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“Non-campaign of a non-candidate” – Alexei Navalny in the 2018 presidential election in Russia

Abstract: In March 2018, another presidential election took place in the Russian Federation. For the fourth time Vladimir Putin won the election by a large majority of votes. Alexei Navalny – an opposition candidate who had been preparing his election campaign since the end of 2016 – was not allowed to stand in the election. Regardless of his elimination from the election, Navalny remained an active member of Russian political life before and after the election; he carried out a boycott of the election, and organized post-election protests. Without a doubt, despite the ban on running in the election, Navalny was one of the main figures in the electoral process. Thus, the aim of this article is a detailed analysis of Navalny’s preparations for the campaign – the authors focused not only on the candidate’s opposition activity, but also on his unique measures and methods of running a campaign (Internet, social media, crowd-funding). The article examines the campaign preparations, as well as the reasons for the rejection of Navalny’s registration as an election candidate, social support index, relationships with other candidates and the change of strategy after the Central Election Commission’s decision. The analysis is based on Russian law, Central Election Commission’s decisions, opinion poll results and information from the Russian and international media.

Key words: Russian elections, Russian president, Alexei Navalny, election campaign, political opposition

On May 7, 2018, seven weeks after the election, the inauguration of Vladimir Putin’s fourth term as president took place. Two days earlier, more than ten Russian cities organized demonstrations under the slogan “He’s not our tsar.”¹ The main originator and organizer of the

¹ The biggest demonstrations took place in Moscow and Saint Petersburg. The cities’ authorities did not give permission to carry out protests, hence both events were illegal. Despite that, at least several thousand people took part in the protests. Among the slogans, apart from the main one of “He’s not our tsar” (regarding Putin’s 18 years of presidency) there appeared “Russia without corruption,” “Cast forth the

protests was the informal leader of the non-parliamentary opposition, Alexei Navalny, who had planned to run in the presidential election. The whole process of preparation for the election had been carefully planned by Navalny himself and his volunteering staff. They took care of details such as campaign funds, efficient collection of signatures supporting his candidacy and a PR campaign in the mass media. But on December 25, 2017, the Russian Central Electoral Commission rejected Navalny's registration, due to his lack of passive voting rights. In the end, despite an appeal against the Commission's decision in court and its interpretation of a constitutional provision favorable to Navalny, he was not allowed to stand in the election. In addition to unofficially taking part in the election campaign, he was an active member of Russian political life before and after the election. He also carried out a boycott of the election and organized post-election protests. It is without a doubt that Navalny was one of the key figures in the electoral process, despite not being allowed to run. Hence the aim of this article is to analyze Navalny's campaign preparations – not only because of the fact that he had a real chance of becoming the only opposition presidential candidate with a chance of winning,² but also because of the means and methods of running his campaign (the use of the Internet, crowdfunding, etc.). The authors of the article analyzed the campaign preparations and the reasons for denying Navalny registration,

tsar," "We are not slaves," "Putin retire." During the demonstration, confrontations between the protesters and the police, including mass arrests took place – over 700 people in Moscow and about 1,600 in the whole country were arrested (data ОБД-Инфо – independent projects devoted to political oppression in Russia; Литой, 2018). In Saint Petersburg, when protesters went out onto the main street – the Nevsky Prospect – they were arrested by police within a few minutes. The main organizer of the protests, Alexei Navalny was also arrested (and sentenced to 30 days in jail). Protests took place in other cities as well, e.g., Chelyabinsk, Yakutsk, Krasnodar, Voronezh and many others.

² Formally, 8 candidates representing different political parties and initiatives ran in the election. However, the majority of them originate from parties that, for years, have been operating in the framework of the Russian political system and do not have any influence upon it. It is rare for the representatives of these parties to engage in oppositional actions against the authorities or criticize those in power. Only Ksenia Sobchak declared that her candidacy would guarantee the presence of opposition in the election, especially after denying Navalny the possibility of standing in the election. However, as a result of the lack of political experience and opposition support, as well as infinitesimal support from society and doubts about her independence (there were rumors that the candidate was convenient for Vladimir Putin), Ksenia Sobchak's candidacy was not taken seriously.

his social support index, relationships with other candidates and change of strategy after the Electoral Commission's decision. The analysis has been carried out based on research on Russian law, the Central Electoral Commission's decisions, results of public opinion polls and information in Russian and international media.

