

**“SYSTEMIC”
AND “NON-SYSTEMIC”
LEFT
IN CONTEMPORARY
RUSSIA**

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Contents

About the authors	2
Executive summary	4
I. Introduction	7
II. The “systemic” left	8
The Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF)	9
A Just Russia (JR) party	15
III. The “non-systemic” left	18
Age and gender composition of the “non-systemic” left	24
Support base and relations with trade unions.....	26
“Two people, three parties”: atomisation and migration	27
“Ukrainian issue” and rift among the left	29
Self-assessment of the movement’s potential, attempts to consolidate, and repression.....	30
The left-wingers and Navalny’s supporters: structure vs. network.....	32
“Appropriate” or “reformat”: two strategies of the “non-systemic” left	35
Left-wing campaign against the old-age pension reform: have left activists made any difference?....	35
IV. Conclusion	38

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Continuing economic crisis, tax and price hikes, decreasing real income and a very unpopular pension reform have contributed to the growing demand for the “left turn” among the significant part of the Russian society. The ability of the current left movements in Russia to shift the government policy to the left will depend on their willingness to deeply reformat their agendas, *modus operandi*, priorities, and programmes.

The existing left parties and movements in Russia can be roughly divided into “systemic” and “non-systemic”. The “systemic” parties are legally registered; they participate in and controllably win the elections; they are loyal to the government, although sometimes criticise it for certain issues. They are involved in the political decision-making processes at the legislative level, but have little influence on the outcome.

Today, almost three decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF) remains the largest “systemic” left party. It comes second in federal elections, yet far behind the ruling party. The CPRF promotes the Soviet past, criticises the “anti-national regime”, and in general retains strong focus on the social agenda. Yet, the size of its fraction in the lower house of parliament, the State Duma, has never allowed it to meaningfully influence any decisions. The CPRF supports President Putin’s foreign policy and the enormous military spending that severely affects the socio-economic opportunities for working people.

Judging by its social composition, the CPRF does not appear to be a working-class party: only 14% of its members are workers while 43% are retirees nostalgic about the Soviet past who have long been forming the CPRF support group. The party’s agenda is defined by its electorate and the CPRF appeals to the Soviet past and promotes Soviet economic paradigm which does not resonate with the younger audiences. At the same time, the CPRF tries to adapt to the current environment: it recognises the multi-party system and supports small business development. The CPRF leadership understands that without attracting younger audiences the party will have no future. That is why the CPRF regularly cooperates with certain “non-systemic” left movements that have many young activists. The CPRF also seeks to engage with trade unions; yet, it carefully avoids conflicts with the federal government and regional authorities. The CPRF has close ties with large businesses – many prominent entrepreneurs have been its representatives at the legislatures of all levels.

The CPRF’s ideology is eclectic. Its key elements are nationalism and Stalinism. The CPRF links the national issues to the class issues as the problem of the exploitation of workers can only be resolved in conjunction with the problems of the Russian nation, according to its ideologists. The CPRF alleges that the Russians are second-class, exploited citizens in their own country while the West-leaning elite consisting of the ethnic minorities gets all the economic benefits. The CPRF has demonstrated its anti-migrant positions on numerous occasions, and its leaders have been resorting anti-Semitic and xenophobic rhetoric. For many members of the CPRF, Stalinism symbolizes order, stability, the “strong hand”, isolationism, and great-power aspirations. Orthodoxy has also been playing an important role in the CPRF’s ideology. The party leader, Gennady Zyuganov, has argued that Jesus Christ was the first communist on earth.

Another large “systemic” left party, A Just Russia (*Spravedlivaya Rossiya*, JR) was formed in 2006 as a result of Kremlin-initiated and supported merging of several left and left-wing patriotic organisations. JR models itself as a socialist movement, criticises and challenges United Russia, yet supports Russia’s President Vladimir Putin.

Between 2010 and 2012, JR attempted to openly oppose President Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin. The party developed a strong left pro-democracy wing, and its representatives became prominent leaders of “Bolotnaya protests”. Upon Vladimir Putin’s return to the President’s Office, JR’s complete loyalty was restored with opposition leaders expelled from the party. Being a Kremlin-controlled party, A Just Russia is considered a part of the existing governance system by voters and therefore is very unlikely to play an independent role in case of possible political turbulence. However, given the JR’s past, certain forces inside the party can emerge that might try to join independent political movements.

“Non-systemic” left groups identify themselves as far-left, communist, socialist or anarchist political organisations. They have no official status of a registered political party or social movement. These groups are atomised and have become increasingly polarized over the recent years. Yet, all of them share a negative consensus towards the ruling government and the CPRF, which they consider a right party that has usurped left-wing symbols and the social justice agenda.

With certain reservations, one could say that “systemic” and “non-systemic” left groups belong to different generations. “Non-systemic” left-wing groups position themselves as a “more radical” alternative to the official CPRF. They choose street protests tactics, have a greater focus on urban youths drawing their attention to social issues, and promote communist ideology through intellectual activities and modern arts. Some of these organisations cooperate with independent trade unions, reach out to plants and factories, and provide legal assistance to employees. However, the “non-systemic” left movement in general has weak links with trade unions and workers.

The major problem of the “non-systemic” left movement is lack of unity among numerous groups that comprise it. This has resulted in conflicts, insufficient membership, and continuing migration of members from one group to another. Absence of charismatic and well-known leaders, lack of significant media resources and government repressions have hampered their consolidation even further. Multiple attempts to unite the left wing have failed, and the situation around Ukraine caused rifts in a number of the organisations.

Some activists saw the Maidan protests as a revolution by right radicals with anti-communist rhetoric. Others considered it a revolutionary struggle against the anti-national government. The left-wing groups did not attach much importance to the Crimea issue (although some of the left, in articles and speeches, discussed the danger of “preventive annexations” that open the door to new imperialistic interventions). Donbass became a place where two ideas clashed: the people’s right to armed resistance to the anti-national government, on one hand, and the image of Russia as an imperialistic aggressor state in this conflict, on the other. After the events in Ukraine, the polarization and divisions have increased significantly.

The supporters of the Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny are the main rivals and, at the same time, potential allies of the “non-systemic” left. Both groups actively engage in street protests and promote social agenda. Nevertheless, they might find it difficult to join forces for common protest activities not only because of their ideological divisions, but also due to their different *modus operandi*.

“Non-systemic” left movements prefer to appear as a structure. During street protests, they walk in tight formations “belted” around with long banners. Each left party or organisation seeks to unify its public statements, promotional materials, and even the clothes of its members. Their current structure is reinforced by the structures of the past. The left groups that see themselves as the followers of the Soviet traditions widely use red armbands with USSR symbols, Young Pioneer red scarves and shirts, and pins of that period. While anarchists and certain left movements reject any party organisation or formal hierarchy, at the street protests, they still resort to some unification and structured statements in their banners, placards, and chanting.

Alexei Navalny’s supporters, being increasingly pressured by the authorities, employ the “network organisation” tactics. They arrive to the public protest in small groups; the meeting points for leaflets distribution are usually announced in Telegram a few hours before the event. Navalny’s supporters design their campaign materials themselves although sometimes the materials might be reviewed by the team.

