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Russia's Opposition Wants You to Vote Against United Russia. That's Where Its Strategy Ends.

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Yulia Navalnaya. **Henning Bagger / Ritzau Scanpix / via REUTERS**

Russia's parliamentary elections are days away, and the opposition has finally settled on its voting tactics. Yulia Navalnaya and Maxim Katz have agreed to endorse a joint slate of candidates in single-seat constituencies. For the party-list vote, they are urging Russians to back any Kremlin-approved party with a chance of clearing the 5% threshold, so long as it isn't United Russia.

Ilya Yashin is calling on people to go to the polls at noon on Sept. 20 and vote against United Russia too. The liberal Yabloko party, whose federal list was thrown out, wants voters to spoil their party-list ballots and support its remaining single-district candidates. The Anti-War Committee has left the choice to voters, urging them to judge candidates above all by where they stand on the war.

According to the logic of protest voting, United Russia stands for Putin's policies, and so every vote withheld from it makes it clearer that support for said policies is collapsing. A poor result would also expose the Kremlin's weakness to the public and to the elites inside the system. Governors, officials, lawmakers from other parties and business elites would see that the center of power can no longer deliver the numbers it used to. They would start acting on their own and bargaining more aggressively. The belief that the regime is unshakeable would start to crack.

Authoritarian regimes really do rest on their own people believing the center is strong, so this could theoretically work. The trouble is that the weakness has to become common knowledge first. If United Russia actually gets 38% of the vote but is awarded 58% by election officials, how does the public find out about the 38%? How do regional elites, senior officials or the heads of the approved opposition parties find out? You need a parallel count, a vast network of observers, polling-station records collected and verified, a way to penetrate the black box of electronic voting and the means to spread an alternative result across the country. In today's Russia, that work has become virtually impossible.

Nor will the Kremlin-approved parties supply this missing knowledge. Even if the Communists, the LDPR or New People get more votes than the official count records, their leaders will be thinking about their own position inside the system — seats, committee posts, financing, relations with the presidential administration and access to regional power. Picking a fight with the Kremlin is far more costly than a few lost percentage points. The authorities don't even need to transfer votes from one party to another. They just need everyone to accept the official result and refrain from challenging it.

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Then comes the problem of interpreting the results. While the opposition calls a vote for the Communists or New People a "vote against Putin," those parties' leaders call it support for their own platform. The Kremlin will count it as a vote for the loyal parties that accept the existing order. If Navalnaya's and Katz's supporters follow their call and vote for New People, the official statistics will record those votes as support for New People. The party will gain seats, funding and political weight, while the organizers of the protest vote are left arguing that some share of those votes was really theirs.

That raises the main question: What happens on Sept. 21?

Suppose millions really do vote against United Russia, and its real result comes in far below what the Kremlin needs. How will the public learn this if the Central Election Commission announces something else?

Even if the fraud can be proved, what then? Will the opposition call on people to defend their votes? If so, how? What is a voter supposed to do when it turns out that his vote, along with millions of others, has vanished from the official count? Will there be concrete demands and organized protests? Or will it end with statements denouncing falsification and a few YouTube streams?

The Navalnaya-Katz appeal puts it plainly: We'll do our part, drop in the ballots the authorities don't want and then see what they do. The organizers themselves don't know what comes next. Maybe the public suddenly recognizes that the authorities represent no one, or maybe it doesn't.

For a campaign run by political consultants, this structure makes sense. There's a task, a date, an audience, a set of tools and a measurable result. The campaign ends, the team conducts a postmortem and eventually moves on to the next project.

But politics is much more far-reaching and continuous than that; one action ends and sets up the next. Success opens new possibilities, while failure forces you to look at your mistakes and change course. Tasks change, and so do the tactics, resources and ways of working with people. A political leader has to know what he or she will do under each likely outcome. United Russia unexpectedly underperforms — what then? The results are rewritten wholesale — what then? A few opposition-endorsed candidates make it into the State Duma — what then? The whole thing flops — what does that teach you, and how does your strategy change?

The Russian opposition's love of elections points to a deeper problem in how it thinks about politics. Elections are treated as the central democratic ritual, so a democratic opposition apparently has to make them its priority no matter what. The result is a kind of cargo cult. The procedure is formally there, but its political content is long gone. The authorities set the date, write the rules, admit some candidates and bar others, control the information space and announce the final number. The opposition pours enormous effort into finding the best way to operate within boundaries built by someone else. The Kremlin acts, the opposition reacts. The initiative is always on the Kremlin's side.

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Tied to this is the idea of "safe" protest by Russians inside Russia. The opposition understandably wants to limit the risks for people living under repression. But political action is only safe for as long as the authorities are willing to put up with it. As soon as a protest becomes genuinely visible and genuinely threatening, the risk to the protesters goes up. Making safety the main criterion confines the struggle to the forms the regime finds most convenient.

The opposition tailors its proposals to whatever its audience already feels ready to do. It offers people a simple, one-off and safe act that requires almost no commitment. You can see the environment at work here. Opposition leaders have become media personalities living in a world of views, subscribers, likes, reposts and donations. Successful bloggers only have to understand what their audiences like and what they will watch. Political leaders have to be able to argue with their audiences, change their minds, make demands of them and raise their capacity for responsibility and collective action. When a politician starts living by the rules of the media, politics itself becomes another convenient product: clear, safe, emotionally appealing and undemanding.

The reaction to the Navalnaya-Katz alliance shows the other side of this. Two well-known figures recorded a video together, and thousands of viewers immediately felt hope rekindled:

At last they've agreed, now something will happen. Politics is treated like a service again. We sit in front of a screen, and the good politicians are supposed to work things out, come up with the right plan and tell us where to go and which button to press. The individual remains a spectator, even when he sincerely believes he's participating. But a mass audience alone does not a political force make.

For much of that audience, opposition unity is when several well-known talking heads have put their public feuding on hold to record a joint video and agree on a shared appeal. However, genuine political unity means a mass organization with membership, local branches, internal procedures, feedback, a division of duties, elections and rotation of leadership, as well as a path for ordinary members to take on more responsibility and move up. That kind of structure turns millions of scattered supporters into a political actor that can exist without the latest video, the latest campaign or the decisions of a few media personalities. As long as unity means coordination among popular bloggers, it's merely unity at the top with nothing underneath.

The Russian opposition's main problem is not that it recommends the wrong box on the ballot. The problem starts when election campaigns are self-contained episodes with nothing accumulating in between them. A million people came to the polls — what connects that million the next day? Discontent turned out to be bigger than expected — which organization captures that energy and turns it into the next action?

The real measure of these elections will be whether protest politics emerges from them larger, more organized and more politically significant than before. If nothing changes politically, in Russia or in exile, the argument over which box to check on the ballot will stay as relevant as the medieval dispute over how many angels can fit on the head of a pin.

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