

Opposition activists in Russia accused Alphabet's Google and Apple of caving in to Kremlin pressure on Friday after they removed an anti-government tactical voting app from their stores on the first day of a parliamentary election.

The app, devised by allies of jailed Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny, gives people detailed recommendations on who to vote for in an effort to thwart the electoral chances of the ruling United Russia party which supports President Vladimir Putin.

Members of the upper house of parliament met Google (GOOGL.O) and Apple (AAPL.O) representatives in the run-up to the election to tell them to remove the app or face serious consequences including fines and criminal prosecution.

John Sullivan, the U.S. ambassador to Russia, was also called into the foreign ministry before the vote to hear complaints that the companies' behaviour amounted to U.S. meddling in Russia's internal affairs.

A court outlawed Navalny's political movement as extremist in June, backing complaints from Moscow's prosecutor that its activists were trying to destabilise Russia, a ruling condemned by the West at the time as a blow against freedom.

Leonid Volkov, an ally of Navalny, accused Google and Apple of buckling under what he described as a Kremlin campaign of blackmail.

"This shameful day will live long in the memory," Volkov said on the Telegram messaging service.

Ivan Zhdanov, another Navalny ally, called the companies' action a mistake and "a shameful act of political censorship."

Apple and Google did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

Andrei Klimov, a senior senator from the ruling party, said he was pleased by the U.S. tech giants' behaviour.

"We view Google and Apple's actions as steps in the right direction," RIA quoted him as

saying.

Reuters independently verified that the app was unavailable on Apple's AppStore and Google Play for Russian users. Previously downloaded versions of the app were not working either.

The move is not a knockout blow for the Navalny camp's tactical voting campaign. His allies published detailed lists online two days ago of how they want people to vote.

Some activists also use virtual private networks to skirt such restrictions and were still able to download and use the app.

State communications regulator Roskomnadzor has demanded that Apple and Google remove the app, threatening fines for non-compliance.

State bailiffs came to an office block to confront local Google staff late on Monday.



Members of a local election commission check ballots at a polling station ahead of a three-

day parliamentary vote in Moscow, Russia September 16, 2021. REUTERS/Shamil Zhumatov

Dry-run for Presidential Election

The election, which will run until Sunday evening, is a test of Putin's grip on power across 11 time zones from the Pacific Ocean to the Baltic Sea at a time when the Kremlin is facing malaise at home over faltering living standards and bad ties with the West.

The United Russia party is facing a ratings slump but is expected to win the vote that follows the biggest crackdown on the Kremlin's domestic political opponents in years.

The vote is seen as a dry-run for the presidential election due in 2024, a highly sensitive moment for the Kremlin should it choose to embark on a political transition to a new head of state.

At stake is United Russia's super majority in the 450-seat State Duma, which last year helped Putin ease through constitutional reforms that allow him to run for office again and potentially stay in power until 2036.

Putin, a former KGB officer who turns 69 next month, has not said whether he will seek re-election when his current term ends in 2024. He has served as president or prime minister since 1999.

Navalny, 45, was jailed in March in a case he called trumped up after recovering from a poisoning with a Soviet-style nerve agent.

His allies, who accuse the Kremlin of a sweeping crackdown, were barred from running for office because of their association with Navalny's network.

The Kremlin denies any politically driven crackdown and says individuals are prosecuted for breaking the law.

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