Another important difference between the left and Navalny’s supporters lies in the structure of their party offices. Describing the atmosphere in Navalny’s offices, volunteers frequently use the word “family”. At the meetings, activists often hang out together, play games, and joke around. Left movements tend to organise theoretical intellectual activities in their offices. Their activists translate the works of modern Marxists or participate in book clubs where they study the works of Marxism and Leninism classics. Pro-democracy left organisations also have spaces that work as common-interest groups, but it is hard to establish how large the network of such offices is.

Protests against the old-age pension reform significantly invigorated the left movement. In summer and autumn 2018, people took to the streets to protest against the pension reform in many Russian cities. In this context, left parties and groups attempted to form a coalition, and the relationships between “non-systemic” left-wing groups and the CPRF improved. In various cities, different coalitions were shaped, including those with liberals.

The pension protests attracted new supporters to the left movement. However, our interviews and observations showed that those people were not very much interested in who had organised the protest and they usually wished they could have participated in a larger joint demonstration. At the September 2018 elections, the CPRF turned out to be the main beneficiary of the pension reform protests. It was not so much as the result of the active protest campaign as the outcome of the “strategic voting” when citizens disappointed by United Russia voted for the second largest alternative.

After the law on raising the retirement age was passed in October 2018, the protests stopped as there were no more real campaign goals left. The struggle against the pension reform became an example of successful cooperation between “systemic” and “non-systemic” left organisations and independent trade unions. However, the campaign revealed the weakness of the left groups, even when they joined together. Cautiousness of the independent unions, electoral goals of the “systemic” left parties and organisational deficiencies of the “non-systemic” left groups prevented them from holding a more effective campaign.

Our analysis has showed that the values and ideology of the CPRF and some of the “non-systemic” left groups in Russia in fact do not belong to the classical left wing. They are rather right-wing patriotic organisations behind red flags. The “systemic” left parties are not independent political actors and operate within the niches assigned to them. The “non-systemic” left organisations – highly atomized and divided, engaged in rivalries and conflicts with each other and with the CPRF, and cut off from any legal political activities by the authorities – are used to existence in small groups and isolation. Some of the left organisations look more like common-interest groups, subcultural gatherings or intellectual clubs rather than political movements. The “non-systemic” left has been weakened by the sustainability of the existing regime that skilfully uses social agenda in its propaganda and has attracted a significant part of the left-leaning electorate, and the existence of “systemic” parties that imitate left movement.

The left-wing groups still have great potential in Russia. To realize it, they need to offer workers and other society groups focused on social agenda an action plan that would resonate with them and reflect their interests and aspirations.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Russian government's decision to raise the retirement age came to the Russian society as a shock. The past two decades have hardly seen a less popular political decision: according to the Levada Center, 89% of the Russians have demonstrated a highly negative attitude towards the reform.¹ The reform caused Vladimir Putin's ratings to fall, and even the official opinion research showed the most severe approval drop in the past five years.²

The factors that have affected the citizens' social well-being include a lengthy economic crisis; growing prices for utilities, petrol, goods and services; VAT and excise tax increase; the fiscal hunt for the self-employed; rouble depreciation; declining quality of education and state-funded health care; and the costliness of paid medical services. Real income has been decreasing for five years in a row, the number of the poor is growing, and income disparities are huge.

These conditions contribute to the demand for the "left turn" among the significant part of the Russian society. According to the October 2018 survey by the RANEPА Institute of Sociology of Management, over 40% of the population consider left-wing politics appealing. Most of the respondents demonstrated negative attitude towards the existing political parties, and 41% indicated that they were waiting for a new socially oriented political force to emerge and fight for higher pensions and benefits, against corruption, and for social justice.³ According to Levada Center surveys, 40% of the Russian population are sympathetic to socialist views, and around 20%, to communist views, although many of them still vote for the United Russia party.⁴

This contradiction stems from the fact that since the 1990s, Russian people have been very wary of any changes, and until recently most of the voters have believed that real politics is made only in the Kremlin. The ability of the current political system to present itself as socially oriented to the voters is one of the main reasons for its long-lasting stability. Many people have been placing their social expectations with President Putin rather than with any left forces. However, the recent reforms have shattered their hopes that the current government would provide them with social security and justice. Since autumn 2018, opinion surveys have been showing that the urge for change is very strong among up to 80–90% of the population.⁵

This report was written by a team of authors based on the field and analytical research of Russian left political parties and movements and the socio-political views and beliefs of today's workers. The report is addressed to a wide audience interested in the left-wing forces in Russia. In recent years, the primary focus of research has been on right nationalist forces while left movements have not drawn so much attention. There has been little in-depth research on the Russian "non-systemic" left wing.

The report consists of two parts.

Part One looks into the left parties and movements in contemporary Russia. It analyses the two main "systemic" left parties as well as the "non-systemic" left movements. No specific field research of the "systemic" left parties' activities was conducted; however, their analysis has been included in the report to give a general landscape of the left wing. The analysis of the "non-systemic" left groups and movements is based on our findings from the direct observations during over 140 protests in various Russian cities carried out since 2015 until January 2019. Section III is a rare attempt to briefly analyse the most active "non-systemic" left organisations.

Chapter Two of the report includes a small-scale local qualitative social research on current workers' social and political views and their social self-identification by methods of focus groups, questionnaires, and personal interviews with manufacturing workers from Kaluga and Omsk.

Will the today's left movement in Russia be able to respond to the growing social demand for the "leftist turn"? Will it be able to offer a convincing programme to the society? How much does it reflect the interests of the people it claims to represent – Russian hired workers amounting to, according to the most recent estimates, around 26 million people, i. e. over two thirds of all Russian labour force?⁶ Does the left movement have such ambitions?

Understanding the dynamics and features of the left movement in Russia can help to answer these questions and predict the possible political trends in Russia in the years to come.

¹ https://www.levada.ru/2018/07/05/pensionnaya-reforma-3/?utm_source=mailpress&utm_medium=email_link&utm_content=twentyten_singlecat_20920&utm_campaign=2018-07-05T06:30:56+00:00

² <https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-44582082>

³ <https://www.rbc.ru/newspaper/2018/10/26/5bd1b4a89a7947b421>

⁴ <https://www.svoboda.org/a/24569176.html>

⁵ https://www.znak.com/2018-10-10/eksperty_predskazavshie_protesty_2011_goda_uvideli_novye_izmeneniya_v_rossiyskom_obchestve

⁶ «Рабочая сила, занятость и безработица в России» [*Labour force, employment, and unemployment in Russia*], Statistics Digest by the Federal State Statistics Service, 2018, p. 71.

II. THE “SYSTEMIC” LEFT

The existing left parties and movements in Russia can be roughly divided into “systemic” and “non-systemic”. However, this division is quite tentative.

In the early 2010s, “systemic” parties could be defined as those formally registered with the Russian Ministry of Justice. But under the pressure of the mass protests of 2011 and 2012, the registration procedure was simplified (a party needs only 500 members to be registered now), and today there are 70 registered parties.⁷ Apparently, among this large number of parties, there are many spoiler organizations or those that exist only on paper, which was the ultimate goal of the utmost easing of the registration process.⁸ And yet, the authorities still have discretionary powers not to register the groups they consider undesirable for whatever reason. For example, even after the law simplifying the political party registration came into force in 2012, the ROT Front left movement had its application turned down on multiple occasions.

At the same time, some of the Kremlin-sponsored political projects, such as A Just Russia party (*Spravedlivaya Rossiya*) and, to a lesser extent, the Communists of Russia and the Patriots of Russia, have been quite successful at the elections.

