields is preserved. The closure of data, however relentless, still has a gradual character. Openness infrastructure continues to operate due to the high inertia of the bureaucratic system and mid-level bureaucrats' efforts to protect their turf.


## To Hide or Not to Hide

In the summer of 2023, following drone attacks on Moscow in May, Russian federal agencies conducted an inventory of public data. According to our sources in the government, the Ministry of Economic Development, which oversaw this task, set the goal of categorizing each dataset into one of three categories:

1. Critical, requiring immediate removal from the website (several dozen datasets);
2. Sensitive, requiring temporary removal from the website until it could be transferred to a closed circuit accessible through the "Gosuslugi" portal (about 2% of datasets);
3. Not requiring special action (more than 97% of datasets).

Datasets requiring immediate removal included information on infrastructure locations, such as lists of thermal power stations or power transmission lines, as well

as statistics on oil, gas, and coal production. Sensitive datasets included other geodata (such as topographical plans or road infrastructure information), lists of infrastructure objects, and registries of licenses (e.g., for the turnover of alcoholic products or waste management)—information that, according to officials, could be used in planning military attacks or imposing sanctions.

Two weeks after the drone attacks on Moscow, a dataset with atmospheric characteristics by altitude, which could theoretically have been used in drone development, was removed from the website of Roshydromet, the federal agency responsible for monitoring and forecasting weather, climate, and environmental conditions. Later, departments gradually removed lists and registries of potentially attackable objects—power stations, combined heat and power plants, power lines, and other similar objects. A total of 36 federal agencies hid datasets with addresses of their institutions and territorial departments (out of 55 agencies that posted such data), among them not only security and infrastructure executive bodies, but also, for example, the Ministry of Education and Rosalkogoltabakkontrol, the agency responsible for regulating the production, distribution, and sale of alcoholic beverages and tobacco products.

This is just one of many examples of the increasing "closedness" of the Russian state. Since the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Russian authorities have been regularly removing data from public access. According to our calculations, nearly 600 datasets have been removed from the "Open Data" sections of official websites of federal executive bodies in the ensuing 2.5 years. Another 360 datasets from federal executive bodies (Ministry of Defense, Federal Penitentiary Service, Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Economic Development, and Ministry of Sports) disappeared along with the state Open Data Portal, as these agencies did not repost the files on their own websites.

The number of datasets cannot be considered a universal measure of data openness, as they contain varying amounts of data. Some datasets contain a single indicator for a specific year, while others span 10–20 years. One-sixth of the removed files (101 datasets) contain only administrative data (addresses and phone numbers of institutions, lists of public events, or lists of information systems). Low informativeness and relevance are common characteristics of datasets that Russian authorities publish as "open data." One-third of the remaining 1,800 files contain administrative data, and one-third have not been updated for two years or longer.

Data that was not formatted as "open" (machine-readable)—various registries; statistical reporting forms; and textual reports containing macroeconomic, financial, crime, and social benefits indicators—were also deleted, sometimes retroactively for all previous years, or ceased to be updated. The exact volume of hidden data is difficult to assess due to the chaotic nature of statistical and open data publication—files in different formats were placed in different sections of websites and sometimes appeared as interactive web widgets.

## On the Path to Legitimacy

The fact that we now have a reason to talk about data closure indicates a fairly high level of openness in previous years. Over the last 30 years, the Russian state has gone through three phases regarding openness (Begtin et al., 2019):

- 1991–2012: formation of the legislative base for implementing the concept of openness and open data; first projects on data disclosure (State Procurement); launch of the "Open Government" initiative.
- 2012–2018: striving for maximum openness; "Open Government" and other institutions working for open data.
- 2018 to present: abandonment of the previous concept; gradual transition to a paternalistic model of relations between power and citizens; creeping rollback of initiatives for open data.

Why did the Russian state move toward openness? The literature provides several potential answers, related to internal and external legitimacy and their uses by the governing authorities.

First, the Russian government was influenced by a desire for international legitimization and integration with supranational institutions. For instance, as a member of the G8, Russia expressed its willingness to join the Open Government Partnership, a multilateral initiative that secures commitments from national and sub-national governments to promote open government, in 2012. In 2013, the OECD, in partnership with Rosstat, the governmental statistics agency, assessed the quality of Russian official statistics and their compliance with international standards, in particular the system of publication of statistical information (OECD 2013).

Second, the desire to attract foreign investment required the implementation of international transparency standards. It might be that some autocracies disclose information (especially related to economic performance) as a signal to the international community and potential investors. Maerz (2016) finds that economic globalization and international pressure stimulate non-competitive autocracies to publish some information and develop other factors promoting transparency, such as electronic government. Comparing several post-Soviet countries that have adopted Open Government Initiatives, the author concludes that the degree of transparency was higher in Russia than in other cases. The improving quality of governance correlates with Foreign Direct Investments (FDI) in Russia, per World

Bank data (World Bank n.d.). Hence, openness became a mechanism for ensuring the security of investments.

Third, the prospect of domestic legitimation encouraged the Russian government to disclose information and make it publicly available. Information flows are important for good governance (Islam 2006). Maerz shows that competitive authoritarian regimes adopt e-government and open data initiatives mainly for internal legitimation purposes. The government publishes not only datasets but also detailed information about the government itself, its responsibilities, legislative texts, and documents. All this information, as well as established e-government processes, improve the quality of bureaucratic performance and consequently increase government approval. Beazer and Reuter (2019) analyze economic performance data and show that the Kremlin party United Russia is punished by voters for poor economic performance in places where mayors were appointed. This suggests that the state should care about such performance, which would explain why it is interested in collecting data that are used to govern and make decisions based on this information.

Fourth, the authoritarian technocratic model of state governance presupposed intensive digitalization and reliance on expertise, for which data were also required. According to the theory of informational autocracy (Guriev and Treisman 2020), modern autocrats forego the use of ideology or mass repression, instead focusing on fully controlling the information sphere and creating the perception that they are competent economic managers. However, it can be hard to lie about economic indicators. As such, some autocrats actually work to improve the quality of government and state capacity, which goes together with a certain degree of accountability and the free flow of information. Given that there are few end users of the "raw data" nationally, it does not pose a great danger to the regime as long as media access thereto is controlled by the authorities.

At the same time, in regimes where elections do not play the primary role in electing politicians at any level of power, accountability is transformational. So-called "long route accountability" (Dewachter et al. 2018) presumes greater centralization of power and stricter bureaucratic oversight. In this model, bureaucrats are not directly responsible to citizens. Rather, citizens voice their dissatisfaction to higher-level politicians, who in turn influence outcomes for lower-level bureaucrats (usually through punishments ranging from formal reprimands to loss of resources).

