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DUMA AND REGIONAL ELECTIONS 2021

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ANALYSIS

The September 2021 Duma Elections: Mission Overdone?

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Abstract

In the run-up to the September 2021 Duma elections, the Russian authorities employed a range of tools to increase the odds that United Russia, the main pro-government party, would retain its two-thirds majority in the Duma in a context of low public support. They sought to facilitate the administrative mobilization of loyal voters through electronic voting and multi-day elections while reducing incentives for opposition-minded voters to turn out by excluding Navalny, listing independent media as foreign agents, and cracking down on protests. These tools were apparently successful: as counting went on, the vote shares of United Russia and A Just Russia steadily increased, while the vote shares of other major parties declined. But the sweeping and unidirectional nature of this change prompted widespread speculation about fraud, which has hampered the authorities' search for electoral legitimacy.

The 2021 Duma elections in Russia were held on the Unified Day of Voting on September 19, 2021. As in the previous elections held in 2016, Russian voters had to return 225 Duma deputies in party-list contests with a 5% legal threshold of representation and 225 deputies in single-member districts under first-past-the-post rules.

Following the practice of multi-day elections, which first appeared in the 2020 voting on constitutional amendments and continued in the September 2020 regional elections, there was provision for casting votes not only on September 19 itself, but also during the two preceding days. Again similarly to the 2020 election, votes could be cast not only in person, but also, in seven regions including Moscow, electronically.

These innovations were justified primarily by reference to the necessity to minimize threats related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Another argument often cited by proponents was that they made voting more convenient for the electors. The counter-arguments, including that multi-day elections offered many opportunities for electoral fraud due to the lack of control over the contents of the ballot boxes (which were stored for two nights before counting) and that the transparency of electronic voting was not sufficiently guaranteed, were ignored by the Russian authorities.

One of the major advantages enjoyed by the main pro-government party, United Russia, in the 2021 elections was that both of these innovations served as major channels for the administrative mobilization of loyal voters. This is particularly true of the first day of voting, September 17, a working day when both state and private employers could reward their employees with an additional vacation day in exchange for turning out to vote in an organized fashion, often accompanied by a representative of the employer and/or transported to voting locations.

The system for administrative mobilization of voters has been under development in Russia for many years—its foundations having been laid by the gubernatorial political machines of the 1990s—but it has apparently achieved an entirely new level of efficacy since the introduction of multi-day voting. Electronic voting, while entirely new to Russia's electoral system, also provided ample opportunities for the mobilization of voters because, according to numerous reports, employers exerted pressure on their employees to help ensure that the latter both registered for electronic voting and cast their votes. Indeed, about a third of those who registered for electronic voting in the six regions that conducted it via the Gosuslugi platform (in Moscow, a local platform, mos.ru, was used) voted in the first three hours after the start of the elections on September 17.

The authorities found themselves heavily reliant on the mobilization of loyal voters because since 2019, and particularly the 2019 pension reform, public opinion polls have registered a relatively low level of voter support for United Russia. According to a major pro-government polling firm, the Public Opinion Foundation (FOM), the share of respondents who intended to cast their votes for the party stood at 30% in December 2020. This figure remained relatively stable (ranging from 27 to 33%) through early September 2021, when it stood at 29%. Nevertheless, the FOM projected that United Russia would achieve 45% of the vote, which would have allowed it to retain a simple majority in the Duma. To reach the more ambitious goal of retaining its two-thirds majority—which, according to numerous reports, was a target set by the presidential administration—United Russia had to win no less than 80% of single-member districts. Both targets, unrealistic as they might seem in light of the low level of voter support in public opinion polls, could be achieved if turnout, however low, came mostly from among administratively mobilized loyal voters.

Obviously enough, then, the other side of United Russia's strategy was to reduce the incentives for opposition-minded voters to turn out. According to the FOM,

in early September 2021 the combined support of the three main parties of the official opposition among those respondents who had made their voting decisions stood at 24%, which points to these parties' lack of credibility with voters. Even this figure was likely inflated because it had probably already been affected by the "Smart Voting" (SV) strategy developed and implemented by Alexey Navalny and his supporters.

The SV campaign—first proposed in 2018 and implemented, with a degree of success recognized by the media and in several academic studies, in the 2019–2020 regional and municipal elections—essentially sought to mobilize opposition-minded voters by urging them to turn out and vote for the strongest non-United Russia candidate in each single-member district, that candidate's ideological stances notwithstanding. In this way, Navalny argued, it would be possible to reduce the dominant party's share of seats in the assembly, thereby reducing the managerial leverage of the executive over the legislature and inflicting symbolic damage on the regime. To help voters identify the strongest opposition candidates in their respective electoral districts, Navalny's supporters developed a number of electronic tools, including the Navalny application (available from the Apple App Store and Google Play) and a Telegram bot. The purpose of these tools was to provide the voter, on her request, with information about which of the opposition candidates in a given district was most likely to outrun United Russia's candidate.

The SV did not make any specific recommendations about party-list voting, but voters who were turning out to defeat the United Russia candidate for the single-member district were highly unlikely to then vote for the party's list. The other aspect that remained unarticulated in the SV campaign but quite apparent from previous experiences of Russian electoral politics was that opposition voters' mobilization could push the authorities to engage in widespread electoral fraud, sparking massive discontent and protests among the population, as occurred in the aftermath of the 2011 Duma elections.

For their part, the organizers of the 2021 campaign within the presidential administration dealt with the threats posed by the SV campaign systematically. First, Navalny himself was excluded from active campaigning by his alleged poisoning in August 2020 and subsequent imprisonment upon his return to Russia. Navalny's main organizations, the Anti-Corruption Foundation and its affiliates, have been classified as "foreign agents" by the Russian authorities continuously since 2019, which has significantly impeded their activities. In June 2021, all these organizations, including the so-called Navalny Headquarters that operated in the regions, were further recognized as "extremist" by a court decision and banned, making any kind of cooperation with these organizations a criminal offence. This led, in particular, to the effective disenfranchisement of several prominent opposition politicians who had originally planned to run in the elections. Several prospective candidates from the opposition camp were arrested and detained.

Second, in the run-up to and during the campaign, the authorities made an unprecedented effort to reduce the amount of politically relevant information available to opposition-minded voters. This was achieved by listing a large number of media outlets—including *Meduza*, *VTimes*, *The Insider*, *iStories*, and several others—as "foreign agents" or "undesirable organizations," forcing some of them into self-liquidation and greatly reducing the availability of others to the Russian audience as a whole. Third, the prospects for mass protests in response to electoral fraud were diminished by the brutality displayed by the police and state security forces in January and February 2021 during the public demonstrations against the imprisonment of Navalny, when many participants faced mistreatment and significant criminal charges.

The official electoral campaign started on June 18. By that time, as many as 32 political parties were eligible to run in the Russian elections. However, only 14 parties could nominate candidates without collecting the required number of signatures in their support. The previous Duma elections had demonstrated quite clearly that no party could expect to navigate the signature collection procedure successfully. Indeed, in 2021 only one minor party experimented with signature collection, to no avail. There was also formal provision for self-nomination (independent candidacy) in single-member districts, which was likewise conditional on signature collection. Only 11 of 174 self-nominees managed to get registered as candidates; most of them were pro-government candidates who, for a variety of tactical reasons, preferred not to run under the label of United Russia.

The set of parties that ran in the 2021 elections was not much altered from the 2016 elections. Four of them—United Russia, the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF), the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR), and A Just Russia (SR)—were already represented in the Duma. It should be noted that following a series of poor performances in regional elections, A Just Russia made an effort to renovate its image by merging with two minor nationalist parties and renaming itself A Just Russia—Patriots—For Truth.

The remaining ten parties were, in descending order of the success they achieved in the party list section of the 2021 elections: New People (new), Pensioners' Party, Yabloko, Communists of Russia, The Greens, Motherland, Russian Party of Freedom and Justice (previously known as the Communist Party of Social Justice), Green Alternative (new), Party of Growth, and Civic Platform. The New People party deserves some attention as a successful newcomer. The party was founded in March

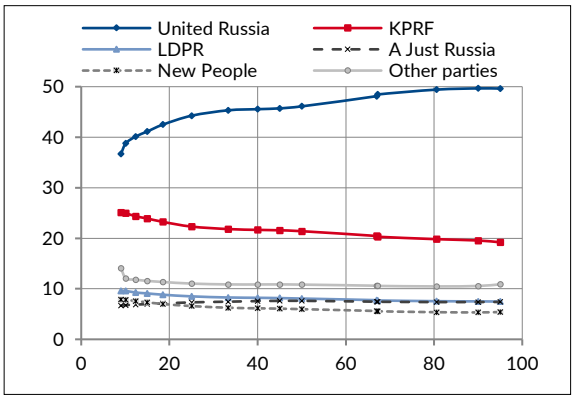
2020 on the basis of the Faberlic network marketing company specializing in cosmetics, beauty, soft goods, and fashion accessories. Its skillful campaigning in the 2020 regional elections helped it secure some level of visibility among voters and entitled it to nominate its list without signature collection. Ideologically, it claimed to represent the "center-right" segment of the electorate.