At the federal elections, the Communists of Russia led by Maxim Suraykin come very close to having seats in the State Duma (in 2016, they got 2.27% of votes). The Patriots of Russia led by prominent businessman Gennady Semigin, who was expelled from the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF) and its leadership, have their factions in several city councils (the party has a particularly strong organisation in Krasnoyarsk Krai where it is backed by Anatoly Bykov, powerful businessman). While the Patriots of Russia pursue the right, “patriotic” and pseudo-social democratic agenda, the Communists of Russia use radical Stalinist rhetoric, attack the CPRF, and attract far-left supporters.

Today, the Russian political system marginalises almost any, even registered, party that has not passed the threshold of getting into the State Duma at the most recent elections, and therefore, the party becomes not quite “systemic”. Therefore the official registration is not enough for meaningful political participation. What really matters is the election result which depends on the Kremlin and regional authorities’ attitude towards a party’s projects and candidates, rather than on those projects and candidates as such.

The “systemic” opposition cannot win presidential elections or the majority in the federal parliament. Yet, if they play by the Kremlin’s rules, the “systemic” parties are guaranteed a certain number of seats in the State Duma or in regional parliaments. At the federal elections, they often have to act as spoilers for the government-supported candidates, and, therefore, their real struggle is focused on regional and municipal elections.⁹ At these levels, the government-controlled opposition achieves two goals for the regime: it creates the illusion of competition, and helps to increase voter turnout and, hence, legitimise the elections.

Having no opportunity to seriously compete for power, the “systemic” opposition usually limits its active campaigning to the election period, and yet its efforts are not too vigorous. When “systemic” opposition candidates act as spoilers, passive campaigning is the main pre-requisite for their nomination. But recently, the protest voting for the spoiler candidates is on the rise even when they do not campaign actively.¹⁰

Differentiation of “systemic” or “non-systemic” can also be based on their loyalty to the ruling regime. The “systemic” opposition is often defined as loyal political forces that might criticise the government for certain actions or decisions, but never pressure for its stepping down. According to political scientist Vladimir Gelman, they serve “as fellow travellers and junior partners” of an authoritarian regime, and struggling with it does not make sense to them as at free and competitive elections, they are likely to lose to other forces. The “non-systemic” opposition, on the other hand, usually demands the change of the regime.¹¹ The government can always strike a deal with the “systemic” opposition on all key issues as it is mostly Kremlin-controlled.¹²

⁷ <https://data.gov.ru/opendata/resource/92eb970e-37ac-4f2f-827b-90d2f4dc61d8#2/0.0/0.0>

⁸ One such example is the Communist Party for Social Justice lead by pro-Kremlin political consultant Andrei Bogdanov. The party’s name in Russian, *Kommunisticheskaya Partiya Sotsialnoy Spravedlivosti*, is abbreviated as *KPSS* — the same way as the Communist Party of the Soviet Union’s. Andrei Bogdanov has also registered with the Ministry of Justice the Social Democratic Party of Russia that is headed by a little-known Sirajidin Ramazanov and exists mostly on paper.

⁹ <https://wp.hse.ru/data/2015/11/10/1078477705/26PS2015>.

¹⁰ <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/78661>

¹¹ <https://tuhat.helsinki.fi/ws/portalfiles/portal/45180066/aseees2014.pdf>

¹² <https://www.google.com/url?q=https://carnegie.ru/commentary/78661&ust=155350584000000&usg=AFQjCNEmsD0MCBPppXvjx43hLAhlyFvDfA&hl=en-GB&source=gmail>

The “systemic” opposition is believed to be allowed to criticise the government to a limited extent and compete with it without the risk of persecution, unlike the “non-systemic” opposition. But this might not be the rule any more: since 2018 even “systemic”, pre-approved and loyal candidates have been regularly targeted on state-controlled television channels, especially when their campaigns happen to be more successful than those of United Russia’s candidates. A notable example here is media attacks on the spoiler candidates that managed to win the gubernatorial elections in September 2018. The rejection to hand over the State Duma deputy seat vacated after the death of Zhores Alferov to the CPRF’s candidate Pavel Grudinin in March 2019 also seemed to be the result of his successful (although still very loyal) presidential campaign in 2018.¹³

Therefore, a political party is considered “systemic” if it is legally registered; participates in and controllably wins the elections; is loyal to the government, although sometimes criticises it; is involved in the political decision-making processes at the legislative level, but has little influence on the outcome. Only two parties that have their factions in the State Duma currently meet the abovementioned criteria in Russia: the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF), and A Just Russia (JR) party.

THE COMMUNIST PARTY OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION (CPRF)

Today, almost three decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF) remains the second largest party in Russia after the ruling party.¹⁴ The CPRF always comes second at federal elections, yet far behind the ruling party (for example, at the 2016 parliamentary elections, the CPRF and United Russia got 13.34% and 54.2% respectively).

The CPRF’s ideology is eclectic and combines a number of communist dogmas, patriotic and Russian nationalism values, social democratic elements, and post-Soviet revanchism.¹⁵ The CPRF supports President Putin’s foreign policy: in 2008, it unanimously approved Russian military intervention in Georgia, and in 2014, it enthusiastically supported the annexation of Crimea and provided (and have been providing since) aid to the pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine by sending there “humanitarian convoys for the people of the fighting Novorossiya”.¹⁶

The CPRF’s official programme states that “the CPRF is the only political organisation that consistently defends the rights of working people, and national and state interests.” However, according to the CPRF, workers make up only 14%¹⁷ of its membership while urban and rural workers of various qualifications comprise around 40% of the total labour force in Russia.¹⁸ Retirees make up the largest group of party members (almost 43%), and the average age of party members is 55.6 years.¹⁹

Judging by its social composition, the CPRF appears to be a party of retirees nostalgic about the Soviet past, rather than a working-class party. The retirees have long been the CPRF’s sturdy support group, and the CPRF has been struggling with widening its electoral base since its agenda is dictated by older voters; hence, its appeals to the Soviet past, use of outdated images, and promotion of utopian Soviet economic paradigm, which does not resonate with the younger audiences.

However, the CPRF managed to adapt to the new political environment by recognising the multi-party system and turning itself into a rather standard traditionalist conservative parliamentary party in the early 1990s. The CPRF advocates for the development of small and even medium-sized businesses, and appeals to Orthodoxy and national cause that have gained popularity recently.

In the 1990s, the CPRF’s regional support base was called the “Red Belt” (like the Ceinture Rouge around Paris known from the Soviet newspapers) and consisted of the regions of the Central Black Earth Belt (Orel, Voronezh, Tambov, etc.) and the neighbouring poor non-Black Earth regions (Bryansk, Smolensk, etc.). In the 2000s, the CPRF’s increased support in these regions continued yet became less visible as the new ruling party, United Russia, significantly outperformed all other parties and started winning elections almost everywhere by the mid-decade. At the same time, since the 2000s, the CPRF has attracted some new voters in major cities, in Siberia and in the Far East.

¹³ <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/78661>

¹⁴ According to the CPRF’s website, it has 162,173 members, 85 functioning regional organizations within the party structure, and 2,350 local and 14,151 grassroots offices — <https://kprf.ru/party/>

¹⁵ https://elibrary.ru/download/elibrary_22952474_53403909.pdf

¹⁶ <https://kprf.ru/announcements/113676.html>

¹⁷ <https://kprf.ru/party/>

¹⁸ «Рабочая сила, занятость и безработица в России» [*Labour force, employment, and unemployment in Russia*], Statistics Digest by the Federal State Statistics Service, 2016, p. 70–71.