Russian election ordinance

In Russia, the procedure of carrying out presidential elections is regulated by the following acts: the Constitution of Russia, Federal Law "On Basic Guarantees of Electoral Rights and the Right of Citizens of the Russian Federation to Participate in a Referendum," Federal Law "On the Election of the President of the Russian Federation," and selected laws from other acts (*Процедура выборов*). Elections are general, equal, direct and are carried out by secret voting. Suffrage has been guaranteed to everyone, regardless of their sex, race, nationality, parentage, possession and social status, affiliation to public associations or other circumstances. The only limitation to active voting is age – voters must be at least 18 years of age. Additionally, voting rights and rights to be elected are not granted to people who are incapacitated by court decision or in prison at the time of the election (*Федеральный закон „О выборах...”*).

A Russian citizen who is at least 35 years of age and has been living on the country's territory continually for 10 years can be elected President of the Russian Federation. In addition, the same person cannot be President of the Russian Federation for longer than 2 consecutive terms (*Konstytucja Federacji Rosyjskiej*, art. 80). No other limitations are stated in the Constitution. Other conditions have been included in the Law "On the Election of the President of the Russian Federation" of 2014. According to the amended paragraph 5.2, article 3, a passive voting right is denied to people sentenced to prison for major crimes, extremist crimes, and for administrative crimes if the sentence is being served during the election period. An offender loses their passive voting right not only for the duration of the sentence, but for a further 10 to 15 years (depending on the seriousness of the crime) from the date of expungement or discontinuation of the sentence. After the introduction of these amendments to the election ordinance their constitutionality was questioned, and it has been assumed that the main addressee of the law is the opposition candidate – Alexei Navalny. This matter will be closely analyzed in the following sections.

The regulations regarding the pre-election campaign can be found in the above mentioned acts. According to Article 50 of the Federal Law “On the Election of the President of the Russian Federation” the campaign starts on the day the candidate obtains approval for their candidacy from the Central Electoral Commission, and ends one day before the actual voting. Separate regulations have been set out for campaigns using traditional media – television, radio, press. In that case, the campaign starts 28 days before the polling day, and ends also one day before the election. It is forbidden to campaign on the polling day and the day before it (*Федеральный закон „О выборах... ”*).

Regulations regarding the presidential election procedure in Russia do not seem to significantly differ from those applied in Western democratic countries. However, the ability to use them instrumentally led to the elimination of the only opposition candidate from the election. Although according to the Russian law he could not be considered an official presidential candidate and his actions did not fall under the definition of an election campaign given by the law, his presence in the public sphere influenced not only the election process, but also the perception of it by Russian citizens and election observers.

Elections without Alexei Navalny – the Russian Central Electoral Commission’s decision

Three months before the election, on December 18, 2017, a decision of the Federation Council calling the presidential election was published, which is considered the beginning of the election campaign. Navalny had been preparing to stand for months prior to the announcement of the election. Even before the official beginning of the campaign, he had almost 80 groups of staff all around Russia, ready to work (Fig. 1). He also accumulated the required amount of 500 signatures under his candidacy.

However, on December 25, 2017, the Central Electoral Commission refused Navalny’s registration as a candidate for the president of Russia. The reason was his lack of the passive voting right – in 2013, he received a 5 year suspended prison sentence for embezzlement in Kirowles. The first sentence was overruled and another examination of the case was ordered by the European Court of Human Rights, which recognized the fact that Navalny had not been given access to a fair trial. However, the appeal ruling also convicted him. Therefore, according to the law on the election



Figure 1. A map created by Navalny showing locations of his staff (as of early December 2017)

Source: Навальный2018, <https://2018.navalny.com/>, 4.12.2017.

of a president, amended in 2014, Navalny cannot run in elections until 2028 (a 5 year sentence plus a 10 year ban on standing in elections after the end of the sentence) (Strzelecki, 2017).