The high level of digitization and centralization characteristic of state information systems leads to many details becoming available simply as a by-product of administrative processes—data become an artifact of the "digital paternalism" model.

In Russia, for example, there is a very high level of openness of judicial data. The "Justice" information system, launched in 2006, is used by courts across the country in their daily work, and also helps citizens monitor the judicial process. Simultaneously, researchers and journalists have the opportunity to collect this data and study the functioning of the judicial system. While the official module aggregating judicial data stopped working at the beginning of 2024, it remains possible to collect data directly from court websites. Journalists and researchers have developed special tools for this purpose, such as the judicial data parser of the "If To Be Precise" project (https://github.com/tochno-st/sudrfscraper).

The peak of the movement toward openness was the creation of specialized institutions that were supposed to spearhead the openness agenda at the federal level. In February 2012, "Open Government" appeared, but in the six years of its existence, it did not receive either sufficient powers or sufficient funding, which ultimately made its work less effective than planned.

Nevertheless, thanks to "Open Government," standards of openness for federal executive bodies were adopted and both the concept of "open data" and technical requirements for publication, lists, and procedures for data provision were defined. Federal authorities published 2,200 machine-readable datasets on their websites.

By the time of its closure for "technical maintenance" in March 2023, the Open Data Portal contained 27,000 datasets. Most of them (84%) were first uploaded during the period of "Open Government," with updates peaking in 2017.

Overall, the portal was more often an object of criticism by researchers than a "flagship" of open data in Russia. As of early 2023, 60% of datasets had never been updated, 30% had never been downloaded, and only 2% (470 datasets) had been downloaded a hundred or more times (see Figure 1 on p. 10).

But from 2018, the regime increasingly moved from the model of "accountability through openness" to a paternalistic model of interaction with citizens. In such a top-down model, open data practices, which involve transparency and free access to governmental data, were not considered a priority.

## Reasons for Data Secrecy

The first signs of a rollback, or at least a slowdown, of the openness initiative emerged after the start of Vladimir Putin's third term in 2012 and intensified following the annexation of Crimea in 2014. Confrontations with Western countries led Russia to lose interest in international legitimization through participation in supranational openness initiatives. In 2013, Russia postponed joining the Open Government Partnership (OGP), an organization created for international

exchange of experiences in implementing principles of openness in government management.

In 2014, Russia withdrew from international cooperation in the field of openness, which had been one of the tasks of "Open Government." At the same time, the country suspended negotiations to join the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Following the dissolution of the G8 in 2014, there was no further mention of its Data Openness Charter, which Russia had joined in the summer of 2013.

Another factor militating against openness was the fact that openness had facilitated anti-corruption investigations, which had become a major driver of Russian opposition politics in the 2010s and posed a serious threat to the regime. In 2016, the disappearance of the names of the sons of General Prosecutor Yuri Chaika from the real estate registry gained widespread attention. Shortly after an investigation by Aleksei Navalny and the Anti-Corruption Foundation (see chaika.navalny.com), their names were replaced with special codes. In 2017, amendments were made to the "Law on State Protection" that formally allowed officials to hide information about themselves and their families from public registries.

However, those factors did not lead to an abrupt change in trends. Inertia meant that a number of openness initiatives continued to develop for some time.

The year 2022 became a turning point. Since then, the scale of data closure has been unprecedented. Three main groups of indicators appear to have been targeted for closure (see Figure 2 on p. 10).

1. **Economic indicators that increase Russia's vulnerability to sanctions**. This category includes data that potentially facilitate the imposition of sanctions against the Russian state and business sectors. Six main groups of indicators have been closed, including macroeconomic and financial data, foreign trade, government procurement, state property, officials' incomes, hydrocarbon extraction, production, and banking reports. At least 15 agencies have hidden 93 datasets. Meanwhile, the authorities often use very formal arguments, and the logic behind their actions is bureaucratic (for example, export and import data were hidden "to avoid speculation"). There is no way to assess to what extent the concealed data actually pose a danger and to what extent their concealment is lobbied for by interest groups (for example, companies that benefit from reduced transparency) or carried out by bureaucrats who seek to shield themselves from potential consequences.
2. **War-related information used in journalistic investigations**. There are much earlier examples of data being closed off after being used in an investigation. However, if previously such data were mostly related to corruption, now they concern any areas even indirectly related to the war. Here, the logic is driven by media popularity: data is removed not because of its specificity, but after it becomes the subject of a journalistic article. This category includes four groups of indicators: mortality from external causes, the number of disabled persons, the number of prisoners, and data on social benefits and allowances. At least six agencies have hidden 12 datasets. Much of this data had been used to indirectly assess the extent of Russian military losses in the war.
3. **Data on social and economic issues**. Since 2022, there has been significant movement toward hiding data that could potentially generate negative publicity for the government. This category is complex due to the swathes of data that have been obscured, making it difficult to estimate the exact number of datasets and indicators affected. This includes data on crime, microloans, environmental pollution, injuries in emergencies, and the condition of the aviation fleet. These data are not directly related to military actions but may reflect the negative impact of war and sanctions on Russian society. Possibly, some indicators have been "closed" preemptively, before they attract media attention and fall into category two.

## Still Not a "Black Box": How Can We Study Russia Despite Declining Transparency?

The authorities' actions so far do not appear to comprise a thought-out strategy. Rather, government bodies react situationally to apparent or potential threats. Often, the deletion of datasets, especially technical ones, is more of a bureaucratic formality: the data are hidden inconsistently, with some entities removing everything and others only specific files. Moreover, deleted information can sometimes be found on websites in the form of text or tables.

The removal of a particular dataset is often the result not of a direct order from above but of a decision made by individual officials. For example, RosTrud, which for many years ranked as the most open government body, unexpectedly deleted over a dozen datasets about social payments, most of which were unrelated to the war.

The roll-back of openness initiatives has not yet led to outright data secrecy. The closure of data still has a gradual, albeit relentless, character. Despite military censorship, access to data pertaining to many policy domains is preserved.

Bureaucratic inertia plays a role here: some individuals responsible for open data, who have been in their positions since more democratic times, continue to publish information out of habit. This inertia and the continued operation of these institutions can sometimes counteract the trend toward decreased transparency. Additionally,

the continued publication of data may represent an effort by mid-level bureaucrats to protect their turf (Bach 2021).