¹⁹ <https://kprf.ru/party/>

The CPRF's support base has been evolving naturally along with the changes in the political situation in Russia, rather than as a result of shifts in the CPRF's political agenda or its leadership (neither of which have significantly altered).

From the mid-1990s until the early 2000s, many regions were headed by the governors linked to the CPRF, but over the last decade their number has decreased to a minimum. In the 2010s, under the concept of the "controlled multi-party system" the CPRF and the other parliamentary parties (the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia and A Just Russia), have normally been allocated by the Presidential Administration one region where their representative could become a governor.

For the CPRF, it has been the Orel Region: after 2014 it was headed by Vadim Potomsky, businessman and State Duma deputy from St. Petersburg, and since 2017 it has been under the governorship of ex-deputy of the Moscow City Duma Andrei Klychkov (many analysts believed that Klychkov was "given" the Orel Region for his withdrawal from the Moscow mayoral elections). Also, in 2015 the CPRF's candidate Sergei Levchenko won the Irkutsk Region elections, and until last year he was the only opposition candidate to defeat the incumbent governor in the 2010s.

The most recent regional elections of 2018 held against a backdrop of the unpopular old-age pension reform were the most successful for the CPRF. The ruling party's approval ratings decline and the increased protest voting helped the CPRF's candidates to win the gubernatorial elections in Primorsky Krai (although the voting results were overturned) and in Khakassia as well as the party list legislative elections in Khakassia, and Irkutsk and Ulyanovsk Regions. Despite its stable image of the "main opposition party" and its recent winnings, the CPRF has been frequently criticised by external observers and disgruntled party members for its acquiescence during and between election campaigns. In particular, the discontent was caused by the CPRF's withdrawal from the elections in Novosibirsk and Omsk Regions and Altai Krai where popular communist politicians could challenge the incumbent governors and from the rerun of the elections in Primorsky Krai after the scandalous overturn of the voting results in September 2018. According to experts, this behaviour makes the CPRF less attractive for younger communist politicians who increasingly doubt the possibility for their advancement within the CPRF.²⁰

The left wing forces do not have consensus on how leftist is the CPRF. On one hand, the CPRF promotes the Soviet past, criticises the "anti-national regime" and social state spending, strictly focuses on the social agenda, and often votes against the bills that violate social rights (e. g. "Yarovaya bill").²¹ On the other hand, the size of its faction in the State Duma (today, it has 43 seats out of 450), has never allowed it to meaningfully influence any decisions or pass a thorny bill, and neither of the other formal parliamentary "opposition" parties, the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR) and JR, could do it with their even smaller factions.

Although the CPRF portrays itself as "the only political organisation that consistently defends the rights of working people", in the federal parliament it supports the enormous military spending which, apparently, severely affects the socio-economic opportunities for working people.

The CPRF regularly organises mass street protests (rallies, marches, etc.) with social agenda. For example, in late March 2019 the communists have launched another nation-wide rally campaign to defend social and economic rights. These events usually look like classic Soviet rallies, and the CPRF's stable social base allows it to mobilise participants without administrative pressure, which are usually resorted to by the ruling party. Moreover, these demonstrations often attract representatives of other protest groups or left movements who liven up the events with their banners and placards. For example, a large group of the deceived real estate investors brought their creative banners, such as "Homeless Regiment"²², to the CPRF's rally in St. Petersburg on 23 March 2019. These protests can hardly change anything, but they help to mobilise supporters.

The CPRF seeks to engage with trade unions; at the same time, it carefully avoids conflicts with the federal government and regional authorities. The CPRF offered little support to one of the leading independent unions, the Interregional Trade Union "Workers' Association" (MPRA), when it was dissolved in 2018. Rise of the independent unions in Russia has reduced the CPRF's social niche even further.²³

The CPRF also has close ties with large businesses — many prominent entrepreneurs have been its representatives at the legislatures of all levels. At the presidential elections in March 2018, the CPRF, for the first time in its history, nominated millionaire and owner of a large business Pavel Grudinin instead

²⁰ <https://regnum.ru/news/2443066.html>

²¹ <http://vote.duma.gov.ru/vote/95965>

²² It's a pan with the "Immortal regiment", the popular country-wide government-led march commemorating victims of the Second World War.

²³ https://elibrary.ru/download/elibrary_22952474_53403909.pdf



Photos 1–3. Protesters at the march organised by the CPRF in Moscow on 7 November 2017.

of the permanent party leader Gennady Zyuganov. Although the CPRF tried to portray Grudinin as a “red director”, his oligarch image significantly undermined his campaign.

Nationalism is one of the key elements of the CPRF’s ideology. The CPRF still mentions “internationalism” and “friendship between peoples” in its programmes as a tribute to the official Soviet rhetoric. But these words are always accompanied by the antonymous terms in the official party documents or its leaders’ speeches. For example, according to the statement on the CPRF’s website, the CPRF is a party of “patriots, internationalists, friendship between peoples, and protection of the Russian civilization”.²⁴

In 2012, the CPRF initiated the establishment of the nationalist movement *Russkiy Lad* (the Russian Way) to bring together all or at least some of the Russian nationalists loyal to the CPRF. *Russkiy Lad* is explained on the official CPRF’s website as “the Russian model of the world”, “the Russian order”, and “the specific Russian mentality coded by our ancestors in our native language and in the genetic memory of their descendants”.²⁵ Notably, *Russkiy Lad* is led by the CPRF leaders – Gennady Zyuganov and Vladimir Nikitin.²⁶

The CPRF’s ideology links the national issues to the class issues as the problem of the exploitation of workers can only be resolved in conjunction with the problems of the Russian nation, according to its ideologists. The CPRF alleges that the Russians are second-class, exploited citizens in their own country while the West-leaning elite consisting of the ethnic minorities gets all the economic benefits.²⁷

Unsurprisingly, anti-Semitism has become the part of the CPRF’s ideology. In his interview taken by the far-right nationalist news agency Orthodox Russia (*Rus Pravoslavnaya*) during the federal parliamentary campaign in September 2003, the CPRF leader Gennady Zyuganov said,

“Our people are not blind. Our people see that the Zionist encroachment into the government is one of the reasons for the catastrophic state of our country, massive impoverishment, and extinction.

²⁴ <https://kprf.ru/party/>

²⁵ <https://kprf.ru/rusk/113039.html>

²⁶ <https://kprf.ru/rusk/113316.html>

²⁷ Suvi Salmenniemi (ed) *Rethinking class in Russia*. Ashgate, 2012, pp. 114-116



Photo 4. Moscow, 7 November 2017.