After the Central Electoral Commission’s decision was issued, Navalny argued that the law taking away the passive voting right from persons who are convicted, but do not serve the sentence in prison, is against the Russian Constitution (which only forbids the incapacitated and those sentenced to prison from standing in elections). Nonetheless, the Constitutional Court to which Navalny appealed against the Central Electoral Commission’s decision, refused to consider the matter and, at the same time, deemed the law limiting the passive voting right constitutional (*Определение Конституционного Суда*). As a consequence, Navalny lost his right to stand in the presidential elections in 2018 and 2024. Nevertheless, he did not abandon his campaign, which had already started, and decided to use the structures prepared and resources accumulated to carry out a boycott of the election and build support among Russian society for the coming years.

Navalny’s “Non-campaign”

Navalny’s unofficial campaign had begun over a year before the election. He expressed his will to run in the Russian presidential election in December 2016. In February 2017, in Petersburg, the first headquarters

of his presidential campaign was opened, and the opening of dozens more campaign offices was announced in the following months. The aim was to build as large a network of people as possible who would not only help in running the campaign but would also put their signature under Navalny's candidacy.³ By the end of 2017, when it was finally certain that the opposition candidate would not stand in the election, 84 groups of staff in almost all regions of Russia had been created. They managed to accumulate 700,000 declarations from people who put their signature under Navalny's candidacy. Additionally, almost 200,000 volunteers offered their help in running the potential campaign (*Год кампании*).



Figure 2. Official website of Navalny as a Russian presidential candidate

Source: Навальный2018, <https://2018.navalny.com/>, 4.12.2017.

The candidate's professional website was also created for the purpose of the campaign, as well as accounts on social media and other channels of online communication (Facebook, Twitter, ВКонтакте, Одноклассники). Cohesive and modern visual identification, daily updates and the interactive form of communication (comments, discussions, etc.) helped Navalny

³ In accordance with Article 36 of the Law "On the Election of the President of the Russian Federation," if Navalny had been allowed to stand in the election, he would have to get at least 300,000 signatures supporting his candidacy, including at least 7,500 in each region of the Russian Federation (Федеральный закон „О выборах“). If the candidate is put forward by a political party, he is required to gain only 100,000 signatures. Candidates proposed by a party which has representatives in the State Duma are an exception – they do not need any signatures under their candidacy.

gain support, especially among young voters.⁴ The opposition politician, as part of his campaign, visited many Russian cities and towns, organized meetings with voters, continued his spectacular anti-corruption initiative and organized protests.⁵ These actions showed measurable effects – in June 2017, more than half of Russians (55%) knew who Navalny was.⁶ This, of course, could not guarantee him electoral victory, since he only got 1–2% in the opinion polls. However, in a country where for the past 18 years power has been in the hands of one person, and there are no independent parties in the Parliament, gradually building support for an opposition candidate appears to be a good strategy.

During the preparation for the election, funding had also been taken care of. At the time of collecting signatures under Navalny's candidacy, a fund-raiser for the campaign was launched as well. Donations could be made through the website in various ways – direct transfers from the biggest Russian banks, account contributions, PayPal payments, card-2card transfers and even Bitcoins. An online shop was opened, with Navalny's campaign merchandise expressing support for his candidacy for the president of Russia (t-shirts, bags, pins, stickers, mugs, etc.). The aim of the store was not only to accumulate funds for the campaign, but also to spread awareness of the candidate.

In total, 368 million rubles (about 6 million US dollars – exchange rate as of May 2018) had been collected. Financial reports were shown on the candidate's website every month, and in April 2018 detailed financial coverage of the whole campaign was published. According to the avail-

⁴ According to research conducted by the Levada-Center, young Russians (18–24 years old) are the most likely to use the Internet – in 2017 over 90% of them went online at least a few times a day. Also, the majority of the age group of 25–39 (almost 80%) uses the Internet several times a day (Левада-Центр, 2017a).

⁵ During this peculiar election campaign, in March 2017 the Anti-Corruption Foundation led by Navalny published a film titled “He Is Not Dimon to You,” in which the detailed results of the investigation into the connections between corruption and the concealed estate of Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev were presented. The film was viewed online by over 27 million people (during the first year, and 12 million in the first month). As a result, Medvedev lost public trust, and a large group of Russians demanded his resignation. Also, thousands of Russians took part in protests organized by Navalny against corruption among the authorities.

