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# Navalny's Gamesters: Protest, Opposition Innovation, and Authoritarian Stability in Russia

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**Abstract**

This paper explores the legacy of the For Fair Elections (FFE) protest movement in 2011–2012 for electoral competition in Russia. We argue that through strategic innovation, oppositions in authoritarian countries can challenge the autocratic state on multiple fronts by transferring resources from street protests to the electoral arena. Our empirical focus is on Alexei Navalny's campaign for Moscow mayor in late summer 2013. The successful mass mobilization in the movement enabled the campaign to implement a model of electoral innovation based on ideational frames, resources, and tactics drawn from the protest movement. Voter response was stronger than expected, demonstrating the persistence of voter opposition in the face of genuine electoral choice. Relying on press reports, blogs, campaign materials and interviews with activists, we investigate the campaign's strategy and show why it presented a particular challenge to the regime. Our conclusion underscores the state's advantage in countering elite opposition innovation, but also highlights how effective opposition innovation can lead to significant changes in strategies to maintain regime stability.

**Keywords**

elections – Russia – opposition – protest – electoral authoritarianism

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> ...there is nothing more foolish than to fight Putin in 2014 with the tactics of 2011.
>
> ALEXEI NAVALNY, September 15, 2014[1]

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On July 18, 2013, the blogger and protest leader, Alexei Navalny, left prison under a suspended sentence to continue his campaign for Moscow mayor. Navalny, who was a victim of politicized justice by the Putin regime, mounted a campaign that drew on resources from the For Fair Elections movement (FFE) to craft a new model of opposition contestation. On Election Day, Navalny received 27 percent of the vote, while his state-sponsored rival Sergei Sobyanin got 51 percent. Importantly, despite the lopsided vote total, the Navalny campaigns' innovative strategy provoked far-reaching renovation of the Kremlin's electoral control strategy that for the time being, pushed the regime toward authoritarianism as it responded to the opposition's potential to win vote support. This shift in state strategy gets to the heart of electoral authoritarian dilemmas: if the state offers the opposition too much latitude it risks instability but it restricts political rights altogether, it loses legitimacy.

This paper reflects Navalny's sentiment that political oppositions in authoritarian states must continue to innovate to challenge authoritarian rulers. While much of the work on contemporary autocracy, and on the post-Soviet states, focuses on elite defection as the core challenge to regime stability, we highlight the potential for popular challenges in protest and elections. Work on the Russian opposition largely focused on support for the FFE street protests that began in response to electoral falsification. This approach overlooks the importance of the vote protest that preceded the street actions and galvanized Russian society. Similarly, the Navalny campaign reminded the Kremlin that even as street protest had stalled, it still faced a pool of discontented voters who were increasingly willing to vote for opposition candidates, if only to protest against the lack of systemic accountability.

1 Writing in his blog on the eve of municipal elections across Russia in September 2014, Navalny described the evolution of electoral politics since 2011 and highlighted the need for a flexible and considered response to the Kremlin's evolving tactics. See Alexei Navalny, "O vyborakh. Nasha taktika," Navalny.com (blog), September 11, 2014, https://navalny.com/p/3803/.

In comparative politics, the preponderance of scholarly work on authoritarian elections focuses on the regime's menu of manipulation—or the tools to control opposition challenges at the polls. At the heart of the democratic breakthrough argument is the idea that even relatively weak oppositions can challenge the status quo by developing an innovative menu of contestation.[2] As Navalny argued in an interview with Vladimir Kara-Murza,

> We have shown that ordinary people—with no administrative resources, no corporate sponsors, no public relations gurus—can unite and achieve results at the ballot box. We have shown that we are no longer confined to a three-percent electoral 'ghetto.' We have transformed the political scene in Russia and have restored faith—in ourselves and in others—that we can actually win. For me, the most important result of this campaign is the return of real politics to Russia.[3]

These breakthroughs raise two critical issues for Russian political development and electoral authoritarian regimes more generally: the sources of innovation and the specific nature of innovation. To address these issues, we use interview data described in the next section of the article. We then turn to explore two sources of opposition innovation identified in the literature: diffusion and transfer of resources across the boundary between street protest and elections. Relying on this evidence, we trace the core elements of the campaign's strategic innovations to the organization, frames, and mobilization tactics of the FFE protest movement. We conclude with a brief exploration of the Kremlin's response to that challenge and a discussion of the durability of innovation in the face of that response.

## Assessing the Argument: Interview Evidence

To evaluate the links between street protest and electoral campaign innovation, we rely on evidence drawn from 34 interviews with campaign staff. We recruited respondents using a snowball sample strategy, targeting those activists

2 Valerie J. Bunce and Sharon L. Wolchik. Defeating Authoritarian Leaders in Postcommunist Countries. (New York, NY, Cambridge University Press, 2011); Mark R. Beissinger, "The Semblance of Democratic Revolution: Coalitions in Ukraine's Orange Revolution", *American Political Science Review* 107, no. 3 (2013): 574–592.

3 Vladimir Kara-Murza, "Politics in Russia: the Kremlin's troubles", *World Affairs* 176, no. 5 (2014): 47–55.

who worked in various activities: door-to-door agitation, leaflets distribution, the organization of voter meetings, and campaign management and strategy. The activists were very willing to share their perceptions. We had a 90 percent response rate. A few activists declined to participate due to time constraints but provided us with colleagues' contact information.

Our respondent sample reflected the composition of the campaign corps. Most of our respondents (21) were younger than 30, and virtually all had some university-level education. Nine respondents were students. Five respondents were older than 50, and two were pensioners. While the majority saw themselves as middle class, a number identified as members of the intelligentsia and lower class.

We completed 18 structured interviews before Election Day, an additional twelve interviews at the post-election rally, and four post-campaign interviews with the managers responsible for campaign strategy and innovation. The interview protocol included questions focusing on biographical characteristics, social identity, socio-economic status, political engagement, risk perception, motivations, political attitudes, assessment of the campaign and more generally, the opposition. Each interview lasted 30–40 minutes. We conducted face-to-face interviews at three sites during August–September 2013: Navalny's HQ, at the mobile agitation offices, and at the post-election rally at Bolotnaya Square. We conducted follow-up interviews over Skype. Comparative analysis revealed the timing and mode of the interviews did not produce significant differences in attitudes or campaign assessments.

