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The Role of Political Leadership in a Hybrid Regime: The Case Study of Alexei Navalny's Team¹

Abstract: The article aims to explain Navalny's team's political strategy after his arrest, focusing on the activity before the State Duma elections. This is an important issue from the point of view of the impact of leadership on a political organization in a system evolving from a hybrid regime to an authoritarian regime. As confirmed by the author's research, the organization adapts to new conditions without a leader. Still, it is predestined to disintegrate and reduce the effectiveness of implementing the updated political strategy.

Keywords: *hybrid regime, Alexei Navalny, non-systemic opposition, political strategy, Russia*

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic comprises a challenge faced by all countries worldwide, while in many of them, it also serves as a background for fierce political competition. This is happening in the Russian Federation, where we observe increased activity of opposition parties, particularly emphasizing the structures established by Alexei Navalny. The article aims to explain the political strategy of Navalny's team after his arrest, particularly emphasizing the activity before the elections to the State Duma. Apart from identifying the goals of Navalny's team, it is also important to characterize the instruments used to implement them. The author attempted to assess the effectiveness of Navalny's team's actions concerning the goals set. In order to attain the objective set, the author centered her research around answering the following research questions: How did Navalny's team update its strategy after the leader's incarceration in a penal colony? Has the online discourse conducted by Navalny's associates changed? Did Navalny's arrest affect the unification/dispersion of the opposition? The article

¹ **Editor's Note:** The paper was submitted and accepted before Alexei Navalny's death on February 16, 2024, in the Russian corrective colony.

hypothesizes that the loss of a leader by a political organization in a hybrid regime imposes a change in its strategy, simultaneously reducing the effectiveness of the actions taken by its members. The motivation to initiate research on this issue is the currently observed evolution of the political regime in Russia towards total authoritarianism, which threatens the functioning of non-systemic opposition structures such as Navalny's team.

Literature review

The topic of Navalny's team's activity is a field of interesting scientific research. Many researchers have analyzed the mobilization capacity of the non-systemic opposition during the protests in 2011-2012, placing it in the context of long-term protest trends in Russia (Robertson, 2013; Volkov, 2015; Gel'man, 2016). By channeling the dissatisfaction of Russians (working with other opposition leaders) and mobilizing them to take to the streets, Navalny has made the protests a vital element of his political strategy (Armstrong et al., 2020). These were not spontaneous manifestations of discontent but carefully planned actions, one of the few opportunities for Navalny's team to influence the Kremlin. The instrumentalization of the protest movement allowed it to increase its visibility, and for Russians, the demonstrations were an opportunity to demonstrate their dissatisfaction without necessarily supporting Navalny's team's demands. 2011-2012 is essential due to the change of emphasis in government-opposition relations. Previously, the initiative belonged only to the authorities, and potential social unrest was managed by, for example, Vladislav Surkov's synthetic initiatives. The protest movement confirmed the potential of autonomous political structures to influence society, including Alexei Navalny's leadership skills. He successfully encouraged readers of his blog on the LiveJournal platform to participate in the protests. Moreover, Navalny's activity was also used as a political resource by the Fair Russia party (exploitation of corruption investigations) or politicians (participation in protests of Alexei Kudrin or Mikhail Prokhorov). The Russian authorities noticed the mobilization potential of Navalny's team, which was proved by his arrest during the protests in 2012 and the closure of the center of Moscow on the day of Putin's inauguration as president. The regime began the dispersion of protests by force, arrests, and trials of the people involved (Navalny was charged with three counts in 2012) to intimidate society. It is a standard strategy of the hybrid regime, which sees manifestations of public discontent as a severe threat to the regime's survival in its current form.

Researchers attempted to explain the reasons for the increase in popularity of the leader of the non-systemic opposition (Lassila, 2016). A significant issue in the scientific analyses was Alexei Navalny's 2018 election campaign. Some researchers noted a particular influence of the protests of 2011-2012 on such a campaign (Dollbaum, 2020). The impact of media messages and the use of social media by the opposition to gain public support was analyzed (Kazun & Semykina, 2020; Dollbaum, 2021). Although it was evident that Navalny's candidacy would not be registered, he decided to start a campaign as it was a way

to create state-wide structures (Navalny's staff). He again used the mobilization potential created by the publication of the investigation results "He Is Not Dimon to You" in 2017 concerning the assets of Prime Minister Medvedev. Media coverage has been vital from the beginning of Navalny's activities. The topics of the videos distributed primarily on Navalny's YouTube and Navalny LIVE channels and social media referred to problems that directly affected Russians, evoking emotions while being universal enough to affect all social groups regardless of political preferences (corruption or social inequality). The Russian authorities used administrative and legal instruments against Navalny.

Researchers explored the "smart voting" election strategy created by Navalny's team, which he promoted during the 2019 municipal elections (Turchenko & Golosov, 2021a; Turchenko & Golosov, 2021b). This is an important issue that could lower Russian voter apathy, which was realized in the communication campaign by Navalny's team. This strategy also has the potential to unite the efforts of the atomized opposition.

Although many scholars have attempted to explain various elements of the strategy of the non-systemic opposition in Russia, Navalny's arrest affected the need for his team to adapt to the new situation and, at the same time, develop a strategy to survive and implement political goals. This article aims to fill the research gap in explaining the impact of Navalny's arrest on his team's strategy (formulated aims, instruments, effectiveness). This episode was crucial for his team, confirming the necessity of revisiting the strategy. At the same time, empirical research contributes to the development of theory on the impact of leadership on the political organization in a system evolving from a hybrid regime to an authoritarian regime. In parallel, the author is aware that Alexei Navalny's arrest can be seen as part of a general trend of suppressing the opposition in Russia (other opposition leaders were also arrested, e.g., Yevgeny Roizman or Ilya Yashin). Still, the structures created by this politician are the most complex and coordinated, providing an excellent research field for analyzing the importance of leadership for the survival of a political organization in an emergency (lack of a leader). The future of the non-systemic opposition should be seen in broader political phenomena (e.g., perspectives of democratization of Russia or strengthening of the authoritarian regime). Still, this article is to contribute to the discussion on the fate of Navalny's team.

Methods

In the research, the author set the primary independent variable in the form of the forced leaving of the leader of a political organization operating in a hybrid regime, wanting to examine how this would affect its functioning in the formation and implementation of political strategy. First, the author developed a theoretical framework for the hybrid regime and non-systemic opposition issue based on a critical analysis of the literature on the subject. This made it possible to confirm that Russia qualifies as an example of a hybrid regime (now transforming into total authoritarianism), and Navalny's team is a representative organiza-

tion of the non-systemic opposition in Russia. The author interpreted Navalny's structures as a highly centralized organization whose actions correlated with the leader's strong influence until his arrest. Based on the assumption that the communication strategy is a subset of the political strategy of Navalny's structures, the author analyzed the content of media broadcasts posted on the official YouTube channels of Navalny's structures: Navalny Live and Navalny. This made it possible to extract and interpret the essential materials from the point of view of influence on Russian society in terms of arousing, instrumentalizing, and channeling its discontent and then using them to achieve operational and strategic aims. The content analysis allowed us to understand the redefinition of Navalny's team's political strategy after his arrest. In turn, the study of news portals and newspapers (in English and Russian), among other things, made it possible to supplement the discussion with the chronology of events. An objective measure of the effectiveness of the strategy redefinition was the interpretation of surveys conducted by the Levada Center (the reaction of Russians to the Navalny team's strategy) and the results of the State Duma elections. The categories analyzed by the author are the aims, instruments, and discourse conducted online in 2020 and 2021 by the non-systemic opposition. The central part of the research was completed on September 11, 2021.

Non-systemic opposition in a hybrid regime

The systemic transition from authoritarian to democratic regimes has been of interest in the context of change in many countries. According to Marc F. Plattner, the transition has become the essential concept regarding the third wave of democratization described by Samuel Huntington, which has generated new democracies worldwide. Importantly, with the spread of this model, the current trend of research on the democratization process is to analyze its consolidation and quality (Diamond et al., 2014, p. 86). Although scholars have denied the utility of the transition category in the twenty-first century, the color revolutions negate such a perception (Carothers, 2002). Larry Diamond points out that not all states in transition have transformed into liberal democracies but have reached an intermediate state between democracy and authoritarianism. The peculiarities of the transition process in these states contributed to the development of a hybrid regime, which combines features of both political systems (Diamond, 2002). Hybrid regimes are an autonomous category of states (not a transitional phase). They have a multiparty system, although, with some limitations, the rulers legitimize their power by holding regular elections. They do not satisfy the criterion of competitiveness, and the risk of defeating the ruling powers is essentially non-existent (Antoszewski, 2016, p. 139). Therefore, the institution of elections guarantees the regime's continued existence. A characteristic feature of these elections is a high level of manipulation by the political elite, which may manifest through, for example, repression of opposition candidates and brutal dispersion of social unrest caused by election falsification and degeneration of the political elite. The functioning of the political opposition is an element

of the discussed regime (Levitsky & Way, 2010). It may take various forms – from political powers fully controlled by the rulers (concession opposition) to an almost free opposition as a legally operating political party. On the electoral level, hybrid regimes conform to the minimum democratic standard, i.e., there is a cyclicity of elections but with a massive violation of civil liberties. Although the rulers take measures to control the results of elections, it should be remembered that growing public frustration with election irregularities may threaten the stability of the hybrid regime, leading to its erosion, as evidenced by the color mentioned above in revolutions in the post-Soviet area.

Russia's political regime should be classified as an example of a hybrid regime possessing the features discussed above. In the context of the chosen research field, the functioning of Russia's political system, next to the concessional political opposition, is essential for parties that do not conform to the formal requirements necessary for participation in the political system. First, they are not registered as political parties or represented in the legislative body and oppose the current political regime (Tatarkova, 2013, p. 132). The deficit of the indicated attributes impairs their function to represent political interests. These excluded entities are called the non-systemic opposition (the terms used interchangeably: anti-system and non-systemic opposition). At the same time, we see the Russian Federation as one of the clearest examples of a process of inverted transformation. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, most post-communist states initiated a progressive liberalization of political and economic systems. In Russia, on the other hand, instead of deepening democratic tendencies, we could see a reversal of this process's functioning. This non-systemic opposition includes using unusual tools of political competition, a relatively low level of social support and trust for its leaders, and the transfer of activities to the Internet (Bol'shakow, 2012).

Parties of the non-systemic opposition popularize their political line through active use of social media such as Telegram, Facebook, or VKontakte, as well as platforms like YouTube. Each key activist accounts in the indicated social media and publishes relatively regular content. In their political messages, the non-systemic opposition often refers to populist slogans, including discrediting the authorities and producing an image of corruption and selfishness of political leaders from the ruling party. On the one hand, this message reaches people disappointed with the lack of expected economic reforms and a fundamental transformation of the Russian system, which President Dmitry Medvedev and Vladimir Putin repeatedly promised. On the other hand, digitizing the opposition's political activity attracts young people for whom this communication channel is exceptionally favorable. Moreover, it manifests the generational transformation observed in Russian society. It is precisely the young generation that willingly engages in all forms of social mobilization. Politicians outside the system seek to inspire Russians to express their discontent, e.g., through peaceful demonstrations in 2011–2013 (Ross, 2015).

The current non-systemic opposition in Russia began to crystallize in the first decade of the 21st century. Many leaders of that opposition, such as Boris Nemtsov, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, and Mikhail Kasyanov, began their careers in political structures in the 1990s by

performing various state functions in the political system and then moving to the opposition camp. When speaking of entities that meet the above-described conditions, we may also use the term “new opposition” due to the conditions of their functioning (the digitization mentioned above of politics; Eliseeva, 2016, pp. 5–6). In analyzing the structural dimension of the non-systemic opposition in Russia, its large dispersion and the lack of motives for action that could unite it on an interim basis to achieve the intended goals is worth noting.

Due to the discussed status of organizations that form the non-systemic opposition and the instruments for achieving political goals, including generating temporary social mobilization through peaceful demonstrations, government forces undertake two-level control actions. In the first place, there is an evident politicization of the decisions of state bodies, which block the possibility of involving representatives of non-systemic opposition parties in the electoral competition, influencing the mass media, enabling it to formulate political messages and using propaganda, producing a picture of the marginal importance of the opposition forces, their instability, the lack of transparent political goals and discrediting their activities. Secondly, the ability to spontaneously mobilize society imposes on the rulers to take decisive steps to de-escalate social discontent, which may be repressing protesters and brutally dispersing demonstrations.

The structures created by Alexei Navalny obey all requirements of being considered the most essential and influential organizations of non-systemic opposition in Russia. The significance of Navalny’s team for the future of the Russian opposition is variously interpreted. On the one hand, there are opinions that the non-systemic opposition is only a distortion in social life, a marginal political force with which Russians do not identify. On the other hand, the activity of Navalny’s team is interpreted as a nucleus of changes in the political identification of society and, thus, a political force making a vital contribution to the future of Russia. Moreover, one should note the voices speaking about the use of mass social mobilization in connection with Navalny’s arrest as an opportunity to manifest dissatisfaction with the economic situation in the state. The author of the article favors interpreting the activity of the non-systemic opposition as a power that can significantly influence Russia’s policy in the long term, but only in a situation of erosion of the hybrid regime and simultaneous consolidation of the opposition by a charismatic leader.

Navalny team’s strategy before the leader’s arrest (2020)

In this section, I will identify the two main aims of the non-systemic opposition in 2020. Then, referring directly to these aims, I will discuss the essential elements of the communication strategy and the mass media used, explaining how they helped to implement Navalny’s team’s political strategy in the selected timeframe. In addition, I will evaluate the effectiveness of the political strategy.

It is worth analyzing the aims, instruments, and discourse conducted on the Internet in 2020 to identify elements of continuity and change in the strategy of the non-systemic

opposition in the political and communication dimensions after Navalny's arrest. Comparing such a short period (2020 and 2021) will demonstrate the leader's importance in operationalizing the team's activity.

Navalny's team was taking action in 2020 toward two strategic objectives: 1) Discrediting the new government headed by Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin and 2) Forming public perception of the constitutional referendum, which took place in July 2020. The specificity of the functioning of the non-systemic opposition in Russia does not allow it to use traditional media. Navalny's team's communication strategy was analyzed based on the discourse carried out within the Navalny Live channel on YouTube.

Following Dmitry Medvedev's resignation as prime minister in January 2020, President Vladimir Putin designated Mikhail Mishustin. In the authorities' perception, this was supposed to reduce public dissatisfaction with the previous government's ineptitude by appointing new politicians ("refreshing" the image). The changes in the structure of the executive power were symbolic, and Mishustin himself is not a new person on the Russian political stage. In his speech, Navalny exposed Mishustin's connection with the authorities and, thus, the possibility of copying the old schemes of action (Navalny LIVE, 2020a). One of the particularly exposed assumptions of the new government was the postulate to create new workplaces for Russians in the construction sector, among others. This issue became the focus of Navalny's associates. The economic series "Where is the money?" by Vladimir Milov emphasized that while the construction sector generates employment, 80% is for migrants (Navalny LIVE, 2020c). Thus, Milov negated the government's postulate that it could significantly increase people's support. Navalny's team has skilfully used this issue to create a perception among the public that migrants are a threat, that they are taking work away from Russians, and thus to increase public approval of Navalny's demand to introduce a visa regime for Asian neighboring countries and other Central Asian states. Already in 2017, 67% of Russians surveyed indicated the need for the government to initiate measures to restrict the arrival of migrants. According to a survey conducted by the Levada Center, Russians are most negative about migrants from Central Asia (38% of respondents; Papiya, 2017). It is necessary to note that this political strategy, i.e., the creation of an external enemy, has been repeatedly used by the Kremlin and is a characteristic element of the narrative in the authoritarian regime. Because of this, the political organization existing within the framework of a specific system adapts the strategies to the conditions of activity and even uses political elites' methods.

For Russians to equate the prime minister with degenerate political elites, Navalny's team published the results of an investigation into the new prime minister's assets on January 28, 2020 (Zasekrechennyye..., 2020). This replicates the scheme of Navalny's team from the period of his presidential campaign. Issuing the results of the investigation into Medvedev's assets was the first phase of implementing a political strategy to mobilize society and was instrumental in using the protests. At the political strategy level, the activities of Navalny's team did not achieve the expected result. Mishustin is not a politician who is an essential

player in stabilizing the political system, one of the significant issues connecting public support for Putin, for example. Corruption of the political elite is a noticeable phenomenon in society, but it does not excite emotions if it does not concern the leaders of the political elite.

The second activity area for Navalny's team was a dynamic campaign to raise awareness of the importance of the constitutional referendum to consolidate the authoritarian regime in Russia. Alexei Navalny has repeatedly pointed to the controversy associated with the proposed amendments to the Russian constitution. The referendum provided for a package vote – Russians were to approve or reject the proposals and not express their opinions on individual ideas for amendments to the constitution (Navalny LIVE, 2020b; Navalny LIVE, 2020d). Indeed, this is an essential point because the package of amendments itself was heterogeneous, and we can separate the social and the identity-political parts. In the first part, the critical change was the provision for the indexation of pensions, which was supposed to activate the older part of society, traditionally supporting the current political elites. The second part consisted of proposals concerning, among others, provisions on the inviolability of borders and appeals to the identity of Russians. The essence of the constitutional amendments is to consolidate the super presidential system and allow Putin to hold the highest post in the state until 2036. Crucially, according to sociological surveys, 80% of Russians approved the social amendments, while only 24% supported the changes enabling Putin's participation in the presidential elections in 2024 (Domańska, 2020; Roth, 2020).

The referendum process allowed the authorities to manipulate the results. Although the referendum's official results indicate that almost 78% of Russians voted in favor of the package of constitutional amendments, the lack of transparency in the procedures raises doubts about this result. It is worth noting that Navalny's broadcasts mainly formed the campaign of the non-systemic opposition regarding the referendum. His associates' activity was on a lower level. Importantly, Navalny was responsible for the creation and implementation of the strategy. The leader was the face of the whole discrediting campaign, and the activity of his coworkers was only an accompanying element. This also demonstrates the high degree of centralization of the team. The autonomy of the initiatives of Navalny's structures in different regions of Russia was always limited by the center's recommendations (for example, at least the staff during the 2018 campaign). The potential of grassroots initiatives by local activists that could reach different communities has not been developed.

In conclusion, analyzing the activity of Navalny's team in 2020, it should be pointed out that it was possible to identify two main political aims of the organization. Despite the clarity of assumptions, the communication strategy itself did not bring the expected results, and thus, the political strategy was a failure. The limited opportunity to distribute political communication, thus strengthening social mobilization around essential issues for the organization, should be pointed out as a reason for the failure. Moreover, in one aspect, the communication strategy needed to be appropriately chosen for the aim. I am thinking of the misplaced material regarding the prime minister's corrupt activities, which

did not reinforce his negative perception due to the secondary nature of the information. Crucially, the strong centralization of the organization deprived it of the possibility of a flexible approach to strategy implementation. Focusing activities around the leader, to a severe degree, eliminated the option of local activist initiatives.

Navalny team's strategy after leader's arrest (2021)

In this section, I will identify the Navalny team's aims at the tactical and strategic levels. Interestingly, the tactical objective should simultaneously be considered an instrumentality for implementing the strategic aim. Then, I will characterize the instrumentation and communication strategy of Navalny's team in the new operating environment – the lack of a leader in the organization influenced its strong centralization. The examples I have selected are intended to show the similarities/differences between the political strategies of 2020 and 2021.

The leader's arrest forced modification of the political strategy and its adaptation to the changed conditions of Navalny's team. The tactical aim, of course, was to force the authorities to release Navalny from prison. However, in reorganizing political strategy, one can see the instrumentalization of this issue. The main objective of the revised political strategy was primarily to influence the outcome of the State Duma elections scheduled for autumn 2021. This was to be realized by strengthening the dissatisfaction of Russians with the policies conducted by Vladimir Putin and the United Russia party, thus reducing the participation of deputies from the ruling party in the State Duma. Given this, the team had to undertake activities in two areas, simultaneously integrate them, and coordinate efforts without the support of a leader. This was a completely new situation for the organization, although it tried to use the patterns of activity developed by Navalny effectively. Oppositionists have used several tools to influence Russian society in order to discredit the rulers (investigations into corruption), mobilize the expression of social discontent (media campaigns conducted, e.g., on YouTube), indicate a voting alternative for candidates from the United Russia party ("smart voting" project). Internet communication tools (YouTube and social media) comprised the main channel for influencing Russians. Protests were also used as a political instrument. In the following section, the author will present examples of how the team implemented its strategy in the new conditions and try to indicate its strengths and weaknesses.

On January 17, 2021, Alexei Navalny returned to Russia from a 5-month treatment, which was carried out in one of the Berlin clinics, after being poisoned by an agent from the "Novichok" group (Stone, 2020). He was arrested during passport control at Sheremetyevo International Airport at the request of the Federal Penitentiary Service, which sought to change the politician's sentence from probation to actual imprisonment in connection with the case of Yves Rocher. The court decided to detain him for 30 days (Mediazona, 2021). However, the activist was not able to contact his attorneys. He received the permit just

a moment before the start of the court hearing. Navalny's associates made efforts to get him released through mass media; they indicated the illegal detention of the opposition activist, including no powers of attorney of the Khimki Municipal Court to detain for more than 48 hours, holding a closed session, no grounds for detention and no motion to change the sentence (allegation of violation of the conditions for a suspended sentence), which is incompatible with the Criminal Code of Russia, no legal grounds for this decision, pointing to the political nature of actions (Mediazona, 2021: *pochemu on...*, 2021).

The presented information is intended to mobilize the Russians to participate in peaceful demonstrations to express support for Navalny and demand his release. They were scheduled for January 23 in many Russian cities. Using Navalny's website and social messengers (primarily VKontakte, Telegram, and TikTok), people wishing to take part in the protests can find the protest locations in their cities of residence. The indicated demonstrations were the first events in a series of protests organized by the opposition under the slogan "Freedom for Navalny!". The slogan itself has become a permanent feature of all media messages by activists associated with Navalny. According to official data, over 4,000 people in 125 Russian cities participated in the demonstrations on January 23. Here, it is worth referring to the Reuters estimate, which argued that the streets of Moscow alone were overtaken by 40,000 people (BBC News, 2021). Other sources estimate that 100-160 thousand people participated in the demonstrations (Rogoża, 2021). The largest concentration of protesters could be observed in Moscow, St. Petersburg, Kazan, Novosibirsk, Vladivostok, Krasnoyarsk, Voronezh, Nizhny Novgorod, and Sochi (Novaya Gazeta, 2021; Yushkov, 2021). Law enforcement units brutally dispersed the protests and arrested over 3.6 thousand people. Criminal proceedings were instituted against some demonstrators in connection with calling for participation in unsanctioned meetings (OVD News, 2021; Lenta.Ru, 2021).

The catalyst for the protests themselves was not Navalny's arrest but the issuance of an investigation into President Putin's assets on January 19. This issue will be discussed later in the article. The timing of the video dissemination was strictly deliberate and proved that Navalny left detailed instructions to his team, knowing the possibility of his arrest. The very procedure was meant to build a dichotomy: the powers that want to democratize Russia – the oppressiveness of the hybrid regime. On the one hand, the protests were another opportunity to increase Navalny and his team's visibility. On the other hand, the repression of protesters and the deepening of the image of the degeneration of the political elite (the film about Putin's assets) may have served as a tool for strengthening interest in the electoral strategy "smart voting", aimed at reducing the participation of the ruling forces in the State Duma.

Activists unendingly raised the issue of the unlawful detention of Navalny, among others, citing the opinion of lawyers (Navalny LIVE, 2021a). Ensuing mass protests were organized on January 31, 2021. Despite the campaign to discredit the opposition in the government media, propaganda activities, and the preventive detention of Navalny's associates, it was possible to mobilize tens of thousands of people. Security services blocked city

centers, so the protests were dispersed. What made them different from previous actions was the geographical scope and mobilization of people from cities where no significant activity had been noticeable, e.g., in Ufa, Irkutsk, or Omsk. The scale of detentions was also grander – Rosgvardiya detained over 5,000 people. After the end of actions, the Investigative Committee of Russia initiated new criminal proceedings under the article on violation of sanitary and epidemiological regulations (article 236 of the penal code) and extremist activity (article 280 of the penal code; Domańska & Rogoża, 2021). The feeling of growing inequality is an issue that unites all social classes, regardless of political preferences, being an excellent topic for mobilizing Russians. Navalny's team continued to strengthen this feeling by, among other things, publishing more corruption investigations. In addition, Navalny's associates took steps to create a perception of the authorities' ineptitude in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, citing rising morbidity and mortality statistics (Navalny LIVE, 2021c). There is no doubt that Navalny's team instrumentalized the imprisonment of the said politician in a penal colony.

The team organized an exciting action on February 14. The main slogan was "Love is stronger than fear". Due to the implementation of a robust repressive apparatus on the part of the Russian authorities, i.e., several days of arrests and police brutality, it was possible to intimidate the public and discourage participation in demonstrations. Russians were encouraged to leave their homes on that day and light candles in solidarity with Navalny as a symbol of the peaceful nature of the demonstration. This was intended to convince people they could manifest their discontent without fear of detention and maintain declining mobilization. In addition, Navalny's associates recorded materials in which they sought to convince the Russians that the several days' detention by the National Guard of Russia was uncomfortable but did not pose a serious threat; therefore, peaceful resistance to the authorities should be maintained (Ibid). Despite the efforts of Navalny's associates to reduce the intimidation of the population, the brutality of the hybrid regime and the use of direct violence against protesters effectively discouraged Russians from coming out into the streets. Because of this, it can be concluded that the ability to maintain social mobilization versus the regime's counter-reaction decreased proportionally as the use of violence increased.

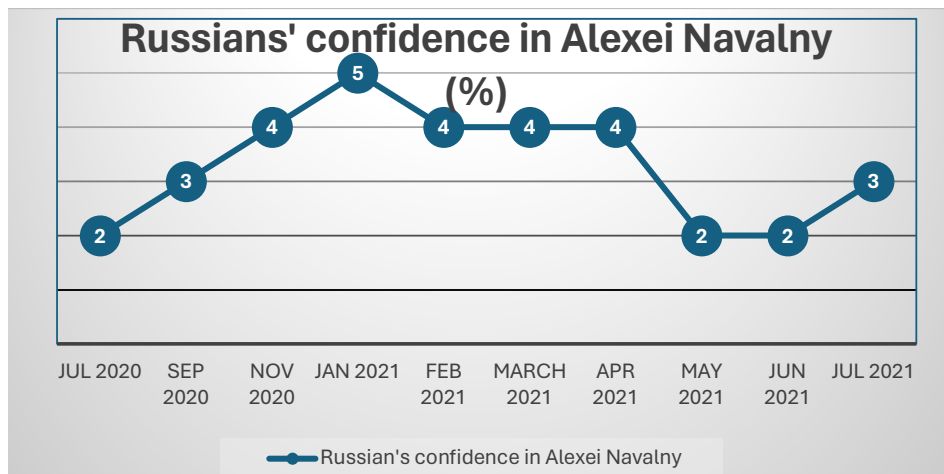
On April 29 (Ofitsial'nyy Portal, 2021), the opposition initiated further protests, which were smaller (around 30,000-50,000 protesters) and atomized once again. Protest preparation and coordination were limited due to the arrests of key activists, and thus, a need arose to manage actions from abroad. This is undoubtedly a weakness of this organization, which became defragmented after Navalny's arrest and could not re-consolidate, making implementing the political strategy less possible. Ultimately, the protest potential was exhausted in April, thus depriving the organization of an essential and traditional instrument of influence on the Russian government.

When assessing the effectiveness of social mobilization, it should be considered in two dimensions: the success in achieving the tactical goal, i.e., leading to the release of Navalny, and the increase in popularity of the opposition leader and his team's political agenda. Mass

expressions of discontent on the part of Russians, including due to the suspension of penalty for the politician mentioned above, did not prove to be an effective tool for influencing Moscow. On the contrary, they strengthened the manifestations of repression and the authorities' willingness to demonstrate force to intimidate the public. Referring to Navalny's popularity among Russians, it should be noted that his supporters are primarily young people. According to the Levada Center research, 38% of respondents aged 18-24 assessed the protests positively, while in the oldest 55+ group, it was only 16%. In the youngest age group, 36% support Navalny's activities, and in the oldest group, only 12% of the respondents share the same view. It is indeed the younger generation that indicates that the poisoning of Alexei Navalny was an attempt to eliminate a political opponent, while the oldest respondents only marginally agree with this statement (only 9% of the respondents; Kolesnikov, 2021). Data analysis confirms the growing intergenerational gap in Russian society. Navalny's team employs mass media, which allows it to reach the younger part of society, for whom social media is an important part of life. Importantly, the level of familiarity with Navalny's character has increased, and the events described have contributed to the fact that 90% of Russians have heard of his activity. Given that most of Navalny's supporters are young people from the middle class, the protests were not economic, as these demands are not the most important for this group regarding changes in Russian politics. Their background can be identified as the manifestation of dissatisfaction with the failure to respect civil liberties and human rights, the corruption of the elite, and the perceived transition of the regime towards an authoritarian system.

That said, it is worth contemplating whether a greater inflow of information has contributed to building a positive image of the leader of the non-systemic opposition in Russian society. Despite the efforts of Navalny's team, there is a visible decline in support for his activities. In September 2020, 20% of respondents supported Navalny's activity, while in June 2021 it was only 14%. Interestingly, among those who did not support President Vladimir Putin, only 30% of respondents approved of Navalny (Levada Center, 2021b). A similar tendency was shown by the analysis of the Levada Center data concerning the level of trust that the Russians place in politicians. In the ranking of politicians trusted by the Russians for July 2020, Navalny was indicated by merely 2% of respondents, and exactly a year later – by 3%. The imprisonment of Navalny in the penal colony and demonstrations of thousands of people in various cities of Russia did not generate any drastic fluctuations in the society's preferences. Details are presented in Table 1. In this context, the strategy of his associates should be assessed as ineffective, with many shortcomings (lack of consolidation of efforts, proper coordination of activities, and gradual exhaustion of mobilization capabilities). In the first phase of the strategy's implementation, the team's operational capabilities were relatively high compared to its activity in previous years, but the resources were quickly reduced.

Figure. Russians' confidence in Alexei Navalny in the ranking of trust in politicians (July 2020 – July 2021)



Source: Prepared by the author based on Levada-Tsentr, 2021.

Corruption investigations conducted by the FBK (Anti-Corruption Foundation; rus. Fond borby s korrupsiyey, FBK) founded by Navalny and publishing their results on YouTube represented an instrument for discrediting the Russian authorities, and currently center around reducing the popularity of candidates for deputies from United Russia before the upcoming elections to the State Duma. It is worth recalling in this connection a few examples of investigations and assessing the usefulness in delaying the intentions of opposition activists. Perhaps the most popular FBK investigation, which contributed to a major increase in Navalny's recognition, is the material entitled "A Palace for Putin. The Story of the Biggest Bribe", which was published the day after Navalny's arrest (January 19) on Alexei Navalny's YouTube channel. During the almost 2-hour documentary, Navalny pointed to the details of Putin's property in Gelendzhik (Alexei Navalny, 2021).

At the beginning of March, the Levada Center indicated that as many as 26% of Russians were watching the investigation, and 37% knew its contents. Importantly, as many as 81% of respondents under 25 and 39% over 55 believed that the presented material looked probable (Levada Center, 2021a). From its broadcast until August 18, 2021, the investigation had been viewed over 118 million times. The mere impact of the investigation should be considered high in the context of mobilizing the dissatisfaction of the Russians. Nevertheless, the obtained effect was short-lived. Referring again to the ranking of politicians' trust, we must take note of the 5% drop in the trust placed by Russians in Putin – from 34% (October 2020) to 29% (January 2021). This is a slight fluctuation. That said, from February 2021, the level of trust began to increase. In July 2021, 31% of Russians indicated the president as the most trustworthy Russian politician. Russian society is aware of the functioning

of the corrupt mechanisms at the highest levels of government, but Putin is invariably perceived as a guarantor of the state's stability. The potential rotation of the political elite is equated with the instability of politics and the inability to predict the consequences of such changes. These fears have their origins in the experience of the 1990s regarding the national transformation. This perception is disseminated by Russian politicians and state media. In addition, information about the property in Gelendzhik had already appeared before.

In the context of discrediting politicians from the United Russia party before the parliamentary elections, it is worth paying attention to the investigation of Navalny's team regarding the assets and business ties of the Chairman of Russia's State Duma, Vyacheslav Volodin. This is an understandable choice of opposition, as Volodin is one of the president's trusted collaborators. The opposition in this material indicated, *inter alia*, the apparent philanthropic activity undertaken by the politician, which is widely exposed in the Russian mass media (Alexei Navalny, 2020). Navalny's team's campaign against Volodin did not result in his defeat in the parliamentary elections. It is also worth noting that the published investigation results were addressed primarily to the residents of Saratov, so the scale of impact is local. Thus, Navalny's team was not able to change the general Russian public's perception of the Duma chairman.

Another toolkit of the non-systemic opposition aimed at reducing the participation of the ruling party's representatives in the Duma was the "smart voting" project. The essence of this undertaking is to analyze the chances of candidates from various opposition parties in a given constituency against a candidate from United Russia and then select the strongest counter-candidate and provide information to voters from the constituency. The aim was to prevent the dispersion of votes of United Russia's opponents and, as a result of their consolidation, lead to a reduction in the participation of deputies from the ruling party in the new composition of the State Duma. The only thing that the interested voters had to do was register through a dedicated application, providing their place of residence and an e-mail address. The day before the elections, they would receive information indicating the candidate worth voting for. Navalny's staff was disbanded, and many critical politicians from his entourage could not participate in the elections. Hence, the "smart voting" strategy spread was the only way for the team to influence the parliamentary elections to break United Russia's monopoly in the legislature. It is no new idea; this election strategy was already announced by Navalny in 2018. As indicated by Ivan V. Bolshakov and Vladimir V. Perevalov, at the local level, this idea brought some results in the 2019 elections to the Moscow City Duma, where thoughtful and tactical voting was noticeable, and in six constituencies, "smart voting" was significant importance for election results. Symptomatically, thanks to the concentration of votes, as many as 20 out of 45 seats were won by the opposition candidates. Nevertheless, it should be remembered that there were many reasons for this result apart from the concept of "smart voting" (Bolshakov & Perevalov, 2020).

In line with the assumption that the main channel of communication between Navalny's team and recipients is online platforms, it should be noted that, for example, the

instructional material on the “smart voting” mobile application on YouTube was viewed by 1.5 million people, while the “smart voting” Facebook page only got 2,4 thousand likes (as of September 9). An important group in the discussed electoral strategy could be the large Russian diaspora, whose number is estimated at around 25-40 million people (there are only 3.5 million Russians living in the USA; VisaSam, 2021). Mobilizing this group and coordinating votes at the same time in line with the strategy of “smart voting” would be a significant success for the non-systemic opposition. Diaspora votes were crucial in some countries in the context of the election results, e.g., the last presidential elections in Moldova were won by Maia Sandu, among others, thanks to the mobilization of Moldovans living abroad. This resource has not been used even in the slightest by Navalny's team. It is particularly puzzling as it would make it possible to transform the team's weakness (team atomization) into an asset (influencing potential voters outside the hybrid regime). This confirms the assumption that in the absence of a leader, a political organization in a hybrid regime formulates a defensive strategy focused on survival. The possibility of initiating offensive actions is very limited. Despite the measures taken, the strategic goal was not achieved, as in the result of the 2021 State Duma elections, United Russia gained 49.82% of votes nationwide.

It is worth remembering that the issue of pre-election campaigns and the promotion of smart voting strategies are constant priorities of Navalny's team. Probably, as in the case of the campaign on the constitutional referendum, also in this particular case, Alexei Navalny would be the leader creating the team's communication. Given this, Navalny's team had to become active in a completely new strategic situation. Before the arrest of the politician, the opposition had not yet started actions oriented toward influencing society in the context of participation in the parliamentary elections. At the same time, Navalny's associates were engaged in coordinating social movements. Therefore, it is worth considering the ability to organize the work of Navalny's team in such an extraordinary situation. A potential complication for implementing the strategy was the fact that the main activists left Russia due to the mass repressions, that the FBK was recognized as an extremist organization, and that Navalny's staff structures had to be dissolved. It is worth mentioning the most recognizable associates of the oppositionist: Lyubov Sobol has left for Estonia, while Ivan Zhdanov (director of the FBK) and Leonid Volkov are in Lithuania (Alekseyev, 2021; Interfax, 2021). A total of 180 people worked in Navalny's structures, and many had to leave the country (Zotova, 2021). Indeed, the political strategy was not effectively implemented at the strategic level. Although the status of an emigrant did not prevent the leadership of Navalny's team from planning and mobilizing Russians to participate in the protests and coordinating them through social media, it failed to manage the campaign in the long term. Certainly, the presence of people who could temporarily replace the leader would have been an added value. With such a centralized management model, as in the case of Navalny's team, the absence of a leader contributes to disintegration. Moreover, functioning under a hybrid regime limits the instruments of opposition parties, so the lack of flexibility in the strategy

and the rapid consumption of scarce resources doom it to failure. The campaign on the idea of “smart voting” was dynamically conducted, and Navalny’s team regularly published materials on this topic on the YouTube platform. However, it is worth remembering that its impact was severely limited to Internet users (especially social media users), and thus the communication did not reach a wide audience. The lack of a leader resulted in the dispersal of structures and decreased functioning. It was impossible to re-consolidate efforts and expand the spectrum of activity, for example, through cooperation with other opposition organizations. The tactical dimension of political actions should be considered correct, new conditions were used, and Navalny’s team confirmed a certain degree of strategy modification and adaptability to the changing functioning environment. Unfortunately, all the described shortcomings at the strategic level lead to a negative interpretation of Navalny’s team’s work.

In conclusion, the change in the operating environment (lack of a leader) forced the implementation of a revised strategy by Navalny’s team. It is important to observe that the organization’s instrumentation has been modified to a limited extent. Thus, similar mistakes appeared during the implementation of the strategy in 2020. In addition, the traditional instrumentation of Navalny’s team, namely the instrumentalization of social protests, yielded results in the initial phase, but activists failed to prevent the depletion of this resource. A challenge to consolidating the opposition’s efforts was the departure of Navalny’s most prominent associates from Russia. It seems that a strongly centralized organization lacking a leader cannot function effectively in a regime of decentralization and thus flexibly take advantage of new opportunities (such as mobilizing the Russian diaspora). Such an organization has a defensive strategy, focused only on survival until the leader returns (or a new one is chosen).

Conclusion

The arrest of Alexei Navalny influenced the redefinition of his team’s objectives and, thus, the necessity to adopt a new political strategy for them. Although the instruments of action have not changed significantly, the political discourse itself has changed. In addition, Navalny’s arrest was transformed into an instrument for the team. As the analysis of media broadcasts from 2020 proved, Navalny’s team focused mainly on discrediting the new government and campaigning for the constitutional referendum. In the second case, Navalny was the central figure formulating the communication to Russians. The lack of a leader affected the decision-making paralysis in the organization’s structures, which made it difficult to campaign before the elections to the State Duma.

In contrast to the activity in 2020, after Navalny’s arrest, his team had to coordinate two plans of action simultaneously – stimulating the public to participate in demonstrations against Navalny’s arrest and their management and campaigning for the popularization of the electoral strategy “smart voting.” The scale of participation of Russians in the initiatives

of Navalny's structures confirms the correct implementation of tasks at the operational level. There was no consolidation of the relevant team or initiation of more intensive cooperation with other opposition parties due to the necessity to act in an emergency. The legitimate gradation of purposes should be interpreted as a team's strength. Implementation of the strategic aim, i.e., breaking United Russia's monopoly in the legislature, would make it possible to increase the activity of opposition deputies whose initiatives could not be easily blocked. The political strategy of Navalny's structures assumed a wide range of activities, the key of which was to discredit the Russian authorities and mobilize society to manifest its discontent during mass demonstrations. Despite the positive assessment of the systemic opposition's activities at the tactical (operational) level, the effectiveness of the initiatives must be evaluated negatively. When assessing the scale and scope of geographic protests, it is necessary to point out their dispersion and gradual slowdown over the course of months. The gradual discouragement and the conviction that the postulates could not be implemented, combined with intimidation of the protesters, resulted in the extinction of protests. The hybrid regime's response to Navalny's team's strategy of intimidation, use of violence, initiation of trials, and mass detentions of protesters caused the protests to be extinguished.

The main channels of communication between Navalny's associates and Russians were cyberspace tools, primarily social media and YouTube, which have made it possible to coordinate protests, publish the results of anti-corruption investigations, and disseminate the election strategy "smart voting." The weakness of the team's actualized strategy was its limited ability to keep social mobilization going. The scale of the initial phase of the demonstration proves the effectiveness of the instrumentality of mobilizing Russians only in the short term, thus making it impossible to operationalize the instrumentality. It was not possible to increase the popularity of the political postulates considerably, but the recognition of the leader did, in fact, increase. In the context of discrediting popular candidates of the United Russia party, no spectacular successes were observed, which is confirmed by the results of the State Duma elections. Given the above, the hypothesis of this article should be considered true. The leader's lack of participation in implementing and coordinating the team's strategy significantly contributed to its failure. In a hybrid regime, political organizations that criticize the regime itself take on some of its functions and logic of functioning.

The Russian authorities have not underestimated the threat generated by Navalny's team to the hybrid regime's purpose of confirming its legitimacy again in the parliamentary elections. As was stated, the brutal dispersion of demonstrations and mass detentions weakened social resistance. Moscow took steps to limit the ability of Navalny's structures to communicate with the public. Moreover, the decisions of the legislature and the judiciary were instrumentalized in order to prevent Navalny's associates from participating in the elections. It should be pointed out that in the context of elections to the State Duma, it is important to block the spread of information about the strategy of "smart voting." The political elite did not disregard the potential of this project, being aware that it brought some

benefits to the opposition parties on a local scale. Strong coordination of Russian votes by Navalny's structures could substantially affect the results of the parliamentary elections.

In comparing the indicators for assessing the political strategy chosen for the analysis of this case study – the aims, instrumentation, and online discourse of Navalny's team in 2020 and 2021 – several interesting observations can be made. First, as mentioned earlier, an organization operating in a hybrid system (now authoritarian) adopts the logic of this system, and its way of functioning reflects its characteristic features (strong centralization, focus on a charismatic leader, disallowing grassroots initiatives). Second, the strong centralization of the organization affects its lack of preparation for functioning in a more liberal environment, and thus, low efficiency in the use of local resources and changes in the type of policy instruments used. Third, the lack of a leader leads the remaining members to focus their activities only on the organization's survival, ignoring the opportunities that come with the implementation of a more flexible strategy (defensive attitude, conservative actions, poor coordination of activities).

Given the current direction of regime change in Russia towards total authoritarianism, a full assessment of the Navalny team's strategy is not possible at this point of change and should be monitored. The article should be regarded as a voice in the discussion on the importance of the leader for the survival of a political organization in the conditions of a hybrid regime. The author sees the need to conduct further research on the indicated issue in the future.

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