They cannot disregard the aggressive role the Zionist capital has been playing in the collapse of the Russian economy and the plunder of the Russian national heritage. They ask a valid question: how come that after the privatisation the key positions in a number of sectors have been taken by persons of a single ethnic origin? They see that the same persons control mass media that have detrimental effect on our Motherland, public moral, language, culture, and faith.”²⁸

The CPRF leadership view the West-leaning elite as evil that carries out cultural and moral expansion over the Russian people, and see capitalism in general and division into the rich and the poor as a global state of affairs manipulated by certain Western forces. That is why they believe that their fight against the West is the fight for the interests of the nation and working people.²⁹

The CPRF has demonstrated its anti-migrant attitudes on numerous occasions. For example, the CPRF organised pickets in the south of Moscow calling for the offices of the Federal Migration Service (FMS) to be moved outside the city.³⁰

The CPRF’s nationalism might take the form of trivial xenophobia. For example, Tamara Pletnyova, one of the influential CPRF figures and the chairwoman of the Family, Women, and Children Affairs Committee in the State Duma, urged Russian women not to have intimate relations with foreign men during the 2018 FIFA World Cup in Russia,

... girls might meet someone and have a baby... Those kids will suffer, as they have been suffering since the Soviet times. If they are the same race as us, it is okay; otherwise, it is complicated. We should give birth to our own children. I am not a nationalist, but still.³¹

²⁸ Русь Православная. 2003. N 75–76 (<https://www.sova-center.ru/hate-speech/news/2003/09/d905/>).

²⁹ Suvi Salmenniemi (ed) Rethinking class in Russia. Ashgate, 2012, pp. 114-116

³⁰ <https://www.svoboda.org/a/26858046.html>

³¹ <https://govoritmoskva.ru/news/163495/>

As previously in the case of Zyuganov, the CPRF members did not resent or condemn Pletnyova's statement.

Stalinism is another CPRF's staple. Many CPRF members arrive to protests, rallies and to the Immortal Regiment memorial marches with Stalin's portraits. They consider offending any arguments that Stalin liquidated 90% of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (RSDRP) members who had joined the RSDRP before 1917 (so-called "Lenin's guards"), or the facts and figures of the Great Purge in 1937–1938. They see Stalin as a sacred figure and an element of their secular "religion" that should not be doubted. For them, Stalinism symbolizes order, stability, the "strong hand", isolationism, and great-power aspirations.

The authoritarian ideology of the CPRF inevitably brings it together with the far-right. For example, according to the established tradition, the CPRF and the Left Front's rally against handing over the southern Kuril Islands to Japan³² in Moscow on 20 January 2019 hosted several far-right speakers, such as the monarchist Igor Girkin (Strelkov).

Religion (notably, the Orthodox Christianity) is also the key component of the CPRF's ideology.³³ On multiple occasions, Gennady Zyuganov publicly stated that Jesus Christ was a communist, and according to the BBC journalists, the CPRF's website had 295 articles mentioning Christ as of 2016.³⁴ Oleg Efimov, Executive Secretary of the Interfactional Deputy Group in Defence of Christian Values in the State Duma, said that communists were "among the most active" members of the group chaired by the communist and the member of the CPRF Duma faction Sergei Gavrilov.³⁵ Efimov also noted that the CPRF leader Gennady Zyuganov had been "not only a participant, but also an active co-organiser of the World Russian People's Council for over 20 years. Zyuganov is an Orthodox Christian and a church builder, and he has a lot of believers in his faction."³⁶

Gennady Zyuganov has been leading the CPRF for over 20 years; he has all the necessary managerial and rhetorical skills that help him to hold the reins in his party. In 1996, he was close to defeating Boris Yeltsin at the presidential election; however, his activity level and charisma have decreased since then. Recently, he had to step down as the CPRF's presidential candidate due to his age. Zyuganov's attempts to preserve the status quo is one of the main reasons why the party remains so rigid and unable to reform itself.

And yet, the party leadership understands that without younger people the CPRF is doomed. The CPRF has its youth wing – the Leninist Communist Youth Union of the Russian Federation (LYCL RF) established (or restored, as they say, because they consider themselves the successors of the Soviet Komsomol) as the Union of Communist Youth in 1999. In 2011, the Union of Communist Youth split into LYCL RF within the CPRF and the Union of Communist Youth within the United Communist Party. The LYCL RF attracts young people who like the CPRF, or support the left agenda in general and are unaware about the complicated configuration of the left wing so they just join the most well-known left party. The LYCL RF has its branches in many Russian cities, especially in those where the left-leaning youth have no other options. The members of the LYCL RF usually attend the CPRF rallies and sometimes hold pickets or events of their own (for example, to mark the anniversary of the creation of the Soviet Komsomol on 29 November). However, the LYCL RF's membership is low: they have around 100 members in each of the St. Petersburg, Moscow, Belgorod and several other organisations and even less in the other cities. Due to its weak youth structure, the CPRF regularly cooperates with "non-systemic" left groups that have many young activists; in particular, it has close relations with the Left Front and allows the members of "non-systemic" organisations to attend its public events once in a while. One of the Moscow left activists told us,

The CPRF has always been short of younger people so it would let "non-systemic" left organisations participate in its public events. They would create a crowd at the events, and it was a mutually beneficial cooperation: for example, at the 1 May Marches in 2000–2002 there used to be formations of anarchists, leftists, and Trotskyists. They welcomed young people and tried to be open for them. In 1990, left groups, even anarchists, were actively using the CPRF's offices.³⁷

³² <https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-46937746>

³³ The Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), the predecessor of the CPRF, turned from atheism to clericalism as early as during Stalin rule. However, it had not become official until the last CPSU General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev. In 1988, he met the Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church chaired by Patriarch Pimen.

³⁴ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Y5thHglhaEhttps://www.bbc.com/russian/society/2016/04/160427_tr_kprf_orthodox_church_symbiosis

³⁵ <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3428104>

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Interview with a left activist, Moscow, March 2018.

The CPRF strictly limits its activities to the political niche designated to it, carefully avoids any conflicts with the federal government and regional authorities, and does very little work with such protest groups as miners, truck drivers, and employees claiming their wages. Vladimir Gelman once called the CPRF “the paper tigers of the opposition” because its sharp rhetoric does not have any serious consequences for the government. “The CPRF is a party of elderly people. It has been assigned a specific niche, and it does not attempt to change anything. This is not opposition; this is eclectic populism”, a left activist told us.³⁸

However, without other “systemic” alternatives, many voters believe the CPRF to be the most left of the existing parties. But the CPRF, due to its eclectic ideology, niche branding, traditional and uncreative *modus operandi*, and its social base that consists mostly of the older people, does not appear to be the kind of party that could shift Russian policy to the left, and make the working people and vulnerable group’s interests count.

A JUST RUSSIA (JR) PARTY

The party was formed in 2006 as a merger of three parties: *Rodina* (The Motherland), the Party of Life, and the Russian Pensioners’ Party. Immediately after the merger was officially announced, A Just Russia was labelled as the Kremlin-sponsored project. The allegations were based particularly on the fact that Deputy Chief of the Russian Presidential Administration Vladislav Surkov who was in charge of domestic affairs and party-building delivered a conceptual speech at the meeting with the Party of Life leader and future JR leader Sergei Mironov and some 30 of his fellow party members.

Surkov identified two main goals pursued by the creation of the JR: to build a two-party system in Russia, and to absorb the protest electorate in JR. “The society does not have ‘a second leg’ it could step on when its first leg gets numb. Russia needs another large party,”³⁹ said Surkov. According to him, the new party was also supposed to get the votes of the left-leaning protest electorate. “The electorate that is against all kinds of authorities would better be with you than with some destructive force,” said Surkov.⁴⁰

Obviously, the new Presidential Administration’s initiative was aimed against the CPRF that was not so much trusted by the Kremlin then as it is now. With JR, the Kremlin implemented its long-standing idea to establish its own left party which would pull votes away from the CPRF and become the “ruling party No. 2” – a fully-controlled project that would create an illusion of a multi-party system, but would not need to be consulted with or taken into account.