Some data cannot easily be removed from access because an infrastructure of state regulation and management is built around them. This infrastructure relies on the availability of such data to function effectively, making it challenging to restrict access without disrupting essential regulatory processes.

What's more, although the Russian state is no longer seeking international legitimization and the movement toward openness has stalled, the search for sources of internal legitimacy and the technocratic nature of the state governance model relying on informatization provide hope that access to data will be preserved for some time. In the current climate, if citizens still have the right to access data, it is not because civil control is perceived as a good thing, but rather due to the "state as a service" paradigm, which implies that the state will help you solve problems if you use technocratic methods to influence it rather than political ones.

Claims about the poor quality of Russian data and widespread falsifications are also greatly exaggerated, as we demonstrate in our study "Can Russian Data Be Trusted? A Hazard Map of Official Statistics." Typically, cases of direct manipulation of indicators (such as mortality statistics) are well-known to specialists. Most falsifications occur at the middle and lower levels due to attempts to implement centralized management by indicators, focusing on achieving strictly set target values (Kalgin 2016). At the federal level, as shown in 2022–2024, the state prefers to hide sensitive data rather than engage in direct distortion of statistics.

Additionally, new digital projects are emerging that simplify access to data or even open up new data that was previously unavailable (Kokorin et al. 2024). For example, OVD-Info publishes data on political repression, the RIMA project archives independent Russian media, and the Cedar project gives researchers access to electoral statistics, judicial data, and many other sources that can be obtained upon request.

*About the Authors*

*Cedar* is an independent think-tank launched in March 2024 and aimed at providing data about Russia to the academic and expert community. Our team consists of independent researchers, data scientists, and journalists who have been studying Russia for many years and are now working in exile. We want to help the academic and expert community better understand Russia using digital tools and resources that we provide. Our research includes the study of electoral fraud in Russia with an explorable dataset, a report on the quality of Russian official data, and some ongoing projects, including a full database of Russian courts decisions.

With a contribution from *Evgeniya Mitrokhina*, PhD candidate at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

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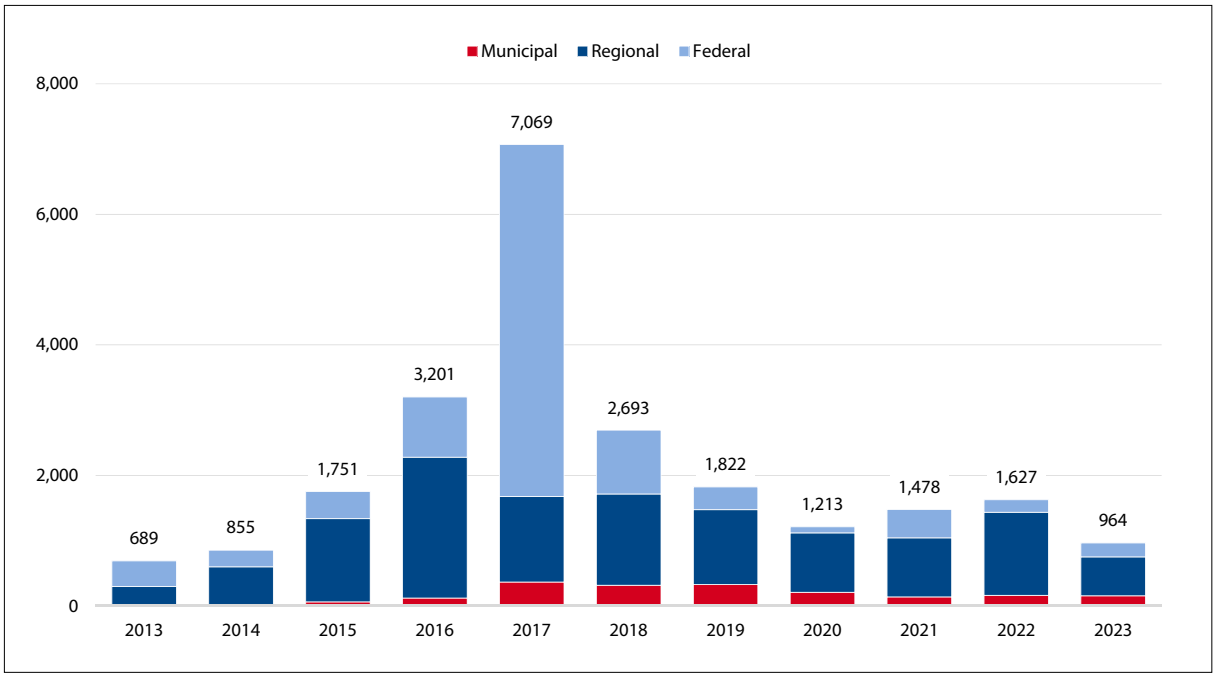
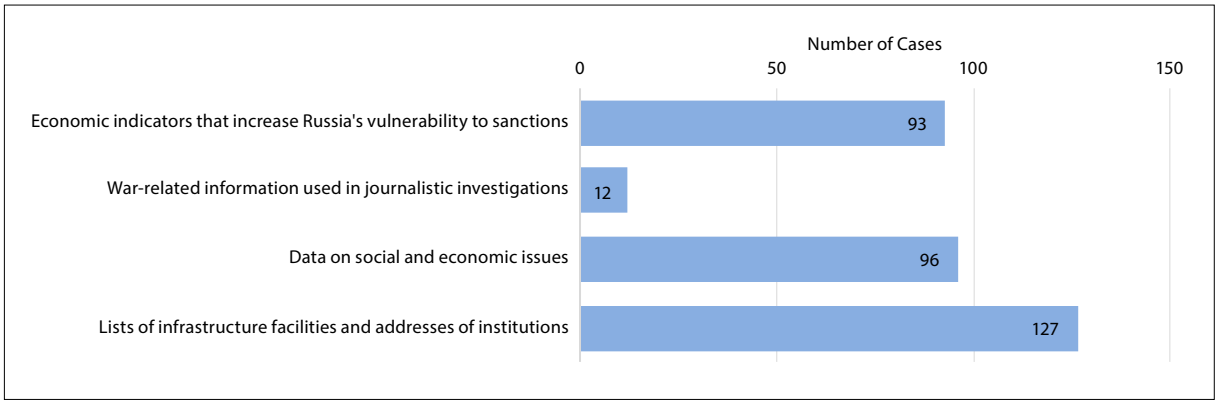
**Figure 1 : Number of Updated Datasets on the Open Data Portal by Year.**




