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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.

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Dr Jan Matti Dollbaum is a post-doctoral researcher at the University of Bremen. His research interests include protest and social movements in democratic and authoritarian regimes. Among other places, his work has been published in *Perspectives on Politics*, *Post-Soviet Affairs*, and *Social Movement Studies*.

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Dr Ben Noble is Associate Professor in Russian Politics at University College London, an Associate Fellow of Chatham House, and a Senior Research Fellow at the Higher School of Economics, Moscow. He conducts research on legislative politics, authoritarianism, and Russian domestic politics. He has published work in a number of academic journals, including *Comparative Political Studies*, *Russian Politics*, and the *Journal of European Public Policy*.

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