## The Source of Electoral Innovation in Russia in 2013

Electoral breakthroughs and post-election protests often catch political observers and political scientists unaware because they seem to emerge suddenly from weak opposition forces. The literature suggests two models of innovation. In their study of post-Soviet regimes, Bunce and Wolchik developed an electoral model of regime change that linked electoral strategies such as coordinated opposition, election observation, and voter registration drives, post-election protest to challenge dictators.[4] In their argument, the electoral model transferred across state boundaries through international networks of youth movements and democracy assistance organizations. The alternative explanation,

4 Bunce and Wolchik, *Defeating Dictators*.

offered by McAdam and Tarrow, stresses the transfer of resources from domestic protest movements to electoral competition.[5]

In a series of articles and books, Bunce and Wolchik demonstrate that while the strategic elements included in the electoral model were not new in the post-Communist context, the diffusion mechanism that transferred the model across borders and the source of resources to implement them were new in the 2000s.[6] Diffusion is a multi-faceted concept that describes the spread of ideas, institutions, strategies or models contestation from a core site within or across national boundaries. While diffusion may occur in response to strategic imitation, Bunce and Wolchik argue that the more likely mechanism of diffusion is the transfer of ideas, repertoire, and strategy through collaboration between international democracy promoters and local oppositions that are linked through transnational networks and rely on brokers that carry new models across national borders.[7] This mechanism was evident in the colored revolutions in Serbia, Ukraine, and Georgia.

In contrast, McAdam and Tarrow highlight the reciprocal relationship between contention (out-of-system protest behavior) and convention (within system contestation of elections).[8] They argue for a more systematic study of the way in which protest movements influence electoral processes and vice versa and identify six mechanisms through which protest might influence subsequent electoral competition. These include new forms of transferable innovations, new electoral coalitions or even political parties, activist engagement in campaign activity (proactive organization), activist engagement in post-election protest (reactive mobilization), ideological change within existing political parties and organizations that reshape electoral competition and lead to new movement activities. These changes can provide both the resources and new ideas to implement a context-friendly version of the electoral model that alters the balance of forces between the state and opposition.

5 Doug McAdam and Sidney Tarrow. "Ballots and Barricades: On the Reciprocal Relationship Between Elections and Social Movements," *Perspectives on Politics* 8, no. 2 (2010): 529–542.

6 Bunce and Wolchik in *Defeating Dictators* point to the reliance on the model in the Philippines in 1986 and Chile in 1988 and subsequently to Indonesia, Mexico, and Nicaragua. For a discussion of Taiwan and South Korea see Erik Mobrand, "Authoritarian Elections and Democratization in South Korea and Taiwan," SSRN, August 1, (2014), http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2492493.

7 Valerie J. Bunce and Sharon L. Wolchik, "International Diffusion and Postcommunist Electoral Revolutions," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 39, no. 3 (2006): 283–304.

8 Doug McAdam and Sidney Tarrow, "Ballots and Barricades".

### *The Limits of Democratic Diffusion in Russia in 2013*

On its face, the diffusion argument is extremely appealing. After all, Russia's protest movement and post-protest electoral innovation emerged on the heels of the global wave of protest that began in 2008 and included the Arab Uprisings. It also occurred in the wake of the post-Communist color revolutions in Serbia, Ukraine, Georgia, and, arguably, Kyrgyzstan in which an electoral model of political change described by Bunce and Wolchik, provided electoral shocks that upended other post-Communist regimes.[9] The timing and trajectory of opposition election contestation in Russia innovation do not fit neatly with diffusion logic or the implementation of a linear electoral model.

Two years before the Navalny contest, the Kremlin's exclusion of opposition parties from electoral competition precluded the implementation the electoral model. Instead, the opposition opted to stage a vote protest that undermined regime support. The regime refused to accept the loss of its parliamentary majority and falsified the vote. In this case, opposition efforts to organize election observers throughout Moscow provided evidence of fraud that led to the largest street protest in Russia since 1991.[10] While the organized opposition provided the infrastructure for protests, it was the newcomers and digital media activists who recognized the potential for significant participation.

The diffusion argument is even more problematic to explain the timing of innovation in the Navalny campaign. The electoral model was not widely influential in Russia before 2013 and Navalny implemented it precisely at the moment that the regime closed the pathways for international democracy assistance aid to opposition forces. Faced with state claims of foreign interference aimed at affecting regime change the Navalny team took steps to limit transnational organizational influence and contact. None of our respondents mentioned contacts with democracy assistance organizations or activist movements from other countries. When pressed, one respondent who has spent three months working as a full-time employee in the campaign was confused by our questions about foreign influence. He responded,

9 Bunce and Wolchik, *Defeating Dictators*.

10 There was also limited international influence in the observation effort led by the civic organization Citizen Observer. The election monitoring NGO, Golos, consulted on the training of election observers in 2011 and did receive support from the National Endowment for Democracy and other international organizations, it was not directly involved in the FFE movement or the Navalny campaign.

> I was just an ordinary activist, not a leader or a top manager. But we have never discussed any foreign trace, any international experience. I saw no direct evidence of this influence.

We did find evidence of decentralized mechanisms of diffusion at work as Russian citizens living abroad returned to participate in the campaign. Our respondents argued that these activists' experiences contributed to the campaign, but they held different assessments of their impact on campaign capacity. One campaign manager argued,

> Foreigners are prohibited from the political activism engagement [here in Russia], as far as I know. We had some Russians from abroad, a few. But they all came to help themselves; they were not activists. Those folks were from France, from Switzerland. But no foreigners.

Another campaign manager argued that the size of the group and their contribution to the campaign was significant in size and contribution:

> Much to my surprise, a huge number of people came from Switzerland, France, and Germany. They returned to Russia deliberately to join the campaign. We did not initially count on this audience.