The new party leader and then Chairman of the Council of Federation Sergei Mironov, who had never been a popular politician, but had close personal relations with Vladimir Putin, became the guarantor of JR’s loyalty. Another reason for creating the new party was to open the career paths for some low-level politicians who had not joined United Russia, yet were loyal to Vladimir Putin, recruit cadres, and allow them to gain some political experience.

Putin personally met with each of the leaders of the three merging organisations⁴¹ which, on one hand, dispelled any questions about the independence of the future party, and, on the other hand, gave it the green light. Later, at least eight politically diverse organisations and other ad hoc social groups, such as various protest initiatives, residential committees, and deceived real estate investor associations, joined JR. They found JR useful because the party that enjoyed favourable treatment by the Kremlin offered them an opportunity for political participation when restrictive political party laws were still in effect (after 2006, a party could not be registered unless it had 50,000 members).⁴²

Using administrative resources available to it, JR rapidly formed its broad regional structure. In 2008, JR had as many as 500,000 members (a lot more than the CPRF) and some rich donors, including Alexander Lebedev, Alexander Babakov, and Gasprom.⁴³ In 2007, JR became an observer party in the Socialist International, and was admitted as a full member in 2012.

³⁸ Interview with a left activist, Moscow, February 2018.

³⁹ <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/697936>

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/697936>

⁴² Mukhametov, R. S. «„Справедливая Россия“ и власть. Этапы развития отношений» [“A Just Russia and the authorities: Evolution of relations”], *Studia Humanitatis*, N 3, 2015.

⁴³ March, L. Managing opposition in a Hybrid Regime. *Slavic review*. 68. # 3 (fall 2009) P. 517-518.

A “systemic” organisation from its inception, JR, however, managed to gain voters’ support, unlike other abortive Kremlin’s projects.⁴⁴ At the federal parliamentary elections in 2007, JR got 7.7% of the vote and reached the electoral threshold (raised from 5% to 7%). At the 2011 federal parliamentary elections, JR won 13.2% of the popular vote and strengthened its positions within the Russian parliamentary system. At the regional elections, the party was successful in the regions with significant numbers of protest voters. So, JR’s creation led to splitting the center-left electorate, and the CPRF lost its monopoly in the left wing.

JR’s ideology and cadre coming from the patchwork of parties and various movements merged into JR turned out to be rather eclectic. Among its founding members was *Rodina*, nationalist patriotic party, which was infamously removed from the 2005 Moscow City Duma elections for its openly xenophobic election video comparing Central Asian migrants with trash (“Let’s Remove Trash from Our City”).⁴⁵ On the other hand, the Social Democratic Party of Russia (constitutional democrats and one of many Russian social democratic organisations) and the Party for the Protection of Entrepreneurship also became a part of JR. The Green Party recommended that its members joined JR.⁴⁶ However, JR has never managed to overcome the inherent conflicts and ideological differences among its diverse members.

JR officially aims for building “new socialism”, presents itself as a socialist or social democratic movement, and regularly uses such traditionally left terms as “solidarity” and “justice”.⁴⁷ It calls for poverty eradication, bridging the social inequality gap, and providing decent pensions, and high-quality education and health care.

JR leader Sergei Mironov and other JR members often criticise and challenge United Russia, yet unequivocally support Russia’s President Vladimir Putin. According to them, all domestic problems, especially those in the social sphere, result from the poor implementation of the intrinsically good President’s directions. One of the most recent statements by Sergei Mironov where he supported both Putin’s domestic and foreign policies was particularly illustrative in this regard. He blamed the government and local authorities for all the domestic failures and said, “The head of our state has set the right priorities. But how they are implemented by our government and local authorities is quite another story. It seems that the officials do not always listen to and hear what the President says”.⁴⁸

Nonetheless, between 2010 and 2012 JR attempted to openly oppose President Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin. In its 2011 manifesto, JR sharply criticised the government. The party developed a strong left pro-democracy wing with some popular State Duma members, such as Oleg Shein, Vice-Chair of the Russian Confederation of Labour, Ilya Ponomaryov, and Gennady and Dmitry Gudkovs, father and son.

Several organisations that had previously joined JR split from it over the same period of time (the Green Party left in 2012 followed by the Russian Party of Pensioners for Justice that announced its intention to re-create *Rodina* party, which they eventually did in August 2012).⁴⁹ This was mostly due to the party registration laws liberalization.

Upon Vladimir Putin’s return to the President’s Office, JR’s complete loyalty was restored. In 2012, ex-FSB colonel Gennady Gudkov was unseated from the State Duma, under a formal pretext, for his public support of mass protests in Moscow. In 2013, both he and his son, Dmitry Gudkov, were expelled from JR for their “actions harmful to the Party” after they had refused to comply with JR leadership’s orders to leave the Opposition Coordination Council (OCC) created during the mass protests in 2011 and 2012. Another OCC and JR member Ilya Ponomaryov (who was the only one of the 450 State Duma deputies to vote against the annexation of Crimea) was also expelled from JR and had to leave Russia.

Today, JR is a socially oriented, very moderate and pro-president “systemic” party that is not as openly nationalistic as its predecessor, the *Rodina* party. Like the CPRF, JR also appeals to Orthodox Christianity. Political analyst Alexander Morozov who had previously headed the press office of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) was one of the key designers of JR, and Orthodox social conservative Alexander Schipkov remains one of the chief JR ideologists.⁵⁰

⁴⁴ For example, the Communist Party for Social Justice lead by the pro-Kremlin political consultant Andrei Bogdanov. Andrei Bogdanov has also registered with the Ministry of Justice the Social Democratic Party of Russia that is headed by Sirajidin Ramazanov and exists mostly on paper.

⁴⁵ <https://lenta.ru/news/2005/11/26/off/>

⁴⁶ <http://www.spravedlivo.ru/4774510>

⁴⁷ <http://31.44.80.183/files/pf59/075833.pdf>

⁴⁸ <http://www.spravedlivo.ru/9365310>

⁴⁹ Mukhametov, R. S. «„Справедливая Россия“ и власть. Этапы развития отношений» [“A Just Russia and the authorities: Evolution of relations”], *Studia Humanitatis*, N 3, 2015.

⁵⁰ <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/4347648.html>

In March 2019, prominent businessman and head of Tsargrad media holding Konstantin Malofeev became a JP party member. According to the newspaper *Kommersant*, on 21 April 2019 the extraordinary JR party congress will pass the amendments to the party charter to streamline mergers with other parties. This may be followed by the merger of JR and *Rodina*. According to the newspaper *Novaya Gazeta*, Malofeev could become a vice-chair of the joined party. The new party might be renamed as A Just Motherland, or as Our Russia. Therefore, JR might also drift right-wise.⁵¹

Konstantin Malofeev's joining JR could reportedly mean that the Kremlin has put into action its idea to restore the "old" *Rodina* party the way it was under Dmitry Rogozin's leadership. *Rodina's* popularity peaked when it combined both nationalist and socialist components. The Kremlin considered it too dangerous and merged the original *Rodina* with the non-charismatic Party of Life. Today, the Presidential Administration has realised that the raise of the retirement age can potentially lead to new wave of protests with explicitly left agenda and is preparing to harness the social fallout, probably with some new or reloaded left administration-controlled projects. Reportedly, the Kremlin is also developing similar backup plans for the CPRF.

