



Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-3605

October 7, 2021

Mr. Sundar Pichai
Chief Executive Officer
Google, LLC
1600 Amphitheatre Parkway
Mountain View, CA 94043

Mr. Tim Cook
Chief Executive Officer
Apple, Inc
1 Apple Park Way
Cupertino, CA 95014

Dear Mr. Pichai and Mr. Cook,

We write to convey our alarm over the removal of digital content related to the *Smart Voting* campaign from the Google Play Store and Apple Store during the Russian Federation's recent Duma elections. News reports have indicated that pressure from Russian President Vladimir Putin was the primary cause for removing the *Smart Voting* application and content from your platforms. We have serious concerns that removing the digital content without transparency and due process may contribute to violations of Russian citizens' civil liberties, particularly during an election already characterized by widespread voter disenfranchisement and President Putin's troubling history marginalizing political opposition and civil society.

President Putin and his ruling United Russia party have habitually altered election laws and the Russian constitution to disadvantage opposition parties and their candidates while solidifying Putin's hold on power. Freedom House reports that opposition politicians and activists are frequently targeted with fabricated criminal cases and other forms of administrative harassment that are designed to prevent their participation in the political process.¹ Alexei Navalny, one of the most outspoken opposition figures, was poisoned last year with a lethal nerve agent that U.S. intelligence officials concluded with high confidence was at the direction of Putin and his Federal Security Service (FSB). Navalny, after returning to Russia from Germany where he was receiving treatment, was then sentenced to two years in a maximum-security prison following an opaque trial process.

¹ "Freedom of the world 2021: Russia". Freedom House.

Furthermore, media in Russia is tightly controlled and monitored by the government, either directly or through state-owned enterprises restricting free flow of information and freedom of expression. Therefore, the open internet is often the only remaining option for opposition candidates to organize and mobilize support.

During the September 17-19, 2021 Duma elections there were multiple reports of election irregularities including ballot stuffing, disappearing ink to alter votes and irregular ballot boxes. According to the U.S. Department of State, “the Russian government restrictions, which were preceded by widespread efforts to marginalize independent political figures, also prevented the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe’s (OSCE) Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights and its Parliamentary Assembly from observing the elections, constricting transparency that is essential to fair elections”.² An independent election monitor Golos registered 4,500 violations.³ And thus the election was flawed long before the first ballot was cast.

Anticipating all of this, Mr. Navalny’s team created the *Smart Voting* mobile application to provide strategic voting information for candidates that had been approved by the Russian government to run in the elections. News reports have indicated that it was following pressure from the Kremlin that your companies, without notice or a public process, decided to remove *Smart Voting* from your App stores for Russian users. And YouTube took down videos created by Mr. Navalny’s team sharing voting recommendations for viewers. The Russian government has long relied on a vague set of so-called “anti-extremism” laws to silence political opposition. Indeed, Amnesty International found that “if the [Russian] courts label Navalny’s organizations “extremist” and ban them, the result will likely be one of the most serious blows for the rights to freedom of expression and association in Russia’s post-Soviet history.”⁴ President Putin’s malicious behavior infringing on his people’s civil liberties is cause enough for concern, American companies assisting him in his censorship effort raises the level of alarm to unprecedented heights.

We urge you to provide information regarding your decision to remove *Smart Voting* from your platforms by answering the following questions:

1. On what legal basis did you base the decision to remove the *Smart Voting* campaign content from your mobile application stores?
2. What were the exact Apple and Google community standards, if any, that the *Smart Voting* developers violated?
3. Moving forward, does Apple or Google intend to comply with local laws in foreign markets even when those laws may violate international law?

² Ned Price. “The Russian Federation’s Duma Elections” Press Statement. U.S. Department of State. September 20, 2021.

³ Hartog, Eva. “Putin’s United Russia wins vote – as designed – amid hints of discontent”. POLITICO. September 20, 2021.

⁴ Amnesty International. “Russia: Proposed ban of Aleksei Navalny’s organizations is new Attempt to Fully Shut Down Dissent”. *Press Release*. April 17, 2021.

Russian citizens deserve the right to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and an open internet without having those liberties abridged. We look forward to your response and working with you to address these concerns.

Sincerely,



Colin Allred
Member of Congress



Gregory W. Meeks
Member of Congress



William R. Keating
Member of Congress



Tom Malinowski
Member of Congress



Barbara Lee
Member of Congress



Emanuel Cleaver, II
Member of Congress



Thomas R. Suozzi
Member of Congress