

**David Szakonyi, Ora John Reuter**  
**George Washington University**

### **Elite Defection under Autocracy: Evidence from Russia**

Elite cohesion is a fundamental pillar of authoritarian stability. High-level defections can signal weakness, embolden the opposition and, sometimes, lead to regime collapse. Using a dataset of 4,313 ruling party candidates in Russia, this paper develops and tests hypotheses about the integrity of elite coalitions under autocracy. Our theory predicts that elites defect when there is greater uncertainty about the willingness and/or ability of the regime to provide benefits and career advancement. Regimes that share power with the opposition, limit access to spoils, and lack formal institutions see more defections. Co-opting the opposition assuages outside threats, but leaves regime insiders disgruntled and prone to defect. Those with personal followings and business connections defect first, since they can pursue their political goals independently of the regime. Taken together, our results highlight important tradeoffs among authoritarian survival strategies. Many of the steps autocrats take to repel challenges simultaneously heighten the risk of defections.