⁶ Only 4 years previously, despite the fact that Navalny was one of the faces of the so-called “white revolution” (mass post-election protests of 2012) and succeeded in Moscow's mayor election (placing second and getting almost a third of the votes), only 1 in 3 Russians recognized his name (Левада-Центр, 2017b).

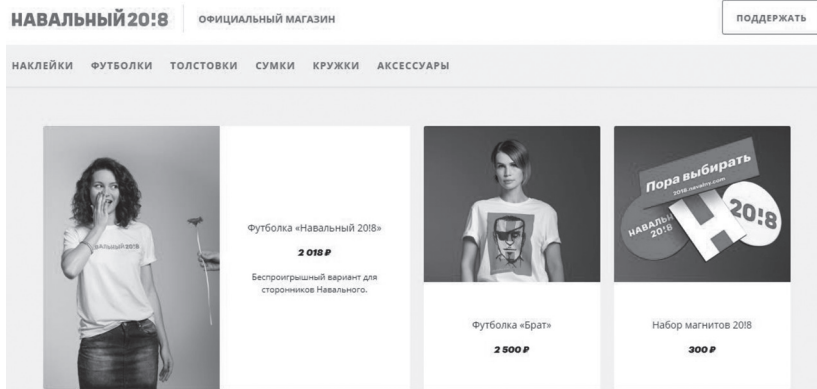


Figure 3. Online shop with Navalny’s campaign merchandise

Source: Навальный2018, <https://2018.navalny.com/>, 4.12.2017.

able information, the most commonly chosen amount of donation for Navalny was (median) 500 rubles (about 8 dollars), and the average donation was 1,500 rubles (about 25 dollars). The opposition candidate’s campaign was supported by about 100,000 people. A big part of the collected money was allocated to staff payments — a few hundred people were responsible for organizing events and rallies, training and coordination of the volunteers, verification and supervision of the campaign. Additionally, the maintenance of the network of local groups of staff was funded (premises and equipment renting, etc.) and funds for political agitation (online and offline) (*Финальный финансовый отчет*). Such extensive reporting of income and expenditure was meant to prevent any accusations of fraud from political opponents, and also strengthen the image of an honest opposition candidate who was fighting corruption among the authorities.

Navalny’s election promise

During Navalny’s election preparations, an election manifesto was published on his website – a part of the campaign required by the Russian law. According to his declarations, the manifesto had been formulated based on information gathered during rallies and meetings with the citizens of various cities and towns, and on expert opinions. In “Beautiful Russia of the Future” (as the platform was named) Navalny mainly refers to the inappropriate use of the country’s wealth – natural resources, quali-

fied manpower, industry, agriculture and infrastructure, from which the profits, for almost two decades, have been going to a chosen few closely linked to authority. He called for the resources to be used as a foundation for the country's prosperity. He planned to achieve his goal by increasing expenditure on healthcare and education. Additional funding was to be acquired by eliminating corruption and reducing spending on bureaucracy, propaganda, armed conflicts, etc. Human capital was to be a foundation of the new Russia – especially important were: education, new technologies, and innovation. A good, well-funded, high-level education was intended to guarantee the development of the country. Navalny also drew attention to income inequity (he demanded a raise in the minimum wage, retirement program reform and new taxes, e.g., for using infrastructure built by previous generations that was unfairly privatized in the 1990s). Among his promises, one can find those regarding strengthening (or more accurately – building) independent local governments and reinforcing regions. The main aims of foreign policy were to cooperate with other European countries, withdraw from armed conflicts (Syria, Ukraine), and regulate visa issues with Central Asian countries (exacerbating the requirements to migrant workers) (*Программа; Прекрасная*).

The manifesto formulated by Navalny and cooperating experts appears to contain many tangible solutions to Russia's main problems – corruption, underinvested education and healthcare, huge social stratification, etc. It does not have big, catchy slogans, and empty heroism. References to unity and history, incomprehensible for the majority of voters, weighing on democracy, freedom and other abstract concepts, were reduced. However, the question whether this particular manifesto would interest Russians remains unanswered – it requires careful reading and at least a basic level of knowledge.