The four main parties mostly campaigned via street posters that highlighted their traditional priorities: stability for United Russia, justice for the KPRF and A Just Russia, and a strong state for the LDPR. Media coverage of United Russia was provided not so much by its own campaign as by news programming and televised endorsements by Vladimir Putin. New People focused its campaign on street posters that emphasized the newness of the party. All the major parties carefully distanced themselves from Navalny and his SV campaign, particularly the only party that could realistically claim pro-democracy credentials, Yabloko. At some point, Grigory Yavlinsky said outright that Navalny supporters did not have to vote for Yabloko because it had nothing to offer them. Such statements obviously undermined the party's electoral chances, but many analysts suggested that this unusual approach was necessary to avoid the party's disqualification from the elections.

The first day of elections, September 17, witnessed rather massive turnout of mostly organized voters, averaging about 40% in the ethnic republics and about 30% in other regions. Given that overall turnout was reported as 51.7%, this suggests that no less than half of the voters in the 2021 elections were subject to administrative mobilization. The SV campaign was severely hampered by the fact that shortly after the SV lists were released on September 16, both the Apple Store and Google Play switched off their Navalny applications; the Telegram bot ceased to function several hours later under pressure from the Russian authorities. The lists did, however, remain available in the form of a YouTube video and a Google Doc.

The early results of the elections, reported late in the evening of September 19 after 10.1% of ballots had been counted, indicated that United Russia's list was in the lead with 38.8% of the vote, followed by the KPRF (25.0%), LDPR (9.6%), New People (7.8%), and A Just Russia (6.8%). The results of elections in most single-member districts were not reported for a longer time, but it is known that the SV candidates were originally in the lead in more than half of Moscow city districts. As counting went on, the vote shares of United Russia and A Just Russia steadily increased, while the vote shares of other major parties declined. This is illustrated by Figure 1, where the Y-axis is the reported share of the vote by party and the X-axis is the share of ballots counted. Nearly all of the victories of SV candidates in single-member districts were also reverted. The official results of the elections are reported on pp. 11–13.

Figure 1: The Dynamics of the Reported Vote for Political Parties by Share of Ballots Counted in the 2021 Duma Elections



Source: Compiled by the author on the basis of election results.

Of course, it is only natural for election results to change as vote-counting proceeds. Indeed, this happened in previous Russian elections, but the change was never as sweeping and unidirectional as in 2021. This invited widespread speculation about massive fraud. Additional grounds for this speculation were provided by the facts that independent election observation was extremely limited; that Golos, the only independent group that still conducted some observation, reported numerous violations; and that the Central Election Commission greatly reduced the potential for quantitative analysis of election results by installing a ciphering device, the scrambler, on its website.

The Russian election authorities thoroughly rejected all allegations of fraud and officially confirmed the returns, as a result of which United Russia retained its constitutional majority in the Duma, albeit in a slightly reduced form. The SV campaign did not reach its proclaimed goal, but by mobilizing at least some opposition-minded voters, it increased the likelihood of fraud and thereby hampered the authorities' search for legitimacy. No massive post-election protests occurred, even though the Moscow city organization of the KPRF did stage several small-scale meetings. Soon after the elections, several remaining independent media outlets and nearly all regional coordinators of the Golos association were placed on the "foreign agents" list.

About the Author

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Additional Reading on the Efficacy of the Smart Voting Strategy

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ANALYSIS

Same Soup, Just Reheated: The 2021 State Duma Elections and the Hegemonizing Political Regime in Russia

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Abstract

The 2021 parliamentary elections in Russia show that while the longstanding menu of authoritarian manipulation remains the same, the level of these manipulations and the efforts being put into regime maintenance are unprecedented. In supplementing and sometimes adjusting these instruments, the regime is moving more rapidly than ever toward a hegemonic form of authoritarianism.

State Duma Elections 2021: The Context

On September 20, 2021, the Russian Central Election Commission finally summarized the results of the elections to the State Duma of the 8th convocation. The most surprising—and, at first glance, encouraging—result was the change in the number of political parties entering the national parliament: this increased, from 4 to 5, for the first time since 2003. That being said, this change had little impact on the political status quo. The party of power—United Russia—took 324 out of 450 seats in the national parliament, thereby preserving its constitutional majority for the next 5-year period.

Given the authoritarian context of today's Russia, this result was quite predictable. Yet in light of declining popular support for the party of power, it was expected to be lower. Even the pro-Kremlin Public Opinion Foundation (FOM) declared in August 2021 that only 30% of the population was prepared to vote for United Russia, compared to 45% in the run-up to the 2016 elections. How, then, did the unpopular United Russia gain a parliamentary supermajority at almost the same level?

In part, this result is attributable to the electoral design. As in 2016, the Duma elections were conducted according to the parallel voting system. This means that half of the parliamentary seats were distributed in proportion to the vote share received by the party lists (PR system), while the other half were won by individual candidates elected in single-member districts (SMD). In 2016, United Russia's electoral gains in the PR segment were ensured by the dispersed votes of small political parties, which were unable to overcome the electoral threshold of 5%. Adding to this its victories in slightly more than 90% of SMDs (which is not hard, since a candidate needs just a simple majority of votes to win), the party of power increased its constitutional majority to 76.2%. Obviously, there was no point in changing rules that had helped United Russia to achieve such outstanding results.

However, the declining popularity of United Russia called for measures beyond simple reliance on electoral design. Most of the strategies the Kremlin implemented are in line with the well-known and common logic of electoral authoritarianism, but with slight modifications for these elections that suggest the further autocratization of the regime.

Why Elections in Autocracies and Russia?

The political value of elections under authoritarianism is twofold. On the one hand, it is argued that elections, even in an autocracy, help to develop an active civil society and engage new politicians and voters, thus inducing democratization. On the other hand, the mass of empirical evidence suggests that this is far from universal. Quite the contrary: elections in autocracies help to achieve the autocrat's main goal, namely ensuring the long-term survival of the regime.

Elections sustain autocracies in a variety of ways, some of which entail context-specific variations. Typically, multiparty elections in an authoritarian regime perform three main functions. First, they help to control elites and other groups in society, thus mitigating potential threats to the status quo. To avoid elections producing a subversive effect, individual elites are required to contribute their efforts and resources, whether vote-buying or persuasion. Low support at the polls (as well as turnout) signals to an autocrat that her agents are incompetent, disloyal, and/or unpopular, thus helping to manage the composition of elite circles.

Second, elections serve to divide and discourage intra-elite opposition. The overwhelming victories of incumbents ensured by the controlled nature of authoritarian elections signal to political elites that resistance is futile and there is no access to spoils outside the regime, thus eliminating any potential for internal opposition. If opposition within the ruling coalition does emerge, authoritarian elections help to reveal its strongholds and to mitigate the threat.

Finally, elections in authoritarian regimes allow for the cooptation of potential rivals. The dictator may allow members of the opposition to participate in elections, offering them some means of advancement into political

offices and providing spoils and limited decision-making capacity. In this sense, authoritarian elections provide mixed incentives for the parties, who may oppose the current regime but still want to benefit from the spoils or to advance their policy agendas.

In this respect, elections to Russia's State Duma follow the logic of regime maintenance. Indeed, these elections featured the mass mobilization of the state-employed electorate (with long queues at local polling stations) and massive falsifications by members of local electoral commissions, demonstrating the loyalty and mobilization capacity of lower-level regime agents. A harsh cleanup of the political landscape—with the banning of pro-Navalny organizations as extremist, the opening of criminal cases against many activists and strong non-systemic opposition candidates, and other repressions—in the lead-up to the elections have severely limited opportunities for consolidation of the protest electorate and thus demonstrated the unlimited power of the regime. Finally, even the entrance of a new political party, New People (*Novye Liudi*), to the parliament was nothing but an illustration of authoritarian cooptation, albeit limited to the minimal needs of the regime. Widely considered a spoiler party, New People united some popular figures with liberal views on both politics and business regulation (such as Sardana Avksentieva, an ex-mayor of the city of Yakutsk); the party's 13 seats give them an arena, but not one large enough to mobilize strong anti-regime bases.

These well-established channels of regime maintenance were supplemented by unprecedented adjustments, most of which were developed as part of the regime's response to the "smart voting" campaign.