*Source: Open Data Portal*

**Figure 2 : Reasons For Data Closure: Most Notable Cases**




*Source: Compilation by Cedar*

# Appendix

**Table 1: Data Closure in Russia 2022–2024**

| Period | Category | Indicator | Executive body | Measures | Description |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| January 2022 | protection from sanctions | detailed export and import data | the Customs Service | stopped updating | explained by the desire to avoid speculation |
| March 2022 | protection from sanctions | contract data of sanctioned companies | the Ministry of Finance | allowed not to publish | explained by reference to the unfriendly actions of Western countries |
| March 2022 | protection from sanctions | bank ownership data and full financial statements | The Central Bank | allowed not to publish | Initially, the measures were in effect until the end of 2022, but they were extended and the list of information was expanded. Currently, financial organizations have the right not to publish financial statements and data on owners until the end of 2024. |
| December 2022 | protection from sanctions | income declarations of public servants | the President | allowed not to publish | Over the following years, government departments removed similar datasets from their websites |
| 2022 | protection from sanctions | data on the export and import of agricultural products | the Ministries of Industry and Trade | deleted | following Customs |
| 2022 | protection from sanctions | data on the export and import of jewelry and gold | the Assay Chamber | deleted | following Customs |
| 2022 | protection from sanctions | data on the export and import of hydrocarbons | the Ministry of Energy | deleted | following Customs |
| 2022 | protection from sanctions | the "Open Data" section (information about state property) | the Federal Property Management Agency | deleted | The concerns were probably related to the registers of federal property (real estate, air and sea transport), but they deleted the entire section just in case. In April 2024, the agency returned to publishing administrative datasets. |
| 2022 | war-related information used in journalistic investigations | the handling of benefits for military families | the Ministry of Defense | changed the order of registration | This case was not a data deletion. Data on payments were not specifically collected and published. The state has made it impossible to calculate this data. |
| 2022 | data on social and economic Issues | all data from Open Data section | Federal Marine and River Transport Agency | deleted | It is likely that the deletion of data was also an initiative of the agency. Some of the deleted datasets contained administrative data, and some of the data continues to be published on the EMISS platform. |
| 2022–2023 | protection from sanctions | registries of companies involved in the development and production of weapons, aviation technology, and those working on import substitution | the Ministry of Industry and Trade | deleted | The files were deleted for two years without explanation. |
| January 2023 | data on social and economic Issues | analytical reports and statistical monitoring forms about crime (Legal Statistics Portal) | General Prosecutor's Office | stopped updating | This was ostensibly due to technical work on the site, although no such work was reported on the main website where they also ceased updating summary data about their activities. |

*Appendix continued overleaf*

**Table 1: Data Closure in Russia 2022–2024 (Continued)**

| Period | Category | Indicator | Executive body | Measures | Description |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| February 2023 | data on social and economic Issues | reporting on the operation of air transport (Open Data section) | Federal Air Transport Agency | deleted | Likely an initiative of the agency, as data collected according to the federal plan of statistical works continue to be updated on an interdepartmental platform |
| April 2023 | war-related information used in journalistic investigations | dataset about the number of departmental pensioners from 2022 year | the Ministry of Defense | uploaded empty values | The dataset should also disclose data on the number of disabled people who have suffered military injuries, which is probably the reason for the concealment. In 2024, the Agency also did not update the data, despite the fact that they should be published in accordance with the Federal Statistical Work Plan. |
| April 2023 | protection from sanctions | statistics on oil and gas extraction | The Government | stopped updating | published by Rosstat and the Ministry of Energy |
| July 2023 | protection from sanctions | corporate information entities under sanctions and related to the defense industry | The Government | allowed not to publish | The new procedure is valid for information about transactions from January 1, 2019 to December 31, 2022. The decree was extended until July 1, 2023. In July, this procedure was retained indefinitely for companies with risks of sanctions or operating in the territories occupied by Russia. |
| July 2023 | war-related information used in journalistic investigations | all data about the number of prisoners (dataset and web-site section) | The Federal Penitentiary Service | deleted | This decision was likely prompted by Mediazona's materials, which assessed the extent of prisoner recruitment into the Wagner Group. Data restored from web archives can be found on the "To Be Precise" platform. |
| October 2023 | war-related information used in journalistic investigations | monthly data on the number of disabled (web-site section) | The Pension Fund | deleted | This happened after journalists used these data to estimate the number of people who had received disabled status due to military injuries. |
| 2023 | war-related information used in journalistic investigations | data on payments to combat veteran | Rosstat | changed the statistical report | Rosstat removed lines with data on payments to veterans from the annual social benefits directory and also removed the total amount to prevent calculations. |
| 2023 | data on social and economic Issues | data on crimes involving firearms | Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) | stopped updating | The reason for closing this data was likely an increase in the number of similar crimes, as well as expectations of further increases. |
| 2023 | data on social and economic Issues | data on sentences for crimes against military service (statistical report) | Judicial Department | deleted | This is currently the only example of such meticulous data cleansing from past years, as typically agencies remove all "sensitive" data en masse. |
| 2023 | data on social and economic Issues | detailing data on the number of fatalities and injuries from emergencies | Ministry of Emergency Situations | stopped updating | The Department publishes data on Russia as a whole, without a breakdown by region. |
| 2023 | data on social and economic Issues | data on the mass of emissions of specific pollutants (from the Registry of objects having a negative impact on the environment) | Federal Service for Supervision of Natural Resources | deleted | These data were crucial for identifying the perpetrators of environmental incidents. Appeals by public organizations to the government and the State Duma led nowhere. However, the removed data remained in the code of the site's registry, allowing analysts from the project "To Be Precise" to download them. |

*Appendix continued overleaf*

**Table 1: Data Closure in Russia 2022–2024 (Continued)**

| Period | Category | Indicator | Executive body | Measures | Description |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 2023–2024 | war-related information used in journalistic investigations | detailed mortality data | Rosstat | stopped updating | Journalists use these data to estimate military losses indirectly, such as through assessing excess mortality. Since 2022, the Russian database on birth and death from the Center for Demographic Research of the Russian School of Economics, based on Rosstat data, has lacked detailed breakdowns of mortality from external causes by specific causes of death, including military losses. Also, in March 2022, Rosstat ceased publishing statistics on the number of deaths by sex, age groups, and regions, which could have allowed for more accurate assessments of losses, and since 2023 the agency has not updated the dataset on causes of death on its website. |
| February 2024 | data on social and economic Issues | reports on the migration situation from 2024 | Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) | stopped updating | After the terrorist attack on Crocus City Hall, the Interior Ministry deleted most of the reports from previous years, leaving only the last two reports for 2023. |
| April 2024 | war-related information used in journalistic investigations | dataset about the number of departmental pensioners from 2023 year | Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) | stopped updating | The Department followed the example of the Ministry of Defense, stopping updating data for no apparent legal reason. |
| 2024 | war-related information used in journalistic investigations | data sets about all social payments | Rostrud | deleted | This data did not appear to be connected to military payments and was likely deleted just in case. |

ANALYSIS

# The Art of Data Manipulation in Russia: Lessons from the COVID-19 Pandemic

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DOI: 110.3929/ethz-b-000681149

## Abstract

With Russia submerged in the uncharted waters of the open conflict with Ukraine and, indirectly, the Western world, there are rising concerns as to whether we can trust Russian official statistics. In this analysis, I draw several lessons on potential data manipulation from the arrival of the pandemic during the politically sensitive time of the national referendum on constitutional amendments in 2020, which gave rise to the doctoring of COVID-19 mortality figures.