Being a Kremlin-controlled party like the CPRF, A Just Russia is considered a part of the existing governance system by voters and, therefore, it is very unlikely to play an independent role in case of political turbulence. However, given the JR's past (JR was established as a merger of various left-wing groups, and during mass protests in 2011 and 2012 it developed rather a strong protest wing), the party is still capable of bringing forth certain forces that might try to join independent political movements. However, under the current leadership, these forces will most certainly be expelled from JR.

⁵¹ <https://www.novayagazeta.ru/articles/2019/03/14/79868-spravedlivaya-rossiya-nadenet-korichnevoe>

III. THE “NON-SYSTEMIC” LEFT

We define the “non-systemic” left as left groups that identify themselves as far-left, communist, socialist or anarchist political organisations and have not been officially registered as a political party or social movement.

The division into the “systemic” and “non-systemic” left is blurred. “Non-systemic” left politicians can still be members of moderate “systemic” organisations and parties (e. g. Oleg Shein, A Just Russia member from Astrakhan), and “non-systemic” groups sometimes cooperate with “systemic” parties or run at the elections as their candidates (the Russian Communist Workers’ Party, the Vanguard of Red Youth of the Labour Russia and the United Communist Party (UCP) used to form alliances with the Communists of Russia; and the Left Front, with the CPRF). Some “non-systemic” organisations have sought for electoral participation: for example, the UCP applied for official political party registration in 2015. The Left Front also tried to get registered and got ready to run for elections.

The “non-systemic” left-wing groups often identify themselves with such marker words as “revolutionary”, “workers”, “proletarian”, and “communist”, or some milder terms (more characteristic for the “new left”), including “socialist”, “democratic”, and “Marxist”. The “non-systemic” left are much more inclined towards street protests tactics than official parties or trade unions. However, their “social club” activities have also been on the rise recently. Many of these groups focus their work on the urban youth and operate mostly in larger cities.

Left-wing groups are atomised and have become increasingly polarized in recent years. This is due to the mounting ideological differences, including those on the Russian foreign policy, internal competition, and the repression by the government in 2012 and 2013. Yet, all of them share a negative consensus towards the ruling government and the CPRF, which they consider a party that has usurped left-wing symbols and the social justice agenda.

The “non-systemic” left disapprove both of the CPRF and A Just Russia for being not quite oppositional (“regime allies” and “government supporters”), “not left” (“nationalist”, “clerical”, “bourgeois”, etc.) and “not revolutionary” (“they reject the immediate urge for revolutionary changes”). The CPRF and A Just Russia are accused of departing from the “true left” ideology and “true socialism”; for example, the “non-systemic” left often disapprove the Stalinism component of the CPRF’s ideology.

Almost all the “non-systemic” left activists we interviewed about their attitude towards the CPRF accused the CPRF leadership of being corrupt (literally “on sale”). Nevertheless, they are positive about the ordinary CPRF activists and sometimes held joint events with them:

...at the grassroots level, there are plenty of adequate people in the CPRF; there are people who have been deceived by the moneygrubbers at the top of the party.⁵²

The leadership ... have discredited themselves greatly... But the ordinary party members are very honest... very active and positive, and I like them.⁵³

Moreover, in Moscow, St. Petersburg and some other cities, the CPRF grassroots offices have been the breeding ground of “non-systemic” left activists. Inspired by the socialism ideals and discontented by the CPRF’s acquiescence and very formal ways, young CPRF activists often drift to more radical left organisations.

According to their origin and ideology, the “non-systemic” left groups can be tentatively classified into the following categories:

the followers of the Soviet communist traditions claiming to continue them; they, in turn, can be divided into: a) Soviet patriots and anti-Stalinists (both Leninists and anti-Leninists); and b) “left imperialists” and Stalinists;

- the “democratic left” (the “new left”) who have distanced themselves from the Soviet ideals and often look up to the international left movement (antiglobal social fora, successors of Trotsky’s Fourth International, etc.);
- anarchist groups that have existed in Russia since the 1980s; some of them continue the Russian anarchist tradition of the Czarist era;
- other groups, including those with ideologies that are quite unusual for Russia, such as Maoism, North Korean Juche, Libyan Jamahiriya, etc.

⁵² Interview with a 20-years-old female Revolutionary Workers’ Party activist.

⁵³ Interview with a 33-years-old male Left Front activist.

Participation in the following street protests (“forces review” of sorts) can be indicative of ideological divisions or, on the contrary, alliances between groups:

- Anti-capitalism (Anti-Cap) in September attended by most of the “non-systemic” left;
- First of May rallies and marches held by radical communists and democratic left groups separately;
- Seventh of November (the anniversary of the Russian Revolution) rallies and marches attended by the left followers of the Soviet traditions;
- rallies and marches to commemorate the anniversary of the murders of human rights lawyer Stanislav Markelov and journalist Anastasia Baburova on 19 January attended by the democratic left and Antifa groups.

Below, we describe the key “non-systemic” left parties and movements.

Russian United Labour Front (ROT Front).⁵⁴ One of the **communist movements that follow Soviet traditions**, ROT Front was formed in 2010 with an eye to the upcoming election, as a merger of the Russian Communist Workers’ Party led by Victor Tyulkin and several smaller communist organisations and independent trade unions. Between 2010 and 2012, the Ministry of Justice refused the Front the political party registration on multiple occasions until it was finally registered in December 2012. The ROT Front candidates stood at several regional and municipal elections with little success (none of them won and many were even unable to register as candidates). In recent years, the Front has been campaigning for salary indexation and, currently, against the old-age pension reform.

Russian Communist Workers’ Party (RCWP)⁵⁵ (after the RCWP lost its formal status, it is officially called the Civic Organisation “Russian Communist Workers’ Perspective” to keep the abbreviated brand name). Established in 1992, the RCWP remains one of the oldest “non-systemic” communist parties active. In the 1990s, Victor Tyulkin’s RCWP together with Victor Anpilov’s movement Labour Russia became the leading force among the far-left Stalinist traditionalists. At the 1995 federal parliament elections, their bloc “Communists – Labour Russia – For the Soviet Union” won 4.5% of the vote. At the 1999 federal parliament elections, Tyulkin’s bloc “Communists, Workers of Russia – for the Soviet Union” got only 2.2 % of the vote after they had split with Anpilov who had put forward his own list of candidates “Stalin Bloc – For the USSR”. The RCWP publishes two newspapers, *The Trudovaya Rossiya (Labour Russia)* and *The Mysl (Thought)*. Its youth wing, the Russian Communist Youth Union (Bolsheviks) also issues its newspaper *The Bumbarash*. The RCWP also incorporates the Movement for Child Protection and the Committee for the Protection of Pro-Socialism Political Prisoners. The RCWP is associated with the Russian Communist Party (led by S. A. Alexandrov) as its republican organisation.

Labour Russia.⁵⁶ The organisation was founded by prominent left politician Victor Anpilov (died in 2018) who was one of the main street protests organisers in the 1990s. Over the last decade, Anpilov participated in coordination councils and public events of the joint opposition, such as the Other Russia, Dissenters’ Marches, rallies For Fair Election, etc. After Anpilov’s death, the Labour Russia’s membership has been decreasing rapidly; however, a dozen of its younger followers wearing the Labour Russia badges participated in the Anti-Cap event on 23 September 2018. Labour Russia’s best-known speaker is Stanislav Ruzanov.