New Flavors in the Menu of Manipulation

Before the regional and local elections of 2019, Alexey Navalny announced a new project called Smart Voting (*Umnoe golosovanie*). The main goal of the project was to minimize the share of United Russia deputies in regional assemblies by rallying the protest vote behind a single alternative candidate in single-member districts. The choice of alternative candidates was based on deep analysis of sociological surveys, the results of the previous elections, and expert knowledge. In those regions where elections were held in multi-member districts, voters received a list of several recommended names.

While technically similar to the strategy of pre-electoral recommendations that is widespread in many democracies, the "smart vote" campaign is quite innovative in the overtly authoritarian context and proved to make a significant difference to electoral outcomes in Russia. For example, in the St. Petersburg municipal elections of 2019, "smart voting" significantly reduced the vote shares of United Russia candidates while increasing the returns for nominees recommended by Smart Voting by an average of 7%. The effect was even larger in 2020, when SV-supported candidates received 10% more votes on average.

In 2021, the regime struck back. First, three-day voting—effectively tested during nationwide voting on amendments to the Constitution in 2020—was introduced. Officially, this innovation was justified as an anti-COVID measure. In practice, however, it allowed for extreme levels of voter mobilization, the forcible opening of paper ballot processing systems (KOIB) and safety lockers for ballots, the correction and adding of unsanctioned ballots at night between voting days, and numerous other violations. Overall, independent observers registered approximately 5,000 complaints and violations nationwide, while overt fraud has been detected using statistics. According to Sergey Shpilkin, an expert on the detection of electoral manipulations, the "real" result of the United Russia party list is about 31%–33%.

Second, a new instrument to fight against the opposition consolidation in SMDs proved to be electronic voting, which was tested in 7 regions but had an especially dramatic effect in Moscow. The main idea behind this innovation was to provide an opportunity for those unable to visit the polls to cast their votes (largely driven by anti-COVID measures). However, even a measure that is in theory designed to facilitate voting can, in an autocracy, facilitate manipulations. In Moscow, for example, candidates nominated by "Smart Voting" were leading in nine out of fifteen single-member districts after the conventional ballots had been counted. However, the result changed drastically after the electronic votes were added. In the end, the "administrative candidates"—members of UR or formal independents who were de facto supported by UR—won all fifteen Moscow single-member districts. Especially given the outrageous delay in publishing the results, it is widely believed among the public that the results were falsified to a previously unseen extent.

Thus, the Russian elections of 2021 have shown that without turning away from the old instruments of authoritarian manipulation, the Russian regime has put unprecedented efforts and resources into their operation. It has also added to these mechanisms, as with electronic voting, one of the Kremlin's most recent gimmicks.

The Paradox of a Hegemonizing Russia

The political science literature on authoritarian regimes suggests, among other things, that the final step between competitive or electoral authoritarianism and a closed autocracy is so-called hegemonic authoritarianism. This type of political regime implies that elections lack competitiveness; political uncertainty is thus close to nil, since the opposition has almost no capacity to compete against the incumbent. To put it simply, elections still exist in such regimes, but as a fiction with no substantive mean-

ing. The most recent tendencies in today's Russia suggest that this is exactly the direction in which the regime is moving, and the latest Duma elections are no exception.

Indeed, the whole electoral campaign served to demonstrate the insecurity of United Russia, despite the intensification of repression against the opposition and its well-developed instruments of manipulation. The paradox is that the more unpopular United Russia, one of the main institutional pillars of the regime, is, the more categorically the regime seeks to consolidate its positions and thus the faster Russian authoritarianism moves toward its hegemonic form.

Yet this does not necessarily mean that the future of Russian politics is set. Most regimes similar to the Russian one transformed as a result of an elite split. The latest Duma elections have shown that in the absence of political alternatives, the protest electorate is ready to consolidate around the systemic opposition (in part as a result of the Smart Voting project). This creates space for a potential strengthening of the relevant political forces and a resulting regime transformation through an elite split. Of course, this opportunity remains to be seized.

About the Author
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ANALYSIS

Alexei Navalny, "Smart Voting," and the 2021 Russian State Duma Elections

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Abstract
Team Navalny's "Smart Voting" project received a great deal of attention around the September 2021 Russian elections. This analysis describes the basic design of the tactical voting strategy, placing it within the longer history of Alexei Navalny's approach to elections. We note the resistance to the project, assess its impact in the face of unprecedented attempts by the Kremlin to neuter its influence, and discuss the relationship between "Smart Voting" and the Communist Party (KPRF).

Tactical Voting in an Authoritarian State

"Smart Voting" is a tactical voting project launched in 2018 by "Team Navalny"—the group of politicians and strategists around the opposition politician and anti-corruption activist. It is their response to the particular conditions of electoral politics in authoritarian Rus-

sia: real opposition candidates—representatives of the non-systemic opposition—are largely barred from running, but candidates from systemic opposition parties are typically allowed to take part in the polls, in managed competition with United Russia (UR) candidates. Without the opportunity to vote on the basis of policy preferences and ideology, the next best option—according to Navalny and his team—is for opposition voters to rally around the candidates best positioned to defeat United Russia candidates. Defeating them might, in turn, embolden systemic opposition parties to take a stronger stance against the Kremlin.

Another goal of "Smart Voting" is to counter growing political apathy. Given that most genuine opposition candidates have been barred from running, many opposition voters see no reason to vote. For these Russians, boycotting elections is the appropriate, moral choice. But the response from Team Navalny is that staying away from the polls actually helps the Kremlin to secure election victories. If opposition-minded voters disengage but others more likely to vote for United Russia can be coerced or induced to turn out, then the authorities have a much easier time achieving their goals, even when support for UR is low.

"Vote for Any Party Except United Russia"

Alexei Navalny and his team have not always called for "Smart Voting." Their approach to elections has evolved over time due to a number of factors, including the changing level of electoral competition and shifting electoral rules, as well as their evolving strategic thinking.

When Navalny was a member of the nationalist NAROD movement, he advocated boycotting the 2007 elections. But in the run-up to the 2011 State Duma elections, Navalny argued that this strategy had failed, as United Russia had been able to secure a supermajority in the national parliament. He now encouraged people to "vote for any party but United Russia"—an approach that became known as the "Navalny option" and was meant to "destroy" the dominant ruling party. Yet by 2014, following the barring of even some systemic opposition politicians from the polls, he was once again calling for a boycott.

Team Navalny settled on "Smart Voting" after Navalny's own exclusion from the 2018 presidential election. In a November 2018 YouTube video, he set out his thinking:

> The parties themselves cannot agree to put up a single candidate against United Russia. But we can. We are all different, but we have the same politics—we are against the monopoly of United Russia. The rest is mathematics. If we all do the smart thing and vote for the strongest candidate, then this candidate will win and the United Russia candidate will lose.

This approach built on the earlier slogan of "vote for any party but United Russia" but finessed it by attempting to coordinate the vote of opposition-minded voters.

Not everybody is convinced. The strategy is not straightforward—and asks a lot of voters who may disagree vehemently with the positions of those politicians that Team Navalny has chosen to back. Indeed, the basic approach of "Smart Voting" has not been accepted—and has in fact been openly criticized—by some members of the opposition, particularly liberals. According to Nikolay Rybakov, the leader of the liberal party Yabloko, the strategy is "cynical" because it amounts to telling voters that "no one cares" about their ideas and values.

Past Successes

Since its launch, "Smart Voting" has not been an unqualified success. It has, however, been an effective tool for reducing the presence of United Russia in regional and local legislatures. In 2019, for example, UR lost its majority in six out of 31 assemblies where "Smart Voting" had been used. In one of these—elections to the Moscow City Council—UR retained its majority but "Smart Voting" helped to significantly reduce the number of seats that UR controlled.

In most races, Navalny's team has recommended the opposition candidate that they deem the strongest, so it is difficult to disentangle the effect of "Smart Voting" from the independent effect of that candidate's popularity. But political scientists Mikhail Turchenko and Grigorii Golosov have tried to determine the independent effect of "Smart Voting," including during the 2019 municipal elections in St. Petersburg. In this analysis, they capitalized on the fact that the same candidates could run in more than one district, allowing them to directly compare the results of a scenario where a candidate received "Smart Voting" support to those where he or she did not. The average difference was seven percentage points, which is certainly enough to sway a race.

In 2020, Navalny's team again claimed victory in some regional and municipal elections. As before, UR defended its dominance in most instances, but there were cases like the City Council of Tomsk where opposition candidates won the majority of seats and—at least equally importantly for Navalny—where candidates who were directly associated with him, and not simply backed by "Smart Voting," defeated their UR competitors.

"Smart Voting" appeared to be particularly effective in Tomsk and Novosibirsk, where Navalny's team accompanied the elections with corruption investigations into regional elites. And so, even though Navalny was now in jail, the State Duma elections of 2021 were, from his team's perspective, another chance to prove that anti-corruption investigations and voting recommendations could hurt the dominant party.

The Meaning of Success

But this time, "Smart Voting" faced a lot more resistance from the Kremlin from the outset. In addition to excluding even moderately oppositional figures like the Communist Party's (KPRF) Pavel Grudinin, the authorities took unprecedented steps to hobble "Smart Voting's" capacity to coordinate the opposition vote. These ranged from labelling Navalny's organizations—including the Anti-Corruption Foundation (FBK)—as "extremist," to Roskomnadzor (the communications regulator) blocking the "Smart Voting" website, to a Moscow court ordering Yandex and Google to censor search engine results for the term, to direct pressure on Google and Apple workers that resulted in the "Smart Voting" app being removed from their respective app stores. This has made evaluating the project's success tricky.

Analyzing the results of the elections, Navalny's closest associate, Leonid Volkov, presented them as a "David versus Goliath" fight and claimed that David ("Smart Voting") had been successful. This "success," he claimed, was particularly noticeable in Moscow, where candidates supported by "Smart Voting" led in the majority of constituencies before online voting outcomes were added to the results. In a September 21 Instagram post, Navalny called these results a "triumph." According to Volkov, these candidates "in fact" won and were elected but had their legitimate victory "stolen." He underlined that the "Smart Voting" strategy had produced the intended effect: it created "stress" for the authorities. Since candidates supported by the initiative did well, he argued, the authorities were forced to resort to egregious fraud, thereby revealing the true nature of elections.

In spite of this proclaimed "triumph," however, Navalny's team did not have much to write home about, as Navalny himself admitted: "You can't call the whole result a 'victory.'" Volkov listed a few "bright and strong politicians" that did manage to get into the State Duma: Oleg Mikhailov and Mikhail Matveev, both supported by the Communist Party. Navalny considered that, in the end, the results showed that "they" represented the majority. According to him, to win elections in Russia you need: (1) to get the most votes; (2) to monitor elections; and (3) to protest if votes are stolen. In his view, the first point was fulfilled, but protest was impossible to organize. As Volkov also acknowledged, the brutality of the repressions earlier in 2021 made protest unlikely. Accordingly, Navalny's team did not call on people to take to the streets after the official election results were announced. Instead, Volkov delegated responsibility, claiming that protesting was now the job of those parties deprived of their legitimate votes.

The team's next moves remain unclear. With several of Navalny's associates abroad and the regional network of the movement dismantled, their influence over Russian politics is now even more heavily dependent on their ability to remain online. On that front, the latest moves by American tech giants Google and Apple do not bode well: Navalny claimed on Twitter that he was surprised not by Putin's fraud at the polls, but by "how obediently the almighty Big Tech turned into his accomplices." Frustrated as a politician, Navalny built a team and an important following on social media, and YouTube in particular. Behind bars, he may soon be deprived of that last tool.

Better Red than Dead?

The Communist Party of the Russian Federation made a strong showing in the State Duma elections. According to official results, the party managed to increase both its share of the vote—close to 19%—and its number of seats, up from 42 in 2016 to 57. The Communists were heavily supported by the "Smart Voting" initiative. Indeed, in 137 out of 225 single-member districts, Team Navalny supported a Communist candidate.

As we show in our book, *Navalny: Putin's Nemesis, Russia's Future?*, Navalny's following is mostly liberal, in the Russian understanding of the term: supporters favor the creation of a rule-of-law state, democracy, and a free-market economy. In recent years, Navalny and his team have put a stronger emphasis on inequality and social policies, but they remain quite far from the political positions of the Communist Party, which stands on a platform that blends traditional social policies, nostalgia for the Soviet Union, and nationalist positions.

That being said, the experience of those Moscow City Duma KPRF deputies who were elected with Navalny's support in 2019 shows that, at least in some groups within the party, there is an appetite for stronger opposition to authoritarianism. On the last day of the vote in 2021, one of these deputies, Evgeny Stupin, appeared on the *Navalny LIVE* YouTube channel to discuss the results—an even bolder move now that Navalny's organizations have been labelled "extremist" and dissolved.

It remains to be seen whether this oppositional stance from some groups within KPRF can be replicated at the State Duma level, which is more tightly controlled. Party leader Gennady Zyuganov made clear in his post-election meeting with Putin that the party supports the president and can be counted on as a force of stability. But Navalny's bet on tactical voting still rests on the hope that it might radicalize the tame systemic opposition. As the KPRF has confirmed its status as the most influential party within that portion of the opposition, its future moves must be followed closely.

Reactions from the Authorities

As shown above, before the polls even opened, the authorities tried to prevent "Smart Voting" from hav-

ing any substantive impact by excluding candidates and blocking access to information about Smart Voting. Their response to the challenge mounted by Navalny and his team also included an apparent increase in the use of fraud during the elections themselves.

To be sure, there were still polling stations and whole regions—like the Sakha Republic in Siberia—where the ballots appeared to be counted correctly. And there were indications that the mere presence of an independent observer at a precinct could substantially reduce attempts at electoral manipulation. But the overall picture was less than rosy. Using official data, analysts plotted the turnout recorded at each precinct against the share of votes that UR received—and revealed the typical "comet" shape that is highly indicative of fraud. Where turnout is around 35%, UR polled at about 30%; both numbers had been predicted—even by state-funded pollsters—in the run-up to the elections. But if a precinct recorded higher official turnout, UR's share tended to be higher as well. This clearly suggests either ballot-stuffing or tampering with the protocols—and this, it seems, is what brought UR's party list result up to the official figure of 49.8%.

No Ideal Strategy

The State Duma elections of 2021 were, then, a continuation of the ongoing cat-and-mouse game between the Kremlin and an opposition that has to operate in an increasingly hostile environment—and has become adept at exploiting the small openings for real politics that still exist. Yet one by one, these openings are being closed. Navalny's efforts, as well as those of many other opposition forces, have nurtured the idea of tactical electoral coalitions. But if elections are gradually being hollowed out, such strategies may prove ever more toothless in the future. In a 2019 blog post, Navalny himself noted the difficulty:

> Yes, of course, Smart Voting is not the ideal strategy. Clear as day. I want to remind everyone that our political system is called "electoral authoritarianism." The word "electoral" kind of means that elections are manipulated so that only Putin wins. And the word authoritarianism means, guys, that there's no ideal strategy.

With the roll-out of online voting expected across the country in the near future, including for the 2024 presidential election, opposition actors face an uphill battle in the electoral field, including the constant fight against electoral manipulation; even the fiercest observers cannot prevent digital fraud as it happens. But Team Navalny's past adaptability suggests that they should not be counted out completely.

About the Authors

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- Jan Matti Dollbaum, Morvan Lallouet, and Ben Noble. 2021. "Alexei Navalny was poisoned one year ago. His fate tells us a lot about Putin's Russia." *The Washington Post*, "Monkey Cage" blog, 20 August, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/08/20/alexei-navalny-was-poisoned-one-year-ago-his-fate-tells-us-lot-about-putins-russia/
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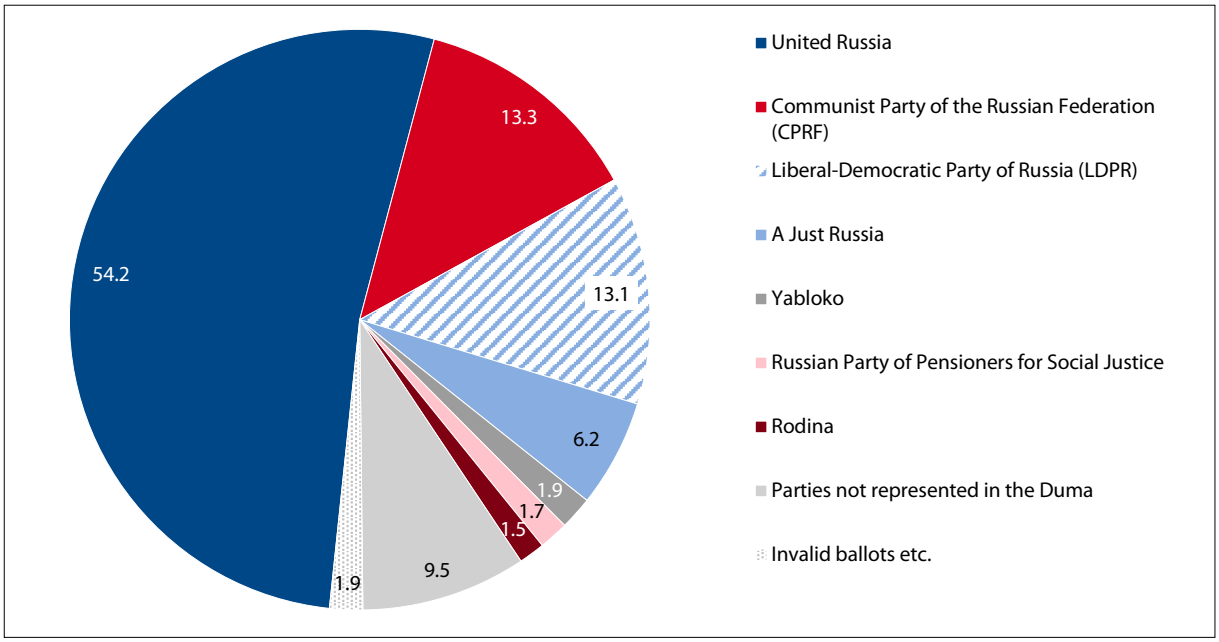
STATISTICS

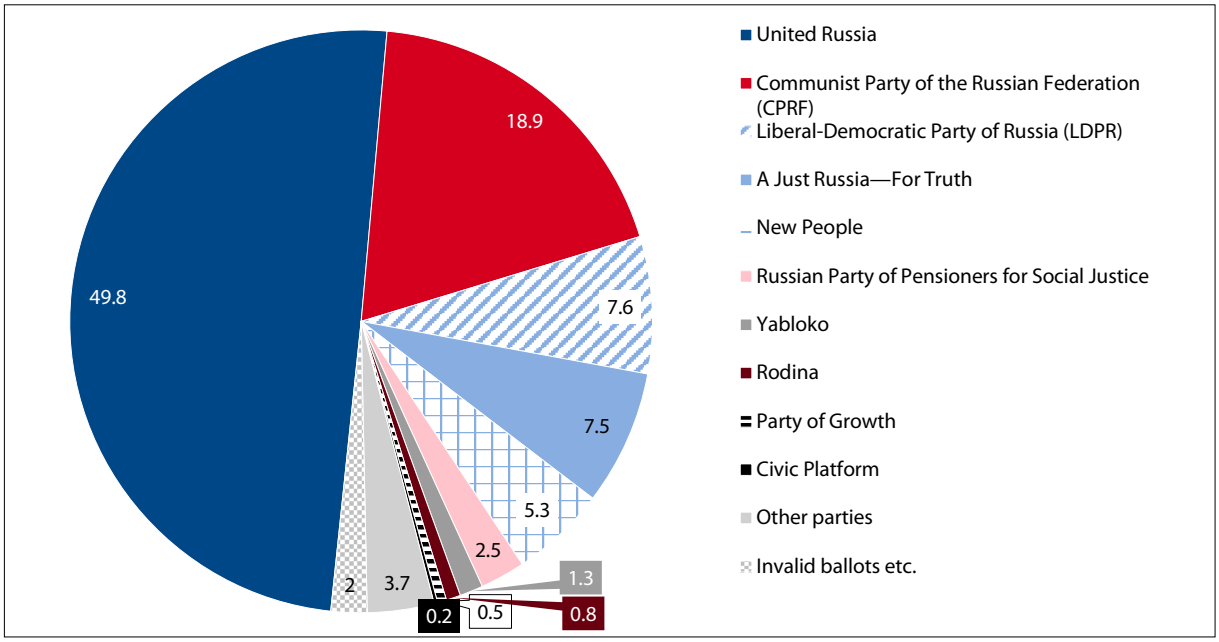
The Results of the 2021 Duma Elections

Figure 1: Results of the 2016 Duma Election—Party Lists, in % of Votes



Source: Central Election Commission of the Russian Federation, http://www.vybory.izbirkom.ru/region/region/izbirkom?action=show&root=1&tvd=100100067795854&vrn=100100067795849&region=0&global=1&sub_region=0&prver=0&pronetvd= 0&vibid=100100067795854&type=242

Figure 2: Results of the 2021 Duma Election—Party Lists, in % of Votes



Source: Central Election Commission of the Russian Federation, http://www.vybory.izbirkom.ru/region/region/izbirkom?action=show&root=0&tvd=100100225883177&vrn=100100225883172&region=0&global=&sub_region=0&prver=0&pronetvd=null&vibid=100100225883177&type=233

Table 1: Results of the 2016 Duma Elections: Number of Seats Won in Legislative Constituencies (Single Mandate Constituencies, 225 Seats in Total)—by Party Affiliation, Number of Seats and % of Votes Cast

	Number of seats	% of votes cast
United Russia	203	48.4
CPRF	7	12.9
A Just Russia	7	9.7
LDPR	5	9.8
Rodina	1	2.4
Civic Platform	1	0.7
Independent	1	0.8

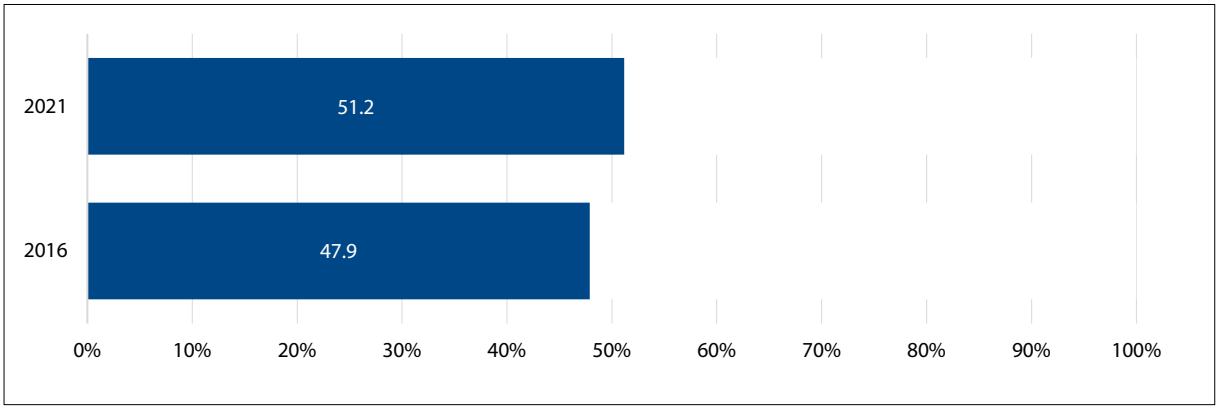
Source: Central Election Commission of the Russian Federation, http://www.vybory.izbirkom.ru/region/izbirkom?action=show&root_a=1000293&vrn=100100067795849

Table 2: Results of the 2021 Duma Elections: Number of Seats Won in Legislative Constituencies (Single Mandate Constituencies, 225 Seats in Total)—by Party Affiliation, Number of Seats and % of Votes Cast

	Number of seats	% of votes cast
Untied Russia	198	45.9
CPRF	9	16.3
A Just Russia—For Truth	8	8.8
LDPR	2	5.9
Rodina	1	1.5
Party of Growth	1	0.9
Civic Platform	1	0.7
Independent	5	1.2

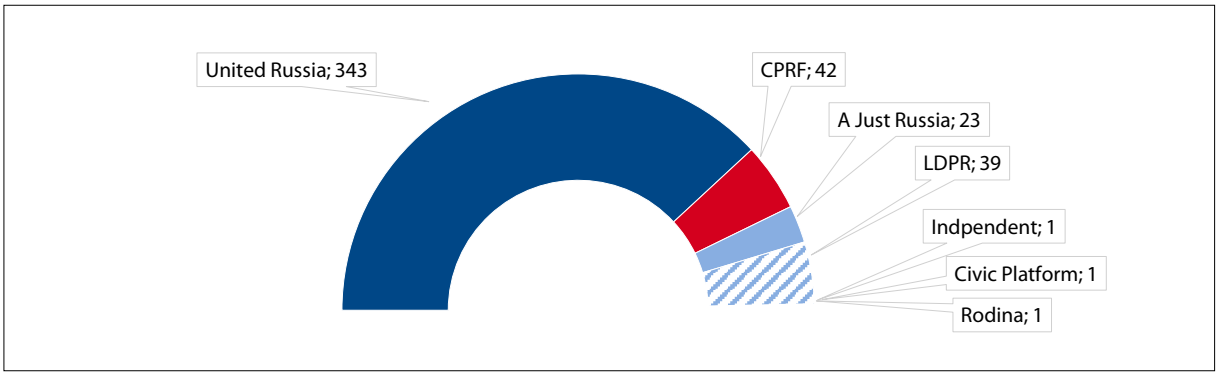
Source: Central Election Commission of the Russian Federation, http://www.cikrf.ru/analog/ediny-den-golosovaniya-2021/p_itogi/