## Autocracies and Data Manipulation

"A body of men holding themselves accountable to nobody ought not to be trusted by anybody." Today, in an age when autocratic governments worldwide rely more heavily on disinformation than ever before (Guriev and Treisman, 2019), this famous quote from Thomas Paine, the U.S. Founding Father, remains highly relevant for approaching officially reported data in nondemocratic regimes. For example, a recent prominent study by Martinez (2022) found that autocratic regimes falsify about a third of their reported economic growth and correcting for this falsification puts the "wonder of autocratic growth" in regimes

such as China into noticeably more modest perspective. A follow-up study by Briviba et al. (2024), adopting a similar methodology, showed that other institutional factors also matter: economic and political openness tend to decrease manipulation, while decentralization increases it. Wallace (2016) suggests that such manipulations are particularly common during politically sensitive times (such as, in the case of China, leadership turnover).

Combining this knowledge and applying it to the Russian Federation since the unprovoked full-scale invasion of Ukraine, one might assume that a country with growing autocratic tendencies, declining economic and political openness, and experiencing a politically sensitive wartime would not release even remotely truthful statistics. Yet such an assumption might be naïve: after all, official statistics are part of autocracies' disinformation campaigns, and effective disinformation must be at least partially accurate to be credible (Carter and Carter, 2024). At the same time, maintaining this intricate balance in false reporting of official data is not a straightforward task for a vast country: within its sizable bureaucracy, the long chain of individuals involved in data collection and aggregation may all engage in doctoring data according to their perceptions of a "desirable" level of falsification and within the scope of their capacities. Such a bureaucratic setting breeds asymmetric incentives and micromotives at different levels of governance and may result, for example, in an oversupply of falsification at the macrolevel, as has been continuously observed in the case of electoral fraud in Russian federal elections, as described in an insightful study by Rundlett and Svolik (2016). But, whereas electoral fraud in Russia is routine, how might the government handle official statistics in an emergency like war when uncertainties are high and signals from the federal center are ambiguous?

In this analysis, I attempt to answer this question by revisiting the insights into data manipulation gained during another recent Russian crisis situation, namely the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, which our team of coauthors—Alexander Libman, Vladimir Kozlov, Dmitrii Kofanov, and I—studied in a recently published paper in the *British Journal of Political Science*, available in open access. We focused on the first six months of the pandemic and examined the discrepancy between official and actual mortality from COVID-19 to test how the timing of the referendum on constitutional amendments and the Russian bureaucratic machine generated data manipulation of COVID-19 statistics.

## The Pandemic in Russia and the Manipulation of COVID-19 Mortality

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 came at a politically sensitive time, as it happened to interrupt President Vladimir Putin's initiative to amend the national constitution to allow himself to run for presidential office after the expiration of his current term in 2024, which would otherwise have been illegal due to constitutionally mandated term limits. Although the amendments could have been adopted by a simple parliamentary decision, Putin decided to turn the constitutional change into a major showcase of his popularity and bureaucratic loyalty, announcing a national referendum. Initially, the referendum was scheduled for April, but due to the spread of the virus, Putin was forced to postpone it until June 25.

The feasibility of the new referendum date depended upon the development of the pandemic. Organizing the referendum at the peak of the spread of the new virus would constrain the ability of the government to boost the legitimacy through the referendum—or even result in public disapproval of the carelessness of the government. The high perceived risk of contracting the virus during this mass public event would also severely reduce turnout. Thus, minimizing contagion rates, or at least convincing the population that the pandemic was under control, became the key task of the regime. At the same time, however, Putin refrained from personally introducing unpopular measures (like lockdowns); instead, he transferred the authority for dealing with the pandemic to regional governors, making them de facto responsible for containing the virus.

In this context, we expected governors to have responded to the challenge with systematic data manipulation. We conjectured that several conditions determined the level of this manipulation: 1) the importance to the federal center of suppressing the COVID-19 data; 2) governors' individual political situations (governors close to reelection faced a major risk that the president would use the so-called "presidential filter" to prevent unpopular as well as insufficiently loyal incumbents from running for reelection); and 3) institutional factors such as press freedom (this factor was investigated in the working paper, Kofanov et al., 2020, but was not included in the publication due to article size limitation).

In hindsight, we can reliably measure the manipulation of COVID-19 mortality: the data on overall excess mortality (which was published at a later point in time) is widely recognized as a substantially less biased measure that can account for undetected and unreported COVID-19 cases (Beaney et al., 2020; Vestergaard and Molbak, 2020). First, we calculate the excess deaths that occurred in each month and each region, which is a positive surplus over the expected number of deaths that should have occurred without the pandemic—a number calculated using data from the three years preceding the pandemic. Second, we divide the excess deaths by the

expected number of deaths in each region and month, thus producing the excess mortality.

To gauge the manipulation of COVID-19 mortality, we compare excess mortality with the officially reported data published at *stopcoronavirus.rf*, the government-operated website established in the first weeks of the pandemic to report real-time data on infections and mortality. The website was widely advertised on national television and the internet, including the leading social media platforms. Importantly, *stopcoronavirus.rf* was, according to the authorities, the only legitimate source of statistical information on the coronavirus pandemic in Russia: any alternative estimates would have been classified as a "false information of public interest, shared under the guise of fake news," and could have been penalized with up to a 5-year prison sentence or a heavy fine (up to 300,000 rubles or $4,200) under a newly introduced amendment to the defamation law.

This case study allows us to draw five main lessons on data manipulation that may apply to wartime Russia.

**Lesson 1. Federal-level incentives motivate underreporting**

Having two measures of COVID-19 mortality—one official and one a more reliable proxy—we plot the difference between them for each Russian region in the months prior to the referendum (April–June 2020) (see Figure 1 on p. 18). Leaving aside the four regions that had not yet experienced COVID-19 due to their remoteness—namely Altai Krai, Buryatia, Chelyabinsk Oblast', and Kirov Oblast')—we observe widespread underreporting of the deaths from the coronavirus, meaning that federal incentives to produce a "rosy" picture of victory over the pandemic effectively resulted in data manipulation.

**Lesson 2. Underreporting is higher when local officials are more insecure**

While manipulation was prevalent, there was still significant variation across the regions. What explains this variation? Our core hypothesis was that regions where local governors believed they faced larger political risks—such as losing their office—were more willing to appease the central government and thus under-report COVID-19 mortality. To proxy political risk, we use the length of time to the next gubernatorial elections, victory which depends almost entirely on the support of the federal authorities, particularly the president (due to his ability to prevent any candidate from running)[1]. Our empirical identification strategy relies on the asynchronous election cycles in individual regions, which quasi-randomly divided all 85 regions (the official Russian regions and the occupied territories of Crimea and Sevastopol) into almost equal groups: 43 regions with elections in the next two years and 42 regions where such electoral pressure was absent (elections having recently been held). All tests showed that the two groups were almost identical in their pre-COVID characteristics and, importantly, in their excess mortality levels during the pandemic. What was starkly different were the official numbers of COVID-19 mortality they reported before the referendum. In Figure 2 on p. 19, we show the dynamics of both mortality indicators, grouped by regions with approaching elections and without in the first months of the pandemic, before and after the referendum. Further econometric tests confirmed the robustness of this result. Interestingly, after the referendum in June, we found no consistent evidence of a significant link between political risk and underreporting. We, therefore, concluded that COVID-19 data manipulation was driven by the actions of sub-national politicians reacting to (informal) incentives created by the central government (i.e., to satisfy Putin's plan to hold the referendum in a COVID-free environment), but heterogeneous incentives within the bureaucratic structure influenced the scale of manipulations.

Interestingly, this finding is somewhat contrary to my recent research with Parrendah Adwoa Kpeli and Günther G. Schulze (Kpeli et al., 2024), which used the same methodology to investigate underreporting of COVID-19 cases in the first pandemic year in countries that were expecting presidential elections in the next two years compared to those with no such electoral pressure. The latter study found that upcoming elections, contrary to our expectations based on the Russian case, were associated with lower (not higher) underreporting. However, this effect was driven by democratic countries, suggesting that free and fair elections can be seen as a reliable bulwark against data manipulation even in a time of global emergency.

**Lesson 3. Freedom of the press matters, but its influence can be outweighed by federal incentives to produce data manipulation**

In the earlier version of our paper, we also studied the effect of freedom of the press, as measured by the relevant subcomponent of a well-recognized index of regional democracy from Petrov and Titkov (2013). This anal-

1 In this sense, Russian gubernatorial elections are not democratic elections where the population selects their preferred candidate; instead, a candidate backed by the central authorities faces little competition (due to opposition candidates being barred from running in the election) and collects the majority of votes using administrative means (mobilization of the state sector, e.g., workers at state-owned enterprises, the prison population, policemen, etc.) and sometimes outright electoral fraud.

ysis seemed to show the opposite dynamics relative to the central incentives to manipulate data: we found that the presence of press freedom did not matter before the referendum, but thereafter, it was strongly correlated with less underreporting. This highlights the partial ability of the press to instill some accountability, even in an autocratic regime.

**Lesson 4. To manipulate or to censor?**

Russian regional authorities were given one additional opportunity to misinform the public about actual COVID-19 mortality when, in June (before the referendum), Mediazona, a Russian independent media outlet, submitted a request to all regional administrations to report all-cause mortality for the month of May. The request was driven by growing concerns about data manipulation and the safety of the referendum, which were being discussed among the more regime-critical parts of Russian society. Some regions responded to the request; others refused to provide any additional data or ignored the request. On June 30, a day before the referendum's end, Mediazona published the results of the data inquiry. We studied the likelihood of responding to the request and found that regions with more proximate elections were *more likely* to respond to the Mediazona request, arguably because they wanted to dispel any suspicion of having concealed data; however, these regions provided figures that were significantly lower than those that appeared in the official statistics eventually published by the Russian Statistics Office.

The results indicate that Russian governors were engaged in a complex game of information manipulation prior to the referendum. Since not responding to the journalistic inquiry could have undermined public trust in their official COVID-19 statistics, regions with approaching elections were more likely to respond. Providing false information to the Russian media, by contrast, imposed no additional costs on local officials, resulting in underreporting of the preliminary all-cause mortality data, especially in regions with forthcoming elections. Hence, one should expect Russian authorities in distress to respond with data manipulation rather than censorship.

**Lesson 5. Manipulation is partially visible**

Do people learn about data manipulation? We looked at a public opinion survey by Levada Center conducted in July, after the referendum was over and some independent news outlets started to report on the manipulation of COVID-19 statistics, pointing out that the newly released mortality figures were much higher than official deaths from the virus. We found that respondents in regions with greater underreporting of COVID-19 mortality were more likely to mistrust official statistics, yet this correlation held only for respondents with higher education, implying that data manipulation is visible primarily to the most educated part of society.

## Perspectives on Data Manipulation in Wartime Russia

The most direct parallel between Russia during the pandemic and wartime Russia is the high level of uncertainty at all bureaucratic levels. This is due to unprecedented events such as "partial" military mobilization, international sanctions, and the Wagner Group rebellion, to mention a few. As we learned from our COVID-19 research, the Russian bureaucracy tends to respond to strain with data manipulation that enables it to sustain the image of competence and efficiency. This strategy can (at least temporarily) succeed, as the recent example of the International Monetary Fund's inability (or reluctance) to question and adjust for the integrity of Russian official data in its growth forecasts has shown. (For a critical take, see Sonnenfeld, Roach, and Tian 2023.) Perhaps the most bald example of data manipulation by the Russian statistical authorities was the change in the formula for calculating the poverty line, which led to a record decrease in the share of poor in the country, undercounting about 3 million people and making the national poverty to be a record 9.8% instead of 12%—the estimate based on the previous methodology. Thus, this development so far confirms the general prediction that underreporting is systemic in uncertain times, such as during the war.

Testing the second lesson that regional governors might underreport more under the pressure of approaching elections is trickier but not impossible. I follow Wallace's (2016) suggestion to use electricity production as a more reliable economic activity benchmark than official gross regional product (GRP) statistics. Because an increase in electricity production normally predicts an increase in domestic product, one can expect a positive correlation between these two parameters; however, if regions try to manipulate the data, this elasticity (positive correlation) will be smaller. This might be the case for regions with upcoming gubernatorial elections, which might encourage data manipulation—just as with COVID-19 mortality underreporting prior to the referendum. A smaller correlation between changes in GRP and electricity production for this region might indirectly manifest data manipulation but should be observed only in the war years and not before that.

I plot the official data available for the first year of the war (2022) from the Russian Federal Statistics Service in Figure 3 on p. 20. In Panel A, I observe that elasticities between the two parameters are indeed different in regions with forthcoming elections than in the rest of the regions: change in electricity production strongly pre-

dicts economic growth in the latter category (significant positive correlation) but not the former, where the correlation is close to zero. Interestingly, this is not the case in a normal year: when we take the data for the pre-pandemic year 2019, the changes in GRP and electricity are almost identically positively correlated. Perhaps the most drastic difference in elasticities could be observed in the GRP attributed to the manufacturing sector, shown in Panel C, where regions with proximate elections demonstrate even a negative correlation between GRP and electricity production, indirectly suggesting some level of manipulation. This is in line with the central government often being more concerned with dynamics in the manufacturing sector as an indicator of regional success. The energy sector, however, receives less attention in official reports, and there I find no differences in elasticities (Panel D), as expected. Since the regions with and without approaching elections are very similar in all other respects (characteristics such as institutions, population, and per capita income), this difference might be interpreted as indirect evidence of some data manipulation at the local level. Yet further, more rigorous econometric analysis is required to draw concrete conclusions.

Less surprisingly, the third lesson suggests that the mass media within Russia will remain unable to impose any accountability on those authorities manipulating the data.

The predictions based on the fourth lesson as to when the Russian authorities will decide to censor or manipulate data should be seen from the crucial premise that both strategies can be politically beneficial. Yet censorship is more appropriate when things are going well (as, for example, they were for the Russian economy in the first year of the war), while in less optimistic times, making available partially falsified data helps to facilitate strategic disinformation directed at the Russian public as well as foreign journalists, NGOs, and other interested parties.

Finally, lesson five suggested that Russian society might still be aware of the manipulation of data in official statistics. One bright illustration of this prediction comes from the recent research of Andrei Tkachenko and Marina Vyrskaia, who find that popular support for the war is strongly negatively correlated with regional numbers of war casualties—indicating that the population is aware of the war-related death toll in their region despite the government's meticulous censorship of this information[2].

To conclude, what remains certain is that the Russian authorities will continue to misinform via official statistics, but the extent and the exact categories of doctored data might vary significantly depending on the perceived needs of the regime at a particular time—something to be taken into account when working with Russian official data.

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2 This is a work in progress, but the slides of the presention are available online: https://drive.google.com/file/d/1IrCn1elco8oKUMgMHWhpvQmFb5jcVkRy/view

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**Figure 1: Spatial Distribution of COVID-19 Mortality Underreporting**

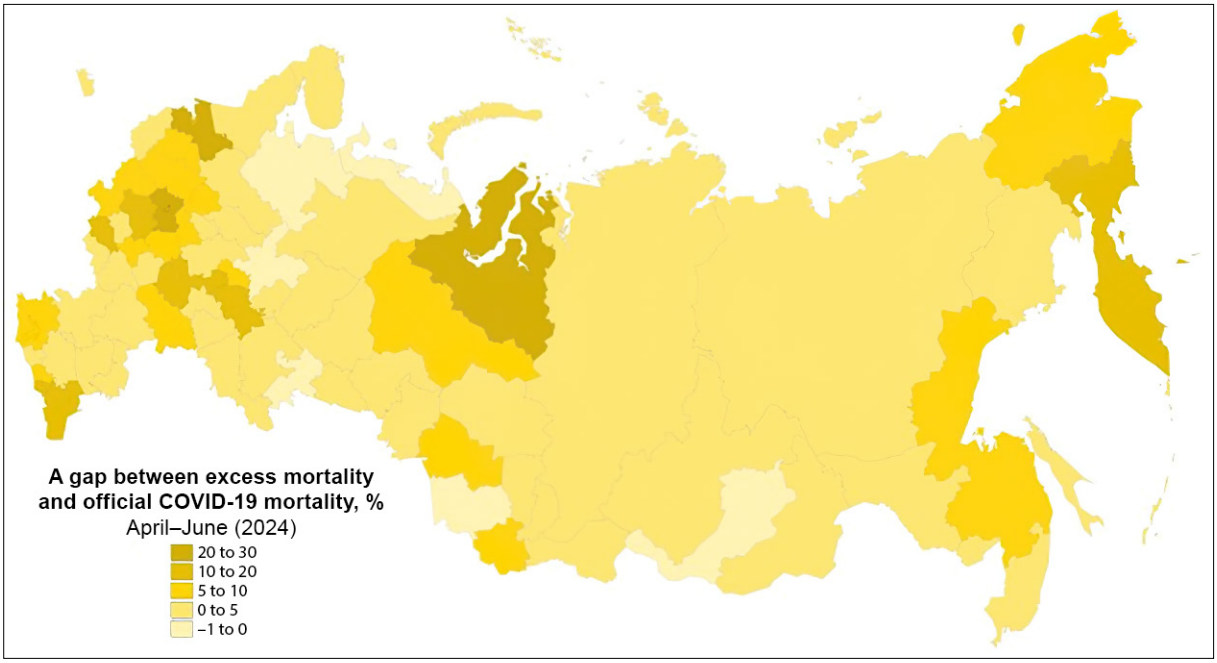
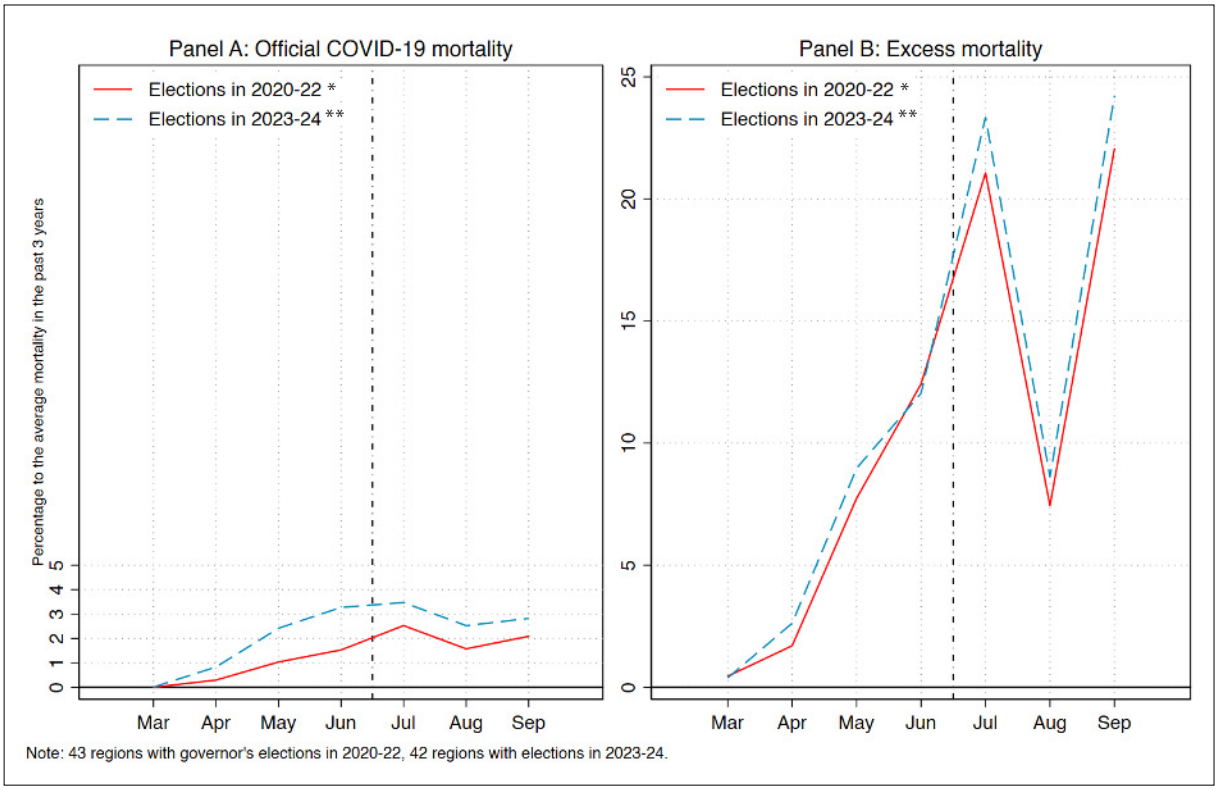


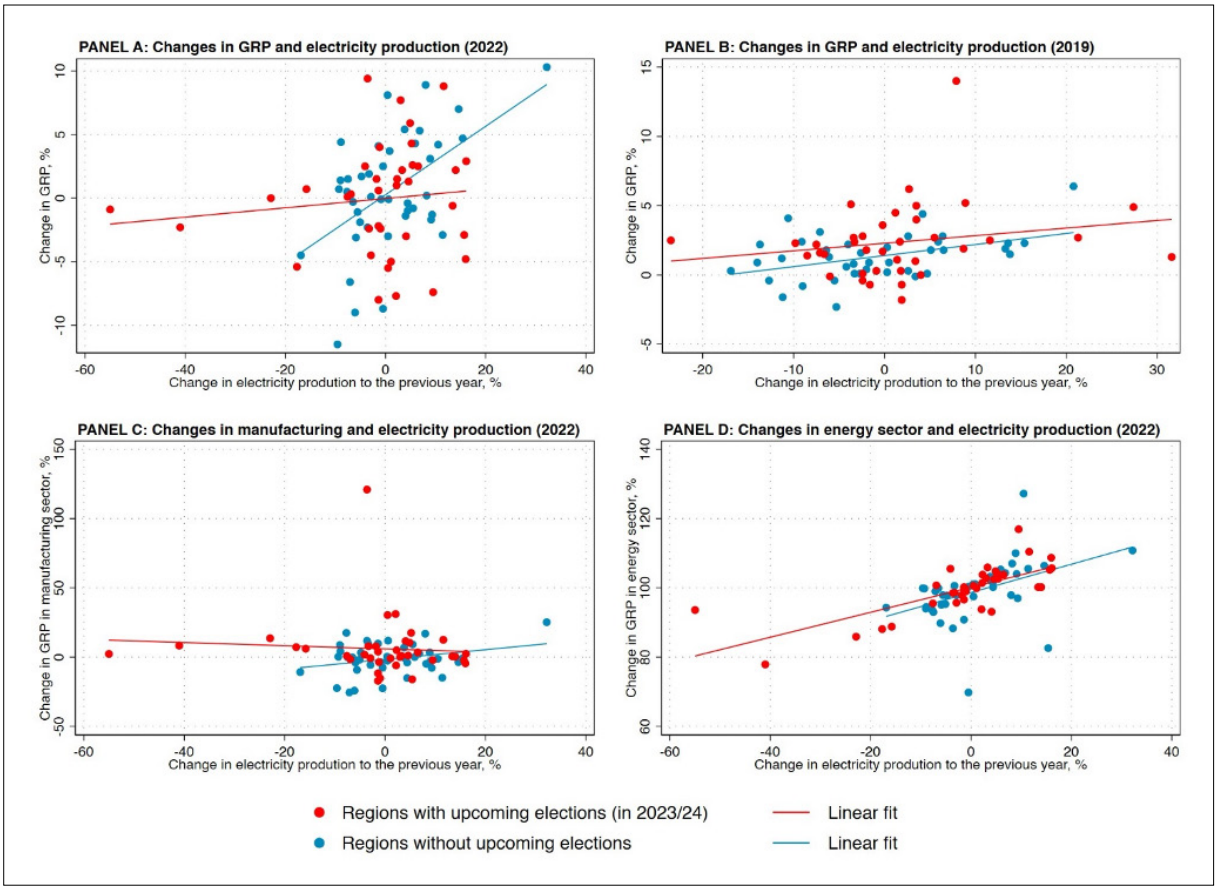
**Figure 2: Average Monthly Dynamics of Mortality Rates in Regions, Grouped by Proximity to Elections**




** Regions with upcoming elections*

*** Regions without upcoming elections*

**Figure 3: Correlations between Changes in Gross Regional Product (GRP) and Electricity Production in Regions, Grouped by Proximity to Elections**



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Responsible editor for this issue: Fabian Burkhardt
Language editing: Ellen Powell
Layout: Marta Warmińska, Cengiz Kibaroglu, Matthias Neumann, Michael Clemens
ISSN 1863-0421 © 2024 by Forschungsstelle Osteuropa an der Universität Bremen, Bremen and Center for Security Studies, Zürich
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