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Russian Diaspora Aims to Inform and Influence Ahead of Duma Vote

The Vote Abroad initiative is a decentralized, grassroots movement organized online across more than 40 countries.

By Brawley Benson

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Pro-Navalny protesters in New York. **Peter Foley / EPA / TASS**

WASHINGTON, D.C. — Polina Sidelnikova has voted in every Russian election since she was 18. This year is no different, even though she now lives in the United States.

The 40-year-old human rights lawyer is one of thousands of Russians living outside their home country who will head to consulates and embassies between Sept. 17 and 19 to elect the new Duma, Russia's lower legislative house.

She is also part of the Vote Abroad initiative, a decentralized, grassroots movement organized online across more than 40 countries in response to the jailing of Kremlin critic Alexei

Navalny, that will inform Russian citizens abroad of voting procedures and organize poll watching.

“This vote is very important because it can show people's dissatisfaction with the authorities, and that despite all their resources the authorities cannot win,” said Sidelnikova, who took part in a Jan. 23 protest in her hometown of Vladivostok in Russia’s Far East before moving to Washington, D.C. in April of this year.

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Vote Abroad members come from diverse backgrounds. Some moved overseas for work years ago, some work for NGOs focused on promoting democracy and human rights in Russia. Others are students and Russians working abroad on temporary contracts.

Many sympathize with Navalny — who is serving a two-and-a-half-year sentence in a penal colony for violating his parole while he was in Germany recovering from a poisoning he blames on the Kremlin — and see their initiative as a continuation of the demonstrations in his name.

After Navalny’s August 2020 poisoning and subsequent detention on his return to Russia in January of this year, protests erupted across the country and abroad.

On Jan. 23, crowds of Russians, many of whom had never met before, gathered in cities around the world to protest the government’s treatment of Navalny. Local media sources and activists estimated large turnouts in some cities, including at least 1,000 people in New York and Berlin, and hundreds in Tel Aviv.

Many of those present exchanged phone numbers, created Facebook groups and formed online Russian-speaking communities, some citizens and some not.

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Activists interviewed by The Moscow Times said the Vote Abroad initiative is wider than just Navalny supporters, signaling the rise of a more far-reaching opposition movement outside Russia.

“You know, it started as a pro-Navalny movement, but not all of the participants were Navalny supporters,” said Dmitry Valuev, a community organizer for the Washington, D.C.-based Free Russia Foundation.

“I think Navalny was the facilitator for people to express their disagreement and their anger with the government.”

Pyotr Kuzmin, one of the initiative's organizers in Australia, said that for the first two or three months after setting up a Facebook group for those in the region he tried to avoid mentioning Navalny at all in online posts because he wanted "broader participation."

“I think it’s not really about Alexei Navalny,” Kuzmin said. “It’s about a broader problem

with corruption, about suppression of political freedoms."

Beyond Navalny

Moving the message away from supporting Navalny as a politician — while still calling out his mistreatment — to advocating for general participation in voting could, activists hope, create a more accessible community.

Outside Russia, this could mean bringing into the fold those who don't necessarily support Navalny as a political figure but think his treatment, in principle, was unjust.

In the U.S., for instance, Russian speakers tend to support conservative American candidates while opposing Putin's ruling United Russia party, according to Ludmila Isurin, a professor in Ohio State University's Department of Slavic and East European Languages and Cultures. But opposition to United Russia doesn't necessarily translate to support for Navalny's politics.

Despite this, in 2018, votes for Putin surged among Russian overseas voters, which The Washington Post attributed to successful mobilization of pro-Putin voters and animosity between Russians and the West.

While not uncommon on a global scale, mass mobilization of pro-democracy citizens abroad is something new for Russia, according to Graeme Robertson, director of the University of North Carolina's Center for Slavic, Eurasian and East European Studies and an expert on protest movements.

"It's been a big part of the transition to democracy in, say, Mexico for example," Robertson said.

Activists involved in the initiative hope the movement could shift the balance of power away from United Russia toward other candidates.

"I am an optimist, I see that people want a change of power," said Sergei Bespalov from Lithuania. "They are not happy with the system, they are not happy with these elections."

Negligible effect

But it's doubtful the initiative will be able to swing outcomes on a national scale.

In overseas voting, the Central Election Commission decides which Russian region different countries will vote for. Voters in Australia, for instance, will vote for candidates in the Altai region, while most Russians in the U.S. will vote for candidates in Moscow.

In cities, the overseas vote could amplify a local push to get anyone but a United Russia candidate elected, part of Team Navalny's "Smart Voting" strategy, which many in the Vote Abroad initiative will use to guide their choice of candidates.

But outside of these places which "have a history of a more protest-oriented electorate," Robertson said, Smart Voting is unlikely to have a large effect.

"Essentially in many places you're voting for different flavors of pro-regime party, so even if

lots of people signed on to it, I'm not sure that it would make an enormous difference."

Yet, in the face of strong opposition and with lofty goals, many cling to the hope that this movement could stick around for the long term, even if its effect on the Duma elections is negligible.

"Even if we don't contribute to a major swing in this election, I think mobilizing the diaspora — the international Russian immigrant community — is a good thing," said Kuzmin, the organizer based in Australia.

"Even if there is no chance of swaying the result of the election, I think it's still worth doing."

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