Election boycott and post-election protests

After the Central Electoral Commission's decision refusing Navalny's registration, the candidate changed his strategy. In place of the electoral campaign, an election boycott campaign had started – pursuant to the statement that “if an independent candidate is not allowed to run in the election, it is not an election at all.” The following objectives were set for the coming three months: close observation of the election, monitoring election turnout and encouraging others to take part in the boycott. Nav-

alny announced that he would not recognize the election results nor the elected authorities (*Объявляем забастовку*).

As part of the boycott, an information campaign was carried out; its main slogans were: “An election without competition is not an election” and “Election without Navalny, Putin’s main competitor – is a mockery.”⁷ At the same time, they tried to convince Russians that if there was no possibility of choosing between real candidates, it was better not to vote at all. Additionally, several larger protests against eliminating Navalny from the election took place. For example, the candidate’s supporters protested on January 28, 2018 in dozens of Russian cities – among others, Irkutsk, Kemerovo, Omsk, Novosibirsk, Yekaterinburg, Moscow and Saint Petersburg. In total, police arrested more than 350 people in some of these cities (*«Забастовка избирателей»*).

Mass protests were organized also after the election – right before the inauguration of Putin’s fourth presidential term. In the protest under the slogan “He’s not our tsar” (Russian: *Он нам не царь*) organized by Navalny in 27 Russian cities “against the actual establishment of a monarchy, against corruption, against inequalities, censorship and anarchy” several thousand people took part. In some of the cities, authorities permitted the protest; however, in the biggest ones – Moscow and Saint Petersburg – Navalny’s supporters carried them out without the necessary permissions (which could not be obtained). This explains the huge number of arrests (around 1,600 people), including teenagers and random pedestrians. Those detained complained about the police’s extreme brutality: some of the people were taken to hospital (Филимонов, 2018; Литой, 2018). Navalny himself was also arrested, and, for repeatedly breaching the rules of organizing mass events and for disobedience to police, was sentenced to 30 days in jail (administrative sanctions) (Лебедеенко, 2018). Other protesters faced trials and sanctions, too; however, the inauguration of Putin’s presidency was not disturbed.

The effects of Navalny’s “non-campaign”

Initially, the main aim of Navalny’s actions was to run in the election and gather as many votes as possible. However, after the rejection of his

⁷ Russian: *Выборы без конкуренции – это не выборы; Выборы без Навального, главного конкурента Путина – это фарс.*

candidacy during the registration process, the campaign was transformed into an election boycott, justified by the fact that there was no real alternative to the incumbent president. According to the data shared by the staff of the opposition candidate, the actual voter turnout (obtained through observations by tens of thousands of volunteers) was 2.5 percentage points lower than the turnout officially presented by the Central Electoral Commission (59.6% vs. 62.%). Also, due to the observer group organized by Navalny, it was possible to register many violations and prove that more than 10 million votes for Putin were placed in ballot boxes illegally (*Кампания Навального 2018*).

Navalny's campaign has proven that political activity based on tangible arguments is possible in Russia. Instead of grandiose and meaningless declarations about patriotism, the Great War, tradition and imaginary enemies, Navalny proposed actual solutions to pressing issues – corruption, social stratification, politicians' huge fortunes, widespread poverty, etc. All the protests, rallies and events did not aim at conversing about, for many, abstract concepts such as democracy, human rights or freedom. These events exposed the pathology of authority and looked for solutions for the future. Of course, it was not always a pretty substantive discussion, it included many populist elements as well. Nonetheless, it brought a new quality to Russian politics.

The campaign on the Internet, social media and on Russian streets allowed Navalny to build a large group of people supporting his actions and ready to help in his political activity. Firstly, it consists of a group of more than 200,000 volunteers who, together with trained specialists, coordinated the whole campaign process. Secondly, there are thousands of young people who took part in the protests organized by the opposition candidate during the campaign. Examples include the March 2017 protests demanding the resignation of Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev after his hidden fortune and links to corruption were revealed; and the protests of January 2018 against banning Navalny from running in the presidential election. And, last but not least, the hundreds, thousands and even tens of thousands of people who came to the pre-election meetings with the opposition candidate, organized in dozens of Russian cities.

Navalny did not, of course, have any chance of winning the presidential election, but his actions seem to have been dictated by long-term goals. His aim is to run for president in either 2024 or 2030, and the recent campaign was a great opportunity to build his public image and prepare to run in a future election as a nationwide candidate, an opinion

shared by an expert from the Carnegie analytical center, Andrei Kolesnikov (Kolesnikov, 2017). The creation of a strong candidate appears to be a great strategy for the Russian opposition, especially during the time of the super-presidency, where neither Parliament, nor the government play an important role in actual governance. If the Russian authorities prolong the exclusion of Navalny from the political scene (e.g., through long-time jail sentences), and he continues to slowly build his position by completing his manifesto with proposals for tangible change, he can count on higher support than 1–2% in the next election.

Conclusions

The campaign carried out by Alexei Navalny in 2017 and 2018 undoubtedly was only a prelude to the preparations for the next presidential election; this time it was mainly informational. It has also proven that in Russian public life there is a demand – although still low – for a different style of politics. Direct meetings with voters, real conversations about problems, tangible solutions and demands are the main characteristics of this campaign, as are anti-government protests, which attracted thousands of people, hundreds of volunteers and millions of rubles donated by Russians to the campaign. As a result, the recognition of Navalny has risen, if only slightly. He also gained necessary experience before his next election campaign.

Just after Putin's fourth electoral victory, his opposition competitor can now count on the support of 1–2% of Russians. Despite the fact that he accurately identifies major issues which affect Russians, and his anti-corruption actions could be appealing to millions of voters from smaller towns and cities, Navalny has one main problem – he does not exist on television (he only appears there in a negative context, as a defendant or leader of another riot). Television is the main medium from which the majority of Russians acquire information (over 80%). Hence, it will be extremely difficult to translate the support from protests and rallies to actual votes.

In mid-May another founding congress of Navalny's new party, Russia of the Future, took place. Its aim is to make tangible changes and reforms in Russia. It will surely provide great support for the opposition candidate in the coming years. However, in the battle for power, given the specificity of the Russian political system (strong personalization, the

majority of actual power concentrated in the hands of the President), he must focus mainly on building his individual position and try to reach the so-called television Russia. At the same time, it is unlikely the Russian authorities will allow the uncontrolled increase of his popularity.

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**„Nie/kampania nie/istniejącego kandydata”
– Aleksiej Nawalny w wyborach prezydenckich w Rosji w 2018 r.**

Streszczenie

W marcu 2018 r. w Federacji Rosyjskiej odbyły się kolejne wybory prezydenckie. Elekcję po raz czwarty, zdecydowaną większością głosów, wygrał Władimir Putin. Do udziału w rywalizacji na urząd prezydenta nie został dopuszczony Aleksiej Nawalny – opozycjonista, który swoją kampanię wyborczą przygotowywał od końca 2016 r. Pomimo eliminacji z procesu wyborczego, A. Nawalny pozostał aktywnym uczestnikiem życia politycznego Rosji przed i po wyborach, przeprowadził także akcję bojkotu wyborów oraz zorganizował powyborcze protesty. Nie ulega wątpliwości, iż pomimo zakazu udziału w elekcji, A. Nawalny był jedną z kluczowych postaci procesu wyborczego. Dlatego też, celem artykułu jest pogłębiona analiza przygotowań do kampanii A. Nawalnego – autorzy skupili się nie tylko na opozycyjnej działalności kandydata, ale również na unikalnych środkach i metodach prowadzenia przez niego kampanii (internet, media społecznościowe, crowdfunding). W ramach artykułu omówione zostały nie tylko przygotowania do kampanii, ale również przyczyny odmowy rejestracji A. Nawalnego jako kandydata, wskaźniki społecznego poparcia, relacje z innymi kandydatami oraz zmiana strategii po decyzji komisji wyborczej. Analiza powstała w oparciu o badania nad aktami rosyjskiego prawa, decyzjami centralnej komisji wyborczej, wynikami badań opinii publicznej oraz przekazami w rosyjskich i międzynarodowych mediach.

Słowa kluczowe: wybory w Rosji, Prezydent Rosji, A. Nawalny, kampania wyborcza, opozycja polityczna