These activists brought knowledge of other political systems gathered through Western education and daily life in democratic political systems. They also brought expectations about the potential for reform of Russia political life. Navalny himself studied in the US and brought that experience to the campaign. In addition, some scholars, economists and political scientist with significant training and skills also participated in the campaign.[11] This more informal diffusion of practices and campaign tactics was distinct from the NGO-opposition linkages that emerged within Russia in the 1990s and other post-Communist states in the 2000s as it was limited to Russian citizens and adjusted to the local context.

The campaign's tactical architects were equally vociferous in claiming that the color revolutions did not shape their campaign model or strategy. When asked directly about tactical models one high-level manager stated, "Well, we borrowed the American model from the Barack Obama election. All these meetings, tables, slogans, you know." When asked, "And what about European

11 Alexei Navalny was Yale World Fellow in residence in 2010.

experience? Like, Ukraine?" the same manager responded, "What? No… Our campaign had nothing to do with that."

While diffusion through the activism of Russian citizens living abroad and the institutionalization of past strategies played a role in the campaign tactics, it does not sufficiently explain the campaign's capacity to innovate. We found that respondents were much more likely to point to the protest movement to explain opposition innovation. As one campaign official noted,

> Our volunteers are not different from the 2011 protest participants. They are the same people, political activists. Volunteers were never recruited from any source but political activism.

In addition to activists, the movement's experimentation with online information and mobilization techniques, fundraising, and ideational frames produced significant results.

This causal argument reverses the linkage between elections and post-election protests central to the work on the post-Communist electoral revolutions and suggests that there can be a reciprocal effect between protest and electoral innovation. In the next section of the paper, we outline the types of innovation that we might expect to be transferred from protest experiences to subsequent election cycles in electoral authoritarian regimes. Drawing on country studies of authoritarian elections over time, we show how the campaign developed a menu of contestation or strategic playbook based on FFE tactics and resources. We then rely on evidence from the campaign to demonstrate the link between electoral innovation in the Navalny campaign and the FFE protest. The evidence highlights the ways in which the protest experience both enabled and limited the nature of the opposition challenge to the regime.

## Organizations, Resources, and Ideas: A Menu of Contestation in EAR Regimes

Studies of electoral competition in the Philippines, Hong Kong, Taiwan, South Korea, Ukraine, Georgia, Malaysia, and Mexico provide insights into the factors that shape opposition innovation. Not surprisingly, many of these cases exhibit a symbiotic relationship between street action (protest movements) and electioneering. Building on this literature, we focus on three areas in which innovation introduces uncertainty into electoral competition: organizations, ideational frames, and tactics. While these three components of the opposition strategy are clearly linked, separating them highlights the obstacles and

opportunities that face electoral oppositions and also the ways in which the state might counter specific actions. This section defines strategies used by oppositions in other contexts that can be used as a yardstick to measure the nature of the Navalny challenges and why the Kremlin responded so aggressively to the campaign.

### *Organizing Campaigns: Leadership, Coalitions, and New Party Organizations*

The empirical study of electoral authoritarianism identifies two organizational innovations that increase the likelihood of opposition success: the emergence of quality challengers and unified opposition coalitions.[12] In authoritarian settings, the regime's control over formal political allows it to block qualified candidates from emerging through normal political processes. As a result, they emerge either through elite defection or from outside of the formal political structure, including protest movements, successful businesses, NGO organizations, online communities, and academic or professional organizations.

Similarly, authoritarian regimes limit opposition organization and intervene in the political opportunity structure to fragment existing opposition. This strategy may include favoring a coopted set of organizations or parties that do not challenge the regime if elected or altering electoral rules and political agendas to pit the opposition against each other. A good example of this strategy is to ban electoral coalitions that might form to topple a regime at a critical moment of crisis or economic downturn. The literature suggests that coalition formation is most likely when the largest opposition organization is persistent, substantial, and ideologically coherent and when there is some probability of winning office.[13]

It is also possible that the campaign headquarters and campaign team can provide a temporary substitute for opposition organization. While scholars of authoritarian elections have not paid much attention to the structure of opposition campaign organizations, we argue that organizational innovation can enhance the value of limited resources and create campaign credibility. New campaign managers bring the tactics and strategies of the protest movement into the electoral arena. They extend the reach the experiences of local

12 Bunce and Wolchik, *Defeating Dictators*; Mobrand, "Authoritarian Elections"; Michael Wahman, "Offices and Policies–Why Do Oppositional Parties Form Pre-electoral Coalitions in Competitive Authoritarian Regimes?" *Electoral Studies* 30, no. 4 (2011): 642–657; Michael Wahman, "Opposition Coalitions and Democratization by Election," *Government and Opposition* 48, no.1 (2013): 3–32.

13 Bunce and Wolchik, "International Diffusion".

campaigns beyond geographic boundaries and provide a mechanism of diffusion of new campaign models over time and space within a single country. In this context, the campaign can emerge as an important signal about the oppositions' competence and capacity to govern while a fractured opposition provides the conflicting information.

### *From Protest Slogans to Campaign Appeals*

Electoral authoritarian regimes control administrative resources to attract voters through patronage and redistribution and to secure the unity of the ruling elite.[14] Greene[15] notes that this disparity drives opposition parties toward programmatic party competition as a means of reaching growing middle-class constituencies. Here, too, the incumbent regime maintains an advantage. Electoral authoritarian regimes invest in developing hegemonic narratives that highlight the inevitability of regime victory and the imagined costs of opposition success.[16] As we argue elsewhere, the narrative combines both ideational and real world arguments as carrots (positive reasons to support the regime) and sticks (implied punishments for defecting) to ensure support.[17] The states' view of political reality—one in which the state is the only viable alternative for patriotic voters—is disseminated through monopoly control of media outlets and laws criminalizing free speech.

If a campaign can offer an alternative frame that attracts votes, then it provides a significant challenge to regime control. This possibility is likely if the frame focuses on democratic values and the protection political and civil rights and the indignity wrought by authoritarianism. These efforts work to build norms of participation, popular expectations, and evaluations of representation that undermine the coercive and patronage-based appeals

14 For examples of this argument see, Conor O'Dwyer, "Runaway State Building: How Political Parties Shape States in Postcommunist Eastern Europe," *World Politics* 56, no. 04 (2004): 520–553; see also Regina Smyth, Anna Lowry, and Brandon Wilkening, "Engineering Victory: Institutional Reform, Informal Institutions, and the formation of a Hegemonic Party Regime in the Russian Federation," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 23, no. 2 (2007): 118–137.