Since 2014, the Labour Russia has been publishing its website digest. Today, the Labour Russia is a part of the United Communist Party.

All-Union Communist Party of Bolsheviks (AUCPB).⁵⁷ The party was created in November 1991 and originated from the “Bolshevik Platform” of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. The AUCPB is permanently led by its General Secretary Nina Andreyeva who wrote the famous article “I cannot give up my principles”, which was published by *The Sovetskaya Rossiya* newspaper in 1988. The AUCPB promotes its ideology and publicises its political activities in its two newspapers, *The Bolshevik Sickle and Hammer* (previously *The Workers and Peasants’ Sickle*) and *The Revolution*. Its youth wing is called the All-Union Bolshevik Young Guard. The AUCPB suffered its first rift in 1994 and 1995 when a group of the AUCPB members led by Alexander Lapin demanded that the party corrected its course and stopped boycotting the upcoming parliamentary elections. Nina Andreyeva expelled Alexander Lapin

⁵⁴ <http://www.rotfront.su/>

⁵⁵ <https://rkrp-rpk.ru/>

⁵⁶ <http://www.trudros.ru>

⁵⁷ <http://vkpb.ru/>

and his supporters from the AUCPB, and they founded a new organisation, the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks).⁵⁸ The second rift in 2016 was caused by the disagreement over Putin's foreign policy. Some of the AUCPB members led by Maevsky and Fatyanova disapproved Nina Andreyeva's support for certain actions by the Russian government and, therefore, were accused of Trotskyism and expelled from the party. However, they have maintained control over the party newspaper *The Workers and Peasants' Sickle and Hammer* and continue to publish it.

Lenin and Fatherland. This interregional civic organisation led by Irma Kovalyova was founded in March 1991 to study, develop and promote Lenin's ideological legacy. The group participates in the CPRF's events and publishes its newspaper *The Lenin and Fatherland* from time to time.

Russian Communist Party (KPSS, or RKP-KPSS).⁵⁹ This is one of the oldest existing communist organisations; it was founded in 1994 by Alexei Prigarin, who died in 2016. It collaborates with many left movements and issues a newspaper, *The Golos Kommunista (Communist's Voice)*.

USSR Citizens Congress (USSR Citizens Movement).⁶⁰ The organisation led by Tatiana Khabarova, PhD, argues the legal validity of the results of the 17 March 1991 referendum about maintaining the USSR. They hold their own rallies (which usually attract around 50 participants) to mark key Soviet anniversaries.⁶¹

United Communist Party (UCP).⁶² The party was founded in 2014 and originated from the Interregional Association of Communists formed by the leaders of the CPRF committees in Moscow (Vladimir Lakeev and Anatoly Baranov) and other regions who had been expelled from the CPRF after their conflict with the CPRF federal leadership. Representatives of the Interregional Association of Communists participated in the demonstrations for fair elections in Moscow in 2011 and 2012. In 2015, the events in Ukraine caused rift in the UCP leadership (internationalists who disapproved Russia's involvement in the armed conflict in Ukraine broke away); however, the core leaders and activists stayed with the UCP. Today, the party campaigns against the old-age pension reform. The UCP's mouthpiece is its newspaper *The Novaya Alternativa (New Alternative)*.

The UCP has a youth wing, the Union of Communist Youth. It was established in 1999 in alliance with the CPRF, but in 2011 split into the LYCL RF (the CPRF's youth wing) and the Union of Communist Youth that eventually joined the UCP.

Russian Communist Youth Union (RCYU).⁶³ This is the oldest organisation which claims to continue the work of the Soviet Komsomol. After the death of the RCYU's first leader Igor Malyarov in 2003 and the RCYU's refusal to cooperate with the CPRF, which had happened under Igor Malyarov's leadership, the RCYU gradually switched from domestic to foreign agenda building friendship with Cuba, North Korea, Venezuela, etc.

Left Front.⁶⁴ This "new left" organisation was founded in 2008 as a wide coalition of "non-systemic" left groups which both focused on street protests and aimed to use more moderate methods, including parliamentary and media-related. Sergei Udaltsov's Vanguard of Red Youth (VRY), ex-youth wing of the Labour Russia led by Victor Anpilov, built the backbone of the Left Front. However, the Left Front wanted to be seen as more mature and respectable than the VRY did back in the 2000s, when they mainly focused on the radical street protests. Several representatives of the established communist parties (the Russian Communist Workers' Party and the Union of Communist Youth) and the State Duma deputy Ilya Ponomarev (A Just Russia) initially joined the leadership of the new organisation.

The Left Front participated in all key street protests in 2011 and 2012, and Sergei Udaltsov was one of the protest leaders. Specifically, he came up with the format and the name of the mass demonstrations called "Marches of Millions" in 2012. Charismatic and politically flexible, Udaltsov became the only well-known "non-systemic" left leader. He managed to create an operational youth left organisation within the Russian protest movement and strived to dispel the marginalised stereotypical image of the left.

⁵⁸ <http://bolshevick.org/>

⁵⁹ <http://rkpkpss.narod.ru>. The website has not been updated since 2004.

⁶⁰ <http://cccp-kpss.su/>

⁶¹ 17 March – referendum on the future of the Soviet Union (1991); 7 October – Soviet Constitution Day (1977); 5 December – Soviet Constitution Day (1936); 30 December – the USSR formation (1922).

⁶² <http://ucp.su/>

⁶³ <http://www.rksm.ru/>

⁶⁴ <https://www.leftfront.org/>

Between 2012 and 2013, the Left Front's symbols and activities were banned by the prosecutor's office, and the Left Front activists were repeatedly arrested for bringing their flags to public events.⁶⁵ In 2013, Sergei Udaltsov was detained and sentenced on charges of organising mass disorders, and he was released only in August 2017.

Udaltsov advocates for fair elections and the release of political prisoners. Since the time of the Vanguard of Red Youth, his public image was associated with Stalinism; however, he has never called himself Stalinist, but rather has urged to adopt the best of the Soviet practices. In 2014, while in prison, Udaltsov welcomed the annexation of Crimea and the armed separatist movement in Donbass ("Novorossiia"). At the same time, the Left Front was undergoing rifts caused by disagreement over the events in Ukraine, among other things. Udaltsov's detention and the split that resulted from the "Ukrainian issue" led to crisis in the Left Front. After Udaltsov's release in 2017, the Left Front's visibility has increased again. Their most recent key campaigns included supporting the CPRF's presidential candidate Pavel Grudinin in 2018, and protesting against the old-age pension reform (within "People Against" movement). In March 2019, Udaltsov joined the opposition coalition of politicians and activists that included nationalists and clericalists, such as Igor Strelkov and Vsevolod Chaplin, for which he has been widely criticised by the "non-systemic" left.

Vanguard of Red Youth of the Labour Russia.⁶⁶ This is one of the organisations that emerged as a result of the split of the Vanguard of Red Youth in 2004. Today, it collaborates with the Communists of Russia and has been actively supporting the unrecognized Donbass republics at special public events. The group led by Maria Donchenko issues its newspaper *The Sadovoe Koltso*.

Left Bloc.⁶⁷ Founded in late 2015 as an anti-authoritarian and anti-militarist alternative to the Left Front, the Left Bloc coalition is a **democratic left** coalition. Its predecessor, the Left Platform established within the Left Front in 2013, was dissatisfied with the "authoritarian policies" