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Why Russia's Anti-Putin Election Protest Matters

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Voters line up in St. Petersburg for the "Noon Against Putin" protest. **t.me/cikrf**

Elections in Russia are neither free nor fair, and the 2024 presidential vote was no exception. Tens of millions of Russians know that.

However, this does not mean that the Russian opposition could not use Putin's sham elections as an opportunity for political action. The Noon Against Putin campaign was an attempt to seize that opportunity. Proponents of the campaign called for every dissident Russians to come to polling stations en masse at noon on March 17 and vote against Putin.

To make sense of the strategy behind Noon Against Putin, one should take into account the fact that this campaign emerged as a response to what may be the most fraudulent elections in the history of Putin's Russia. In these voting, all of the Kremlin's usual electoral manipulation techniques were present, such as barring independent candidates from running, ballot stuffing, obstructing poll watchers, forcing state employees to vote,

employing questionable online voting and early voting procedures, censoring the media, and persecuting any real opposition.

The issues with the fairness of the elections did not stop there. Putin's re-election campaign is particularly controversial as voting was also claimed to be held in the four Ukrainian regions annexed by Russia in 2022. Although Moscow does not even control all of those regions and many residents were killed or had to leave their homes as refugees, none of this stopped the Kremlin opening polling stations.

Moreover, the elections were overshadowed by the death of Aleksei Navalny. Putin's main political opponent was killed in prison less than a month before the vote.

Furthermore, even Boris Nadezhdin, a moderate anti-war candidate, was barred from running. After Russians all over the country lined up in long queues to support his nomination, the regime decided not to take the risk of embarrassing Putin.

Lastly, even Putin's right to run in these elections was questionable. The only reason he was allowed to appear on the presidential vote ballot after serving four presidential terms is because he amended the constitution in 2020 to make it possible.

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Due to all these issues, one could criticize the Noon Against Putin campaign by pointing out that any participation in Putin's sham elections will ultimately contribute to legitimizing him. Although this position does have some moral validity, there are strong indications that Noon Against Putin was still a better political strategy than an electoral boycott.

Even from the point of view of Russia's electoral laws, voting against any candidate other than Putin is a more reasonable strategy than a boycott, as in Russia there is no minimum turnout threshold for elections. However, this is probably not even the most relevant argument to consider, as the Kremlin not only falsifies the results of the vote, but the turnout figures as well.

The Noon Against Putin campaign was initially proposed by Maxim Reznik, a former St. Petersburg legislator, and his associates from the European Petersburg movement. Most of the leaders of the anti-war opposition supported the campaign.

For many, joining the initiative became a way to pay tribute to Aleksei Navalny, who advocated for the campaign shortly before his death. The initiative came to be seen as one of his final wishes.

Overall, the initiative was based on the idea that even though Putin's elections are fake, Russians should still use them as an opportunity to express their dissent with Putin's policies. The Noon Against Putin campaign allowed them to do this even though there were no suitable candidates on the ballot who took an unambiguously anti-Putin, anti-war stance.

Russian authorities responded to the campaign by intimidating political activists with warnings qualifying the campaign as illegal "extremist activity."

Dozens of campaign participants were detained. Moreover, in some cases, attempts were made to disrupt the campaign by scheduling concerts and other festive events at polling stations for noon.

The rationale behind Noon Against Putin is best understood if one considers the campaign not to be an electoral strategy, but a form of political protest. Most of the nationwide demonstrations held in Russia in recent years have been violently dispersed, and the protesters have been persecuted. Knowing this, the Russian opposition had to find alternative ways to show mass discontent.

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It made perfect sense for the opposition to use Putin's re-election attempt as yet another opportunity to mobilize the protest. The recent history of Russian protest movements demonstrates that, despite independent opposition candidates are usually barred from running, elections still mobilize protests. This was the case with the protests of 2011-2013 that were sparked by fraudulent State Duma elections, and the 2017-2018 protests organized by Navalny's supporters during his presidential campaign, and the 2019 protests in Moscow provoked by unfair City Duma elections.

One more success of the Noon Against Putin strategy was that it helped to bring together different factions of the Russian opposition. Some advocated casting votes for any randomly chosen candidate other than Putin. Others tried to convince Russians to spoil ballots. Others campaigned for Vladislav Davankov, a fake liberal candidate controlled by the Kremlin.

But despite these differences, all of these factions were united in urging their supporters to go to the polling stations at noon on March 17. Furthermore, in some cities outside of Russia, even advocates of the electoral boycott among Russian emigrants coordinated their protest actions with the Noon Against Putin initiative.

The campaign mattered because it showcased the mobilizing potential of the Russian opposition. It demonstrated that despite obstruction from the authorities, the risk of repression, and activists being forced into exile, the Russian opposition can still mobilize its core supporters in large cities.

Apart from expressing dissent, the Noon Against Putin campaign was also designed to boost the morale of the Russian resistance and strengthen it as a community. Trust levels in Russian society are generally very low, hindering collective action.

Additionally, the Kremlin deliberately used repression to stop the opposition from coming together in any way, something they have not demonstrated they can do. Putin's propaganda also either completely ignores dissidents or portrays them as an insignificant minority. Given all of this, the Noon Against Putin campaign is meaningful as an opportunity for dissident Russians to participate in collective action with like-minded individuals.

Ultimately, regardless of how Putin's propaganda or radical boycott advocates will try to twist it, none of the people who joined the Noon Against Putin action did so to legitimize Putin. Their goal was to show opposition to his autocracy and war, and not to compromise with the

tyrant. What was at the core of the protest was the understanding that the only way to succeed in a political struggle is to show up and engage in it.

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