Figure 3: Electoral Turnout 2016 and 2021, %



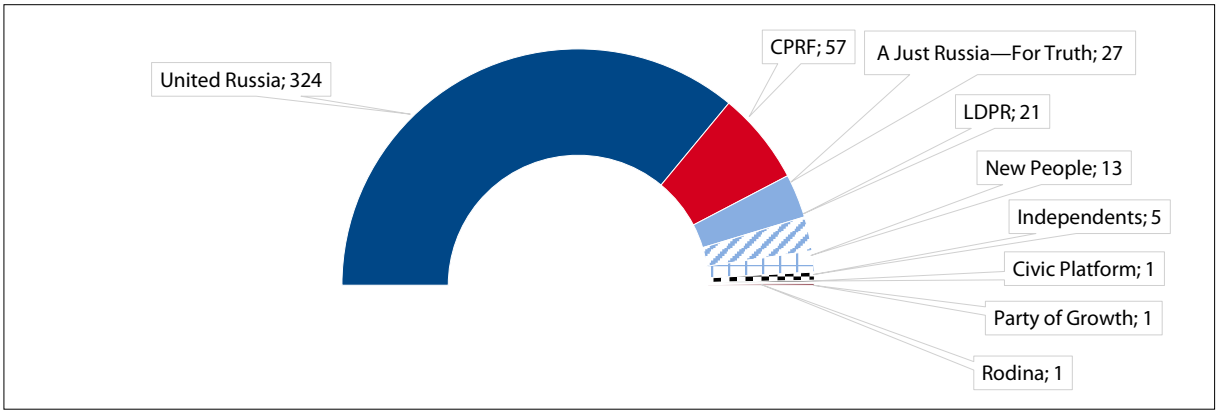
Source: Central Election Commission of the Russian Federation, http://www.vybory.izbirkom.ru/region/region/izbirkom?action=show&root=1&tvd=100100067795854&vrn=100100067795849&region=0&global=1&sub_region=0&prver=0&pronetvd= 0&vibid=100100067795854&type=242; http://www.vybory.izbirkom.ru/region/region/izbirkom?action=show&root=0&tvd=100100225883177&vrn=100100225883172&region=0&global=&sub_region=0&prver=0&pronetvd=null&vibid=100100225883177&type=233

Figure 4: Seat Composition of the Duma 2016–2021



Source: RBC, 24 September 2021, https://www.rbc.ru/politics/24/09/2021/614a18399a79471a19f405d2

Figure 5: Seat Composition of the Duma after the Elections of 2021



Source: RBC, 24 September 2021, https://www.rbc.ru/politics/24/09/2021/614a18399a79471a19f405d2

COMMENTARY

Elections in the "Protest Region" of Khabarovsk on Social Media and in Local Online Media

Tatiana Golova (Centre for East European and International Studies, Berlin)

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Given the mass protests in the Khabarovsk region in 2020 triggered by the arrest of the "people's governor," Sergey Furgal, the election of a new governor in September 2021 was always going to be controversial—and so were the discourses about it on Russian-language social media. Even under difficult conditions, social media provide opportunities for political action and the construction of shared regional and Russia-wide political spaces. I analyze the case of the Khabarovsk region to show how elections, first and foremost the gubernatorial election, are discussed and what lines of discourse and interpretations can be identified.

The Khabarovsk region garnered much attention in Russia and abroad in 2020: the arrest and subsequent detention of the then-governor, Sergey Furgal (LDPR), provoked street protests that are remarkable for their longevity and mass

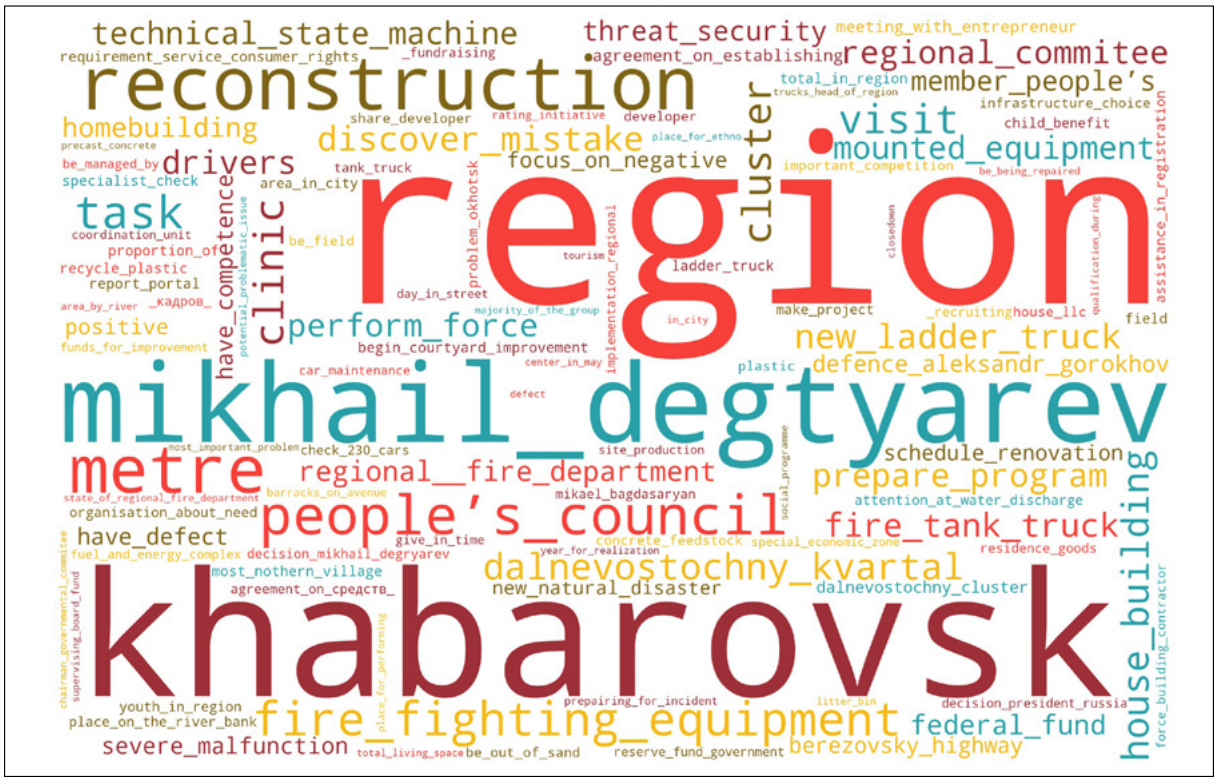
participation. They were characterized by anti-Kremlin and other political slogans, assertions of a pronounced regional identity, and a "good governor" discourse. Social media played an important role in this mobilization. Mikhail Degtyarev, appointed by Putin as acting governor, got off to a rough start with the protesters and the region's inhabitants as a whole.

So what was happening on online and social media before the elections in this perceived "protest region"? To answer this question, I first collected posts and comments on social media (mostly Odnoklassniki, VKontakte, Facebook, and YouTube) via a keyword-based search using the commercial service Medialogia SMM. Only publications on accounts (individual user pages, public pages, and groups) explicitly based in the Khabarovsk region were included. In a similar way, I gathered publications by regional and local online media (including the websites of hybrid media outlets), using statistics-based computer models to identify clusters of similar texts. To gain a better understanding of these patterns, selected texts representing certain clusters were then interpreted qualitatively. The analysis focuses on two timeframes: from August 2 to 18 (the period around the registration of candidates) and from September 13 to 20 (the elections were held over three days from September 17 to 19).

For each period, a large cluster of texts—between a third and half of which were published in regional/local online media—can be identified that depicts Degtyarev as a capable acting governor. For example, he is shown carrying out a personal inspection of renovations to Khabarovsk courtyards ("new benches made of eco-friendly materials were installed in a courtyard") or presenting new fire engines to the fire department. This PR cluster includes comments supposedly by "ordinary people" that on closer inspection turn out to be identical to publications by trolls (e.g., "I think that our people tend to focus on negative things without noticing positive developments! Please don't do that!"). Taken together, this and a similar cluster (see Figure 1) account for around one-third of the August sample.

Figure 1: Main Word Combinations for the "PR Cluster" in August

Cloud of relevant word combinations that occur frequently in the main "PR Cluster" and are specific in relation to other clusters of the same period. Words are included in the original dictionary form (e.g., "is" counts as "be"). Font size depends on frequency.



Source: Tatiana Golova

Another cluster focused on the gubernatorial election strikes a different tone: it contains fewer texts from online media outlets and more posts and comments from social media (indicating a higher level of user activity), a lot of everyday language, and opposing views. Identical comments by trolls are less prominent here. The main cleavage is between those who are for Degtyarev and those who are against him: "Don't vote for Degtyarev. He is a lying populist and Putin's slave. At the end of the day, he will, like Putin, hoodwink us all" vs. "Degtyarev works for real, without looking

for attention!" The fact that no genuine alternative candidates were allowed to stand for election is also discussed here. In addition to Degtyarev, three unconvincing candidates were registered in order to create the impression of a political competition without posing a serious threat. Piotr Pereversentsev (KPRF), who might have been able to consolidate the votes of the disaffected, failed to get past the "municipal filter" (to stand in a gubernatorial election, a candidate must collect a certain number of signatures from municipal deputies and officials). However, he did not feature prominently in the discourses analyzed here.

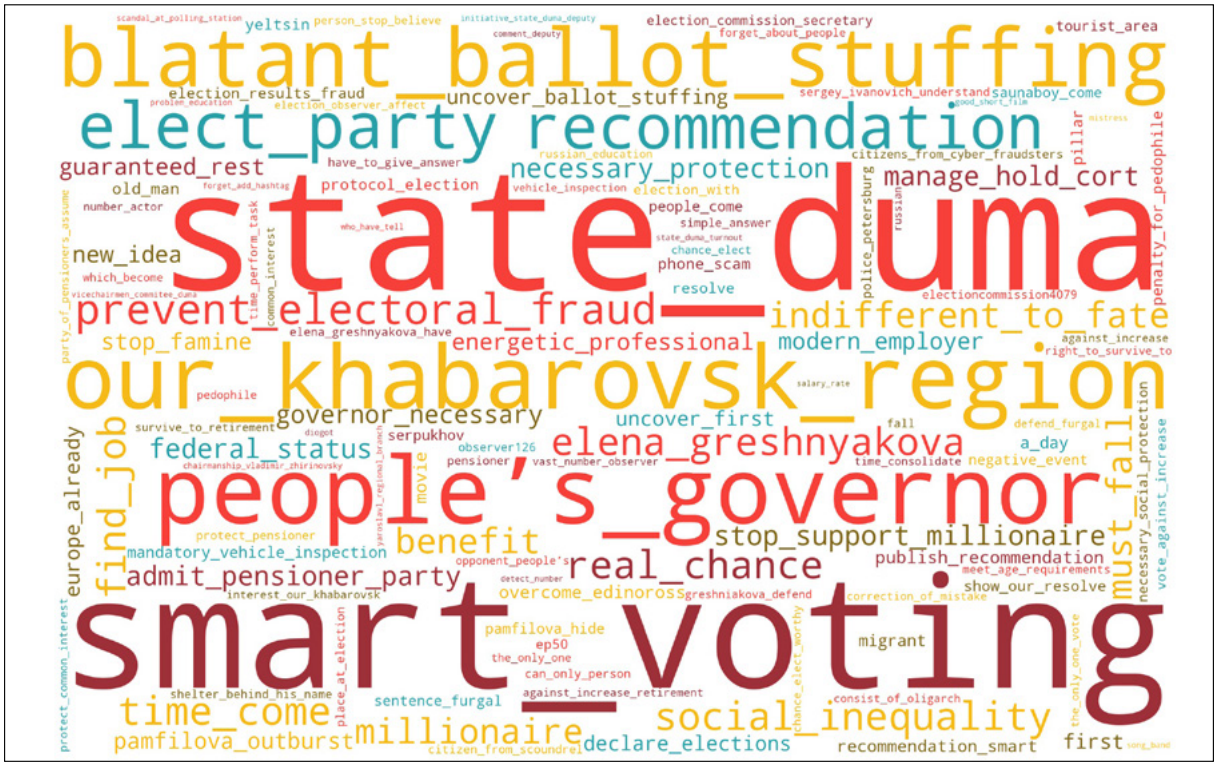
The discourse on the gubernatorial election is linked to other elections at federal, regional, and municipal level scheduled for the same dates. In this context, there is a cluster of social media texts that criticize the upcoming elections in general as unfair and manipulated (like a much-shared Team Navalny video, "Sold the Elections, Bought a Dacha. How Members of the Central Election Commission Are Getting Rich"). Also discussed is the main dilemma of discontented voters: to vote or to boycott the elections ("But if you do not go and vote for yourself, they will do it for you, for EdResnya [a pejorative term for United Russia] and for Putin"). Under difficult conditions where elections do not necessarily produce representation, social media enable people to interpret participation in elections as political action.

In relation to the Duma elections, critical discourses bring up the issue of state pressure on the KPRF and its candidates, including Pavel Grudinin and Nikolay Bondarenko. The multitude of styles and use of everyday language, for example in comments on articles reposted from media outlets, indicate a lively discourse that extends far beyond the borders of the Khabarovsk region. The regional dimension of the Duma elections is reinforced by the controversy over the election commission's refusal to register Sergey Furgal's son as a candidate.

Around the election dates, in the second analyzed period, the scope for individual political action becomes an even more important topic. The Smart Voting project initiated by Team Navalny, which sought to consolidate discontented voters around the most promising alternative candidates as a way of undermining United Russia, is both praised (including through sharing its recommendations) and criticized (see Figure 2). Noteworthy is an independent cluster of texts that calls on people to cast their ballots for the KPRF. These arguments are underpinned by the same rational logic divorced from voters' genuine political preferences as Navalny's Smart Voting but make no reference to the latter ("The KPRF is a left-wing party only on paper. […] One should vote for them not because they are left or right, but because they stand a chance against UR").

Figure 2: Main Word Combinations for the "Smart Voting Cluster" in September

Cloud of relevant word combinations that occur frequently in the "Smart Voting Cluster" and are specific in relation to other clusters of the same period. Words are included in the original dictionary form (e.g., "is" counts as "be"). Font size depends on frequency.



Source: Tatiana Golova

Electoral fraud at different levels and in different Russian regions is at the center of a further September cluster, where social media texts also dominate. The transregional political space that is constructed online is characterized by alienation. In a notable line of discussion, the official election results are contrasted with the experiences of voters and their personal networks in a way that suggests that the results are not legitimate ("All our friends and relatives voted against them. Such figures would not have been possible had the elections been held lawfully").

The 2020 protests did not play a major role in the discourses analyzed here. They did, however, leave a trace. Protest voting was most visible in those Duma elections based on party lists: the Khabarovsk region is one of four regions where the current protest-voter party, KPRF, performed better than United Russia. As acting governor in an authoritarian regime, Degtyarev had a huge advantage over his competitors, yet he was elected with a relatively modest 57 percent of the vote (spoiler candidate Marina Kim received a respectable 25 percent). Regardless of the election results, social media enabled the construction of shared spaces of experience and opportunities for political action. That makes them very different from local online media, which first and foremost provided a stage for the acting governor's PR activities.

About the Author
Tatiana Golova, PhD, is a sociologist and researcher at the Centre for East European and International Studies (ZOiS) in Berlin. She works on activism in large Russian cities, including mobilization on social media, and on post-Soviet migrants in Germany. This contribution is based on the preliminary results of the research project "Regional Protests on Russian Social Media."

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ANALYSIS

Waste Management in Russia

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Abstract
The field of waste management in Russia demonstrates the consequences of stifling political opposition. Legislation censors environmentalists and activists who seek to reform current waste management practices, even as local politicians financially reward companies for dumping waste into deteriorating landfills. This article reviews current waste management practices in Russia and the effects of such practices on the Russian populace. It outlines the various protests and other forms of civic engagement that have taken place in response to inadequate waste management, and the government's repression of such responses using the "foreign agent" law. Finally, the article examines the corruption in Russia's waste management system and explores why reform of this sector is unlikely to occur.

Current Conditions and the Need for Reform
In 2014, the World Bank issued a report stating that in 2010, Russia produced 48 million metric tons of waste and sent about 95% of this waste to landfills, with 30% of such landfills failing to meet basic sanitary standards. Moreover, in 2010, of the 7,518 "waste disposal sites" in Russia, 5,243 of them were unauthorized (IFC, 2014). The Embassy of the Netherlands in Russia released a similar report outlining percentages of waste in Russian landfills. According to this report, 34% of waste is food, 19% paper, 14% polymers, 12% glass, 6% wood, 6% street waste, 4% metal, 3% textile, and 2% "other" (Netherlands Embassy, 2019). The report stated that not only does Russia lack a "tradition of recycling," but many of its landfills are also completely overfilled and

outdated. It noted that the top ten regions producing the most waste are Moscow Oblast, Moscow City, Krasnodar Krai, the Republic of Bashkortostan, Sverdlovsk Oblast, St. Petersburg, Rostov Oblast, the Republic of Tatarstan, Nizhny Novgorod Oblast, and Samara Oblast (Netherlands Embassy, 2019). On average, European Union member states recycle about 60% of their municipal solid waste (MSW), while Russia's MSW recovery rate lags far behind. Moreover, Russia has steadily been producing more municipal solid waste, yet has been ineffective in recycling or managing this waste (IFC Advisory Services, 2012).