15 Kenneth Greene, "Opposition Party Strategy and Spatial Competition in Dominant Party Re-gimes. A Theory and the Case of Mexico," *Comparative Political Studies* 35, no. 7 (2002): 755–783.

16 Sergei Guriev and Daniel Treisman, "How Modern Dictators Survive: An Informational Theory of the New Authoritarianism," National Bureau of Economic Research, Working Paper No. 21136 (2015).

17 Regina Smyth, Irina V. Soboleva, Luke Shimek, and Anton Sobolev, "Defining Common Ground: The Language of Network Mobilization in Russian Protests," in *Civil Society Awakens? The Systemic and Non-Systemic Opposition in the Russian Federation: National and Regional Dimensions*, ed. Cameron Ross (London: Ashgate, 2015).

common to authoritarian regimes.[18] Fox observes that Mexican opposition focused on convincing citizens that there was no need to give up critical civil rights such as free speech and honest voting to gain public services or even private goods such as jobs.[19] Greene stressed the importance of campaign appeals that "transform hearts and minds" to engage citizens in the political process. To the extent that the campaign can create demands for change based on new models of citizenship and increased political activism, it can profoundly shape electoral competition over several election cycles.[20] The impact of new frames is particularly effective if the campaign can find new ways to communicate its ideas and models of state-society relations to everyday citizens—a theme we return to below.

### *Tactical Innovation*

The tactical repertoire of EAR oppositions can go a long way to change the electoral balance by spreading the campaign message. Volunteer activists embody a solution to resource disparities between the state and opposition forces. Once recruited, activists play a critical role in campaigns' efforts to organize the campaign offices, produce campaign materials, raise funds and overcome the media bias common in EAR regimes. A strong activist corps can enable a broad range of campaign tactics that move the campaign from the airwaves and newspapers to the neighborhoods and homes of potential voters. These strategies include door to door canvassing, leafleting on the street, hanging posters and placards, and candidate meetings with constituencies. The more extensively opposition campaigns can innovate the more successful the campaign is likely to be.

Protest movements also produce mechanisms of mobilization designed to evade state control. These might include ways to fund a movement through small donations, ties to critical social groups, or inform voters. In the FFE movement, new media provided critical tools to disseminate information and mobilize internet activists, overcoming the information bias resulting from state-controlled media.[21] Using similar tactics, a candidate can recruit activists and educate potential voters. When activists take the online message to

18 Bunce and Wolchik, *Defeating Dictators*; Mobrand, "Authoritarian Elections".

19 Jonathan Fox, "The Difficult Transition from Clientelism to Citizenship: Lessons from Mexico," *World Politics* 46, no. 02 (1994): 151–184.

20 Kenneth Greene, "Opposition Party Strategy and Spatial Competition in Dominant Party Regimes. A Theory and the Case of Mexico," *Comparative Political Studies* 35, no. 7 (2002): 755–783.

21 Regina Smyth and Sarah Oates, "Mind the Gaps: Media Use and Mass Action in Russia," *Europe-Asia Studies* 67, no.2 (2015):285–305, doi:10.1080/09668136.2014.1002682.

the street and doorsteps of potential voters, the effect of digital media can be amplified.

In the face of significant obstacles and limited resources, the opposition has a limited set of strategies that they can use to win votes. It can build organization and coalition, substitute resources such as activists, social media, and electoral technologies to win votes, and finally, to craft ideational appeals that provide compelling reasons for moderate voters to support the party. Protest movements can provide significant catalysts to shape these strategies and render them viable as the movement shapes the potential for a new model of opposition electioneering that highlights the importance of the candidate, their team, and their program.

## Innovation the Navalny Campaign: A New Model of Opposition Success

The Navalny campaign relied on the FFE protest to develop a model of opposition electioneering that could be used in subsequent elections, amplifying its threat to the regime. We assess the campaign model using the expectations formulated in the previous section and noting the ways in which the peculiarities of the movement shaped the campaign.

### *Innovating from Protest: The Candidate, and His Coalition*

Alexei Navalny's candidacy constitutes the first electoral innovation of the campaign. The Putin regime controls ballot access and the political ambition ladder, limiting the emergence of a new political elite to contest elections. Through his Internet anti-corruption campaign and his prominent role in the FFE movement, Navalny entered the race with a political base and significant name recognition. Polls taken at opposition protests in June 2013 showed that 62 percent of participations supported Navalny's candidacy.[22] This positive assessment among voters was limited. The Kremlin's campaign to associate protest with anti-traditional, anti-Russian values reinforced negative beliefs about Navalny's wealth and personal corruption. National media about his corruption trials convinced many voters that he was just like other corrupt politicians. In short, while the best choice for an opposition challenger, Navalny's candidacy was fraught with significant negative voter affect but also a core of loyal support.

22 "Opros Na Mitinge Oppozitsii 12 Iyunya," Levada-Center, June 17, 2013, http://www.levada.ru/17-06-2013/opros-na-mitinge-oppozitsii-12-iyunya.

While a limited opposition coalition did back Navalny's candidacy over 40 candidates had tried to secure ballot access, including other reform parties, demonstrating opposition fragmentation. In addition, the coopted systemic opposition, which eschewed the protest movement, ran candidates who were universally perceived to be hopeless. Nationalist groups split on their support for Navalny. One of the FFE leaders, Sergei Udaltsov, attempted to run against him but failed to obtain ballot access. Vladimir Tor of the Nationalist Democratic Party backed Navalny while Dmitry Demushkin's Slavic Union did not.[23] Eduard Limonov, of the Other Russia, hinted that Navalny's release from prison was due to a deal with the authorities.[24] On the other end of the political spectrum, democratic activists expressed deep reservations about the candidate's nationalist positions.

The protest did provide new potential allies. Led by campaign lawyer, and former Alpha Group fund manager, Vladimir Ashurkov, the campaign built on the link between business and politics that emerged from the FFE protest movement. This strategy created a limited coalition between business and politics for the first time since Mikhail Khodorkovsky's arrest. During the campaign, 37 IT business leaders wrote an open letter articulating their financial and vote support for the candidate, in exchange for his work to establish a more transparent business climate. As we note below, business leaders also volunteered in the campaign. Despite this breakthrough, efforts to forge a broad opposition coalition failed, revealing its inability to institutionalize the protest coalition in 2012.

To a significant degree, the campaign organization, and tech-savvy management team substituted for a party organization. The team consisted of FFE leadership from around Russia, and it has significant electoral and organizational experience. The model of the campaign mimicked a tech incubator rather than an old style Russian campaign headquarters. Campaign managers built the organization on principles of horizontalism and inclusiveness based on concentric circles of campaign management, staff, and the extraordinary number of volunteers. Headquarters housed nine departments to coordinate different activities, including: street agitation, IT, finance, sociology (research), publications, legal, logistics, headquarters management, and the press office. According to interviews, the institutional design walled off the *RosVybory*

23 "Natsionalisty podderzhali Naval'nogo na vyborakh mera Moskvy," Lenta.ru, June 20, 2013, http://lenta.ru/news/2013/06/20/navalny.

24 Eduard Limonov, "Byl "na puti k ispravleniyu", no vot tebe, babushka, i Yur'yev den". Izvestia.ru (Newspaper), July 19, 2013. http://izvestia.ru/news/553919.

election monitoring organization formed in winter 2011 from the rest of the campaign to maintain integrity.

By drawing on protest experiences and networks, the campaign was able to develop a campaign structure that allowed it to use its resources to best advantage. The team self-consciously forged an organizational model that could be replicated in other regimes and races, making a significant contribution to broader opposition capacity to challenge the regime. Likewise, the horizontal nature of the team and "gamification" of campaign headquarters increased bonds between and among activists, managers, the candidate and even voters. These innovations attracted and retained volunteers throughout the election period, changing the oppositions' capacity to adopt new appeals and tactics.

The team itself garnered significant admiration from the activists. As one young woman argued,

> I believe that team Navalny is the most successful social project in the history of modern Russia. The most successful, most thoughtful, most carefully orchestrated social project, which involved continuous pleasure.

Interest in the campaign technology also proved to be a draw for activists. A young woman, involved in subway agitation confessed: "I am not interested in Navalny's persona." She was curious about the campaign organization and inspired by its reliance on cloud services, transparent decision-making, and on-line engagement of supporters. She continued, "I realized that I am eager to see whether it [management of campaign] is indeed organized the way it was presented on the Web." As this young woman indicates, the campaign organization became part of the message of change and participation. It was both a model and an example of what the opposition might accomplish with renewed energy and cooperation.

The campaign model also provided some information about the opposition's capacity to govern if elected. In a regime where the independent opposition is not permitted to participate in elections or the policy process, the demonstration of competence by any opposition is rare. Moreover, the campaign found new ways to advertise its successes. The campaign's glossy report clearly functioned not only as a primer for future action but also an advertisement of its achievements.[25] While there were some press reports

25 Alexei Navalny, "Alexei Navalny – Candidate for Mayor of Moscow" (campaign report, Moscow, 2013).

of Muscovites mocking the campaign and its tactics, the demonstration of effective organization proved a key draw from participants and also showed what the opposition might accomplish in other races with limited resources.[26]

### *The Campaign's Ideas*

Although the candidate famously argued that many of his practical innovations came from the U.S. television show *The Wire*, his platform contained the ideas advanced in his blog and anti-corruption websites, coupled with the themes of the protest movement. The campaign sought to mobilize activist support while extending the appeal of the campaign to reach beyond the protest constituency. The campaign implemented these somewhat conflicting strategies in three different sets of appeals.

The slogan "Change Russia, Start with Moscow" defined the overarching strategy of the campaign. In our interviews, the activists very much believed in and supported this idea that change would be incremental, had to occur in society, and could be led by Moscow. Appeals to existing supporters focused on Navalny's enduring themes: fighting corruption, and for transparency, and accountability. These efforts repeated the slogans of the earliest actions of the protest movement including: "One for all and all for one," "Do not lie and do not steal," "I came, I saw, I stayed," "We are the power here." The campaign added a new slogan that appeared in its newspaper headlines: "Navalny is my Mayor." These slogans linked the protest to the campaign, invoking shared emotions and identities across the two actions.

The official campaign platform, announced on July 1, at the campaign kickoff, aimed at extending the candidates' appeal beyond the protesters and sympathizers by focusing on economic and social welfare concerns.[27] Campaign activities took place in the sprawling suburbs around central Moscow to reach potential supporters. Navalny's appeals argued for devolution of city power to provide local solutions to the problems that plague Moscow: utilities, healthcare, education, parking, and traffic. The program also sought to win the support of voter groups by addressing specific concerns: the need to improve the Moscow's business climate and to deliver better health care. In personal appearances, Navalny effectively argued that he was similar to the voters, and

26 For example see the case of independent local campaigns in 2014 and 2015 in Novosibirsk, Kostroma, Kaluga, and majoritarian campaigns for Moscow Duma elections.

27 Alexei Navalny, "Programma kandidata v mery Moskvy Alexeya Naval'nogo: Izmeni Rossiyu, Nachni S Moskvy", Navalny.ru (blog): http://navalny.ru/platform/Navalny_Program.pdf.

understood the problems as they did. Consistent with many campaigns, even the activists criticized the lack of cogent solutions to these thorny problems that have plagued the city for decades.

As noted above, Navalny's discussion of illegal immigration was central to the campaign message but divided his support. The campaign provided him with the opportunity to clarify his positions on illegal immigration. While the ethnically defined concept of nationalism that Navalny articulated in the campaign largely reflected popular understandings, democratic activists objected.[28] As one young woman argued,

> It is a little bit depressing—this sharpening of the "national question." Buryats and Bashkirs are also ethnic minorities. I am not comfortable with nationalistic rhetoric.

Likewise, activists reflect the protester's frustrations with the narrow definition of reform. A middle-aged man argued that Navalny's agenda,

> …lacked inspiring ideas. He is too focused on corruption. There is a deeper problem behind it: a stupefied nation, intellectual and moral degradation.

The campaign addressed these concerns indirectly, through the articulation of a new model of representation. The program promised Muscovites a "*normal European life*" and advocated for the protection of political rights. Responding to Sobyanin's distribution of food baskets just before Election Day, campaign director, Volkov, echoed Fox analysis of the Mexican opposition, "Take the goods, and vote your conscience."[29] In short, he admonished voters: don't trade votes for services.

Perhaps a bigger component of the protest movement in the campaign came from the transfer of a shared identity to the election campaign that focused on a new model of citizenship and hope for the future. Here, the amorphous FFE movement contributed less tangible but substantial resources to

28 Marlene Laruelle, "Alexei Navalny and Challenges in Reconciling 'Nationalism' and 'Liberalism'," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 30, no. 4 (2014): 1–22; Natalia Moen-Larsen, "Normal Nationalism": Alexei Navalny, "LiveJournal and 'the Other'," *East European Politics* 30, no. 4 (2014): 548–567.

29 Leonid Volkov, "Bol'shoye Itogovoye Interv'yu: Rasshifrovka, Chast' 1," Leonwolf.livejournal.com (blog), September 20, 2013, http://leonwolf.livejournal.com/520857.html.

the campaign. A man who was responsible for organizing rallies and media appearances observed:

> We all were frightened before the first protest and even left a will before we joined the movement. But it was not a mob. There were people like us. The feeling we had in Navalny's office, the feeling of being with people like me.

The protest movement gave activists a language to talk about their shared identities—people like me—and that created the foundation volunteerism. These sorts of contributions were imperative in the authoritarian environment where protest signals broad opposition to a regime in which citizens are reluctant to reveal their true beliefs and wait for proof that they are not alone before they act.

Another man in his 30s articulated a desire to shape a better future, a common theme among protest activists. He stated, "I am principally far from Navalny and do not entirely support his program… [I participate] for the sake of my children and future generations." Even those who supported the candidate participated for a complex set of reasons. A young man argued that Navalny was the only viable candidate for mayor but that he volunteered to provoke longer-term social change. A young woman was more positive, arguing, "I believe in Alexei Navalny. Believe him, trust him, and want him to be mayor. I want to live in a country where he will be the president." Moreover, she then went on to show a broader commitment, "Maybe I have stated this very naively. I just had some inner impulse or the desire to be part of it, to participate and make some sort of move." The campaign tapped the same emotional motivations that drove many protesters.

Campaign activists felt a sense of ownership and personal investment in the campaign beyond Navalny's candidacy was quite common in our interviews and echoed the motivations supplied by FFE participants. Another female activist stated,

> I have protested since my early childhood. I tried to push against the system. And as soon as it started at the Moscow-level, I understood, that I could do something that was *mine* – and went ahead.

This sense of morality, citizenship, and dignity united the volunteers as it had during the protest. Our respondents frequently mentioned the ideas of "moral duty," "responsibility as citizen and human," "to be responsible for the country." The activists pointed out the profound differences in self-awareness and

moral responsibility the divided them from Kremlin supporters. As a 29-year-old woman volunteering full-time as a subway agitation manager put it:

> I do not care about the campaign of Navalny as oppositioner… I participate to avoid the pangs of conscience, to be able to sleep in peace.

Many volunteers predicted that this model of political participation and civic activism would endure. One young woman claimed,

> Even if Alexei does not become mayor, then these people and the whole team will not fall apart, they will continue to work on various civil and municipal initiatives and projects.

We argue that these attitudinal changes, as well as the accumulation of information about the actual nature of the regime, are essential elements of challenge and innovation in the campaign. Despite the significant negatives that Navalny brought to the campaign, he managed to build significant vote support over a very short period. Focusing on the campaign as the political message shaped activist identities and extended the activist core. It also created a strong opposition message that focused on change that was incremental, not revolutionary, and that would begin with civic training. The success of these appeals in the context of the campaign reminded the Kremlin that vote support for the opposition was much larger than the street protests indicated. Their demands for regime responsiveness were still salient two years after the protest movement ended. Moreover, these appeals could be used in local and regional races around the Federation, creating an enduring threat to the regime.

### *Campaign Strategy: An Effective Use of Limited Resources*

The FFE brought about two innovations—the mobilization of activists and development of an online funding model—that provided the basis for subsequent organizational and tactical advancements. According to the campaign report, more than 3,000 activists volunteered regularly, and 15,000 participated sporadically in the campaign. As we note above, the activists were much more diverse than they appeared in the caricatures of them in the state-owned media. They shared valuable intangible traits such as experience and interest in politics, information sources, and skills that shaped the campaign.

A good example of the transfer of competences is evident in the campaign's use of technology. Managers made decisions through online platforms and cloud services that allowed broad input. Campaign managers developed games

to recruit and involve activists in decision-making. They relied on interactive systems such as Podio, Google Docs, GitHub, Pivotal Tracker, and Dropbox to store and exchange data and other crucial information. These tools provided maximum transparency in all activities of the campaign and contributed to its portability. These tools shaped both activist involvement and the fund-raising model.

As with past opposition campaigns, access to administrative resources—state budget funds—provided an enormous boost for the incumbent candidate, Sergei Sobyanin. To counter the regime's advantage, the Navalny campaign used crowdsourcing mechanisms developed during the FFE protests. Donors could contribute up to $450 through a Yandex Money account that required them to identify themselves to prevent scandal. A second funding scheme, "Credit Trust," was more dubious. Under this program, campaign supporters donated large sums (a million rubles) and then asked to be reimbursed with small donations. While technically legal, the scheme skirted the law, amplifying the states' claims of misuse of funds and laying the ground for criminal charges against key campaign figures in 2014.

To counter Sobyanin's media control, the campaign built an unprecedented strategy self-publication, digital media blitzes, and face-to-face contact that linked new media with timeless campaign activities. Activists bore most of the responsibility for voter contact. The campaign relied on blogs, Twitter, FB and a campaign website to provide extensive information to online supporters. As he did during the protests, Navalny asked volunteers to agitate through their social networks. To evade state monitoring of social media, the campaign asked volunteers to send 20 messages per day to random users of *Vkontakte* and Facebook networks asking them to vote. Volunteers also participated in political discussions on the web through forums, FB comments, and blogs sharing information about the campaign model, its program, and the candidate. Finally, the campaign produced YouTube videos to train volunteers and present the program and policy initiatives.

Volunteers took the online message offline mimicking FFE protest mobilization and network activism. Faced with the Kremlin's smear campaign and a general distrust of anyone engaged in electoral politics, the campaign understood the importance of delivering their message through intermediaries who were trusted by potential supporters. The activists worked through their personal networks, lobbying family, friends, and colleagues on behalf of the candidate. One respondent noted that he engaged in "agitation of relatives." Another referred to his attempt to move beyond his closest contacts to convince "his outer circle." A third said that he convinced his disinterested girlfriend to vote for Navalny. This extension of digital media beyond its

technical and user boundaries magnified the use of technology as it did during the 2011–2012 protest cycle.

These efforts were part of a broader strategy to build name recognition and extend support by providing new information to voters. Barred from state-owned media, Navalny's mass media outreach was limited to coverage on the radio station Echo Moscow and the independent television station *Dozhd'*. Both outlets not only frequently invited him to participate as a guest but also featured his campaign material on their websites. The publishing office produced two issues of a newspaper each with a circulation of four million. Activists also created 68 neighborhood newspapers that provided targeted information arguing for policy devolution to raion councils as a mechanism of problem-solving.[30]

The campaign personalized advertising, distributing bumper stickers and banners that supporters might display on cars, in apartment windows, or hallways. It produced about 900 larger placards to hang on apartment houses, handed out t-shirts, and made the logos available through the web so that anyone could create shirts or posters. These symbols signaled support for the campaign among ordinary citizens and revealed the private preferences of Navalny supporters to neighbors, friends, coworkers and other potential voters, enhancing the "people like me" image of the campaign. They also reached voters at home and during their daily routines. Navalny was extremely active: greeting voters on the metro, and holding at least three meetings a day with constituents in apartment courtyards, parks, and squares. In sum, the campaign organized close to 90 voter meetings across the city attracting and estimated 40,000 constituents.

Activists set up cubes—banners lashed to metal frames—around the city. On average, four volunteers manned each cube providing leaflets, newspapers, and other materials to potential voters. In total, there were more than 2700 cubes constructed in Moscow, with the height of activity taking place in the latter weeks of the campaign. Software engineers provided an online-offline linkage through interactive maps of Moscow showing where the location of the cubes. Volunteers mounted pickets in front of downtown office buildings. Similarly, online appeals, the phone bank, and door-to-door campaigning provided individual contact with voters. The campaign estimated that activists working through these channels distributed 14.7 million pieces of campaign literature and symbols, and answered questions about the candidate and his platform.

30 Navalny, "Candidate for Mayor".

The campaign strategies, ideas, and organization all reflected developments that emerged from the movement and were tailored to suit the electoral environment. There was also a reciprocal effect on the movement itself. Electoral organizational innovation changed the structure of the activist core. The ease of participation guaranteed by new technologies and user-friendly communication between the efficient and horizontally organization attracted new political activists. The campaign also attracted the first visible influx of Russians living abroad that returned specifically to join the campaign.

On the other hand, the movement also constrained campaign efforts. The FFE coalitions did not hold up under the strain of electoral competition. Navalny's decision to cooperate with elements of the nationalist movement exacerbated his image problems. Moreover, the framing of the FFE movement as a political reform movement rather than economic grievances movement precluded the kind of cross-class coalition that might have expanded Navalny's electoral support in the city's blue-collar periphery. Similarly, the Kremlin's framing of the movement as a revolutionary force funded by Western governments was transferred to the campaign and amplified by some of the campaign messages. These elements provided considerable obstacles for the campaign in extending its support beyond the protest movement. Also, given the inability of the movement to institutionalize after the first protest cycle, it did not provide much structure for the campaign, nor did the democratic opposition groups contribute directly to the organization.

## The Navalny Campaign and Regime Stability

The regime miscalculated when it allowed Navalny to participate in the election, expecting him to be humiliated by the outcome.[31] Instead, the transfer of resources from the FFE protest movement to opposition electoral campaigns yielded a model that incorporated new technologies, a pool of activists, and a new type of appeal. Despite the Kremlin's electoral engineering between 2011 and 2013, Navalny's campaign won unexpected support. While poll data vary widely depending on the polling agency and mode of response, Levada Center data is typical in that it demonstrates a sharp increase in vote support for Navalny over the summer before elections. The final vote tally was even higher than polls suggested. This evidence of a campaign effect transformed

31 The municipal filter law that requires candidates to obtain signature support from regional elected officials conveys ballot control to the party of power United Russia.

the election and had far-reaching consequences for the election result and state-society relations.

Between 2013 and 2014, Navalny's success altered opposition strategies and plans for subsequent elections in significant and predictable ways. The evidence of opposition electoral success sparked new electoral coalitions. In Moscow, the "For Moscow" electoral coalition drew on activists and organizational techniques honed in the Navalny campaign. Similarly, in 2015 a broad opposition coalition worked together to contest regional elections in demonstration regions. The regime also learned the lessons of the campaign and developed a new set of strategies to contain the opposition. New institutions and electoral regulations increased ballot access barriers and barred new opposition coalitions from competing. Instead, the Kremlin packed the ballot with hopeless candidates and friendly opposition, lowering the electoral threshold for regime-sponsored candidates. This strategy included the incorporation of fellow travelers from the systemic opposition, UR, and the so-called independents, who if successful, support the regime's policy initiatives and reduce the burden on UR to forge absolute majorities. Similarly, deals among the systemic opposition and the Kremlin about strategic withdrawal in regions where elections might be close ensured that UR candidates had a clear path to victory in gubernatorial races. The new law on political parties made it easier for parties to register, increasing the number of parties allowed to compete from seven in 2011 to 78 in 2015, providing a pool of hopeless candidates to create the illusion of competition.

The Kremlin also worked to decrease the link between elections and protest by engineering victory through manipulation rather than fraud. One strategy to deal with opposition voting is to allow turnout rates to decline as voters become alienated by the lack of choice. Regional elections after 2013 illustrate that the Kremlin adopted this strategy in many regions where opposition potential has been significant in past elections. To hedge its bets, the Kremlin also moved to protect itself if fraud became necessary to secure vote targets. It employed early voting processes and at home voting procedures that moved the locus of fraud beyond the reach of election observers to preclude postelection protests over falsification.[32] New laws limited the access of election observers and also provides the Kremlin with early warning of the intended location of observers, a move that greatly limits independent information about fraudulent practices. New draconian rules against all types of protest, including encampments and vehicle processions such as those used by the truckers and farm tractors to disrupt traffic. The formation of a National Guard police force

32 The Yabloko party tracked evidence of falsification in early voting in St. Petersburg.

directly under the control of the president increased the perception that the state was willing and capable of using force against mass demonstrations. All of these signals dramatically increase the cost of protest for potential participants and dissuade all but the active opposition from participating in street actions.

Coercion in the form of politicized justice emerged as an even stronger component of the Kremlin's menu of manipulation. The arrest of key members Navalny's campaign team between 2013 and 2015 not only removed prominent challengers from electoral races, but it also provided a staunch warning to activists who might want to get involved in managing opposition campaigns. Criminal charges also showed the regime's intention to enforce the separation between business and politics. Also, the regime continued to release compromising information about the opposition leaders, creating rifts within the leadership ranks. More perniciously, the murder of opposition leader Boris Nemtsov and the poisoning of PARNAS leader Vladimir Kara-Murza underscore the danger of opposition in contemporary Russia. Activists, volunteers similar those who worked in the Navalny campaign, also became the target of state harassment and surveillance increasing the costs of campaign participation. In spring 2016, the hacking of opposition websites and release of individual personal data of voters who participated in the opposition primaries extended the harassment beyond activists to opposition supporters.

In the wake of the Navalny campaign, the Kremlin increased its efforts to shore up vote support by doubling down on propaganda to discredit the opposition. The release of scandalous footage of PARNAS leader Mikhail Kasyanov in 2016 is the most notable example of this strategy, and it effectively divided the opposition. Conversely, the Kremlin also notoriously shifted its appeals to redefine stability as protection of national pride, Russian values and ultimately, national security. The moral panic over LGBT citizens and the subsequent stress on conservative values divided opposition consensus. This frame also easily incorporated anti-Western sentiment and in the wake of Euromaidan in Ukraine, a justification for the annexation of Crimea and the subsequent war, undermining the nationalist-democratic partnership that gave rise to the 2011 protests.

On the eve of the 2014 regional elections, Navalny argued that simple strategies such as the "anybody but UR" campaign of 2011 or an election boycott would no longer work against the Kremlin's new playbook. The opposition had to be smarter and more precise in its strategy to identify those candidates on the ballot who would fight for effective policies on behalf of constituents and boycott races with no promising candidates on the ballot. The opposition stressed voter education and building ties across disparate political groups.

The "For Moscow" website endorsed a candidate in each district including some candidates from the systemic opposition.[33] Activists developed a similar web-based voter education tool in St. Petersburg. In spring 2016, Navalny's electoral coalition had a small breakthrough when it managed to provide evidence of voter fraud in municipal elections in the Moscow suburb Barvikha, forcing the cancellation of the election. While the opposition continues to try to contest elections, the Kremlin's strategies have undermined the key attributes of the Navalny campaign model, but they have also undermined the value of elections as a legitimizing force.

## Conclusions: Electoral Innovation and the EAR Equilibrium

The Navalny campaign transformed FFE protest resources, strategies, and frames into an unexpectedly successful effort to challenge the regime. This case demonstrates that even limit protest in the context of electoral authoritarian regimes can provide a significant source of ideas, resources, and tactics that amplify the effect of protest. The FFE movement provided some very tangible resources: a finance model, an information network, ideational structures, and an activist corps that was easily mobilized through social media. These elements enabled the campaign to take its message to the streets through candidate meetings, cubes, newspaper distribution and door-to-door canvassing. This effort was critical not only to educate voters about the program but also to demonstrate opposition support among ordinary citizens. It challenged the Kremlin's control over political messages, chipping away at the states' version of political reality and the demonization of Navalny himself. The 2013 Moscow mayoral campaign underscored that the 2011 vote protest and subsequent protests movement had a significant legacy. The Kremlin faced not only an increasingly clever opposition elite but also growing problems of political activism and opposition voting.

In response to these challenges, the Kremlin used its experience in subsequent elections to reconstruct its electoral control system. These efforts manufactured UR majorities in every regional legislature that was elected after 2012 and victories in all but four gubernatorial races. Regime stability has come at a cost that may require future changes. Levada polling evidence suggests that voters have disengaged from elections—that they are quiescent but not content. Against a backdrop of increasing protest activity and strikes, the decline

33 See, for example, the public page of the coalition on Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/mskcoalition.

in active regime support signals that there is still potential for civic activism to cross from the streets to the ballot box.

Regarding the broader question of competition in electoral authoritarian regimes, our analysis illustrates that electoral victories can mask significant changes in the mechanisms that maintain those victories. These countervailing changes might seem trivial to the casual observer, but the incremental changes can produce underlying shifts in the mechanisms that shape electoral outcomes at each stage of the process and introduce new dynamics into the political system. These changes can lead to seemingly rapid regime disintegration or authoritarian control. Thus, while the literature points to exogenous shocks or incumbent missteps as the source regime change, we echo Bunce and Wolchik[34] to suggest that that opposition innovation that challenges and alters the state's equilibrium can also be a mechanism of systemic change. These changes may well appear most potent if the face of an exogenous shock that alters state power, the information environment, and even opposition appeals. Most significantly, we show that electoral outcomes are not always reliable indicators of electoral authoritarian stability because those outcomes mask a constantly shifting set of electoral processes and mechanism for state control that can produce seemingly sudden and dramatic political change.

34 Bunce and Wolchik, Defeating Dictators.