An official report by the Russian state auditors found that only about 7% of waste in Russia is recycled, with the rest being dumped in landfills in remote areas (Moscow Times, 2020). There are over 8,000 landfills in Russia (Moscow Times, 2020). In 2019, Putin initiated a waste management reform with the goal of recycling 60% of Russia's waste by 2030.

Protests, Civic Engagement, and Responses from the Kremlin

At first glance, it might seem odd to talk about sustainability efforts in Russia given the current political climate in the country. In fact, Russia's strengthening authoritarianism and Putinism are crucial for understanding the country's lack of effective recycling.

The Kremlin's policies affect waste management in Russia in two specific ways. First, the leadership uses the "foreign agent" law to target activists in the Russian Federation, including environmentalists. Second, rather than reforming waste management, the current situation allows for the creation of more "dumping grounds" in provincial cities, damaging the health and quality of life of citizens who live there. Growing concerns about these impacts prompted many of the 2018 environmental protests in Russia.

Originally passed in 2012, the "foreign agent" law is a legislative tool used by the Kremlin to stifle political dissent and opposition in the country (Reuters, 2012). It labels any unapproved groups that receive funding from outside the country as "foreign agents," a known euphemism for "spy" in Russia, and subjects them to heavy fines and regulations, making it difficult for the targeted organizations to work effectively. Many human rights organizations, LGBT rights groups, and environmental groups have been unjustly labeled as foreign agents and have been harassed and blacklisted. For instance, not only was the organization Ekozashchita (Ecodefense) blacklisted as a foreign agent in 2018, but the leader of the group, 65-year-old Alexandra Koroleva, had to seek asylum in Germany in 2019.

Koroleva fled out of fear of being potentially imprisoned for two years on the grounds of refusing to comply with the provisions of the "foreign agent" law (Human Rights Watch, 2019). Koroleva's organization refused to register as a foreign agent in 2012, when the law was passed, and was forcibly added to the list by the Russian government in 2014 (Human Rights Watch, 2019). Between 2012 and 2017, at least 14 different environmental groups shut down in response to the heavy fines and constraints imposed by the "foreign agent" law (Human Rights Watch, 2017). Yet this has not stopped many from protesting ineffective waste management practices. 2018 saw various protests in Russia's Arctic in response to the construction of new landfills in remote areas.

Though the alleged reason for Koroleva's arrest was her refusal to comply with the "foreign agent" law, members of Ekozashchita argue that it was in fact a direct response to the group's vocal criticism of the planned construction of a nuclear power plant in Kaliningrad (Human Rights Watch, 2019). In June 2019, Ekozashchita's co-chair, Vladimir Slivyak, confirmed that Koroleva had fled to Germany and stressed that her arrest was a political response by the Russian government to the group's campaign against power plant construction in Kaliningrad (Kireeva and Digges, 2019). Additionally, it is crucial to note that the Kremlin froze Ekozashchita's bank account in December 2018, rendering its members unable to pay the fines (Human Rights Watch, 2019).

This would not be the first or only instance of the Russian authorities targeting environmentalists. Even prior to the enactment of the "foreign agent" law, the Kremlin actively silenced and harassed environmentalists who brought to light the corruption in Russia's waste management sector. Environmentalist Yevgeny Vitishko of Ecological Watch on the North Caucasus was arrested in 2014 for exposing ecological and environmental damage in the North Caucasus resulting from the Sochi Olympics. Prior to this, he had also been arrested in 2011 for exposing illegal land use by the governor of Krasnodar (Goble, 2014). In November 2008, journalist and environmentalist Mikhail Beketov was savagely beaten by assailants—requiring doctors to amputate his leg and several fingers, and rendering him wheelchair-bound for the rest of his life—after accusing the former mayor of Khimki, Vladimir Strelchenko, of corruption, nepotism, and destroying local forestry to make way for a new freeway (CPJ, 2013). Those who advocate for effective waste management and environmental practices are routinely abused, targeted, and harassed by both the Kremlin and local politicians. It is no wonder that Russia lags behind in waste management reform.

Most federal spending is allocated to the capital city, Moscow, while remote regions receive little fund-

ing. This disparity in government spending affects all aspects of Russian infrastructure, including waste management. Remote areas in the Arctic are often neglected, with landfills being built on the territory, while infrastructure in Moscow is more effective. This is why most of those protesting waste management and landfills do so in remote, Arctic regions.

Not only is there a lack of effective federal infrastructure in these remote regions, but they are often used as dumping grounds and landfills. Many of the 2018 protests followed the government's announcement of plans to build a landfill near Shiyes in the Arkhangelsk region (Staalesen, 2018). Specifically, participants protested the corruption in trash collection.

Many of the inefficiencies surrounding Russia's waste management system have to do with corruption, which exists at both local and regional level. Those who participate in illegal logging and then setting fires to destroy the evidence are often rewarded, only exacerbating the issue. Additionally, the Russian Federation is behind on implementing effective waste management and recycling practices, having made few advances since the Soviet era, when the population generated much less solid waste (Arnold, 2019).

One of the largest protests occurred in the Tambov region village of Dmitrievka (Arnold, 2019 and Radio Liberty, 2018). Over 3,000 people came to Dmitrievka to protest the expansion of a landfill in the region, a number made especially impressive by the fact that only 7,000 people live in the village (Radio Liberty, 2018). Such landfills have had crippling effects on the environment and on the health of locals.

The Severny Samarka landfill in the Leningrad Region is one of Russia's largest, opened 50 years ago. Despite making various vocal complaints and protesting, locals are ignored by regional politicians. There are no regulations or restrictions, so the landfill has only been growing. Moreover, locals have reported respiratory problems due to the extensive gas emissions coming from the site. Area resident Oleg Yakovlev reported, "If there's wind blowing from the side of the landfill, there's simply no way to breathe here. It's such a horrible smell. And what can you do with a child here? We've written letters. People from the town of Samarka have written as well. We've collected signatures. There's no point…The authorities say nothing." Residents have protested and filed complaints to authorities, but to no avail (Mansuryan and Feofanov, 2021).

In 2020, Rosprirodnadzor, Russia's environmental watchdog, fined the owner of the site and demanded the end of continued dumping in this landfill. The court ignored this fine and allowed operations to continue, with over 1,000 tons of garbage dumped into the site every single day. This landfill now contains over 30 million cubic meters of waste (Mansuryan and Feofanov, 2021).

The problems can be traced back to financial corruption. Another local resident, Larisa Mukhina, stated, "How can we talk about the law when there's a flow of illegal cash? Yesterday, we witnessed it and interviewed the driver of this garbage truck. He told us that private vehicles [dump waste] for money. And he's not the first person to tell us this…The official annual revenue of the business exceeds $5 million. The amount of dirty money? No one knows for sure" (Mansuryan and Feofanov, 2021). Locals in this region protest regularly, often stopping trucks from coming in with large amounts of waste.

Protests take many forms. Some are smaller and happening with increased frequency; some are larger, as in 2018. In 2021, ballet dancer Ilmira Bagrautinova danced on the Bataringaya Bay on the Gulf of Finland near St. Petersburg to protest the planned construction of a new port this year. She and other residents have expressed concern that this port will pollute the water and ecologically destroy the area. Many have signed a petition to Putin to halt construction (BBC, 2021). The video of Bagrautinova dancing went viral, with over 1.2 million views.

Future of Waste Management Reform in Russia

Unfortunately, it does not appear as if there is much hope for waste management reform in Russia. In 2018, opposition activist Alexey Navalny took to Twitter to say that the political leadership of the Tambov region must resign over the corruption in waste management (Arnold, 2019). In 2015 he spoke out against contracts and money awarded to private companies for disposing of trash in an illegal manner. Many view trash reform as impossible in Russia (Arnold, 2019). Though the Kremlin has closed several landfills, the waste itself has simply been moved to different areas, which has not solved the issue of pollution. Many organizations, including Rosneft, benefit from this corruption and dump industrial waste near their production sites (Baev, 2018 and Podobedova, 2018).

Conclusion

Though there have been some efforts aimed at waste management reform, the hostile domestic political climate and large number of unauthorized landfills present major obstacles for those concerned about the environment. For actual reform to take place, the government must repeal the "foreign agent" law and end its crippling effect on the work of environmentalists. Local politicians, for their part, must stop the lucrative and corrupt practice of dumping waste in remote landfills.

Please see overleaf for information about the author and a bibliography.

About the Author
Leah Silinsky holds a Master's Degree from the George Washington University Elliott School of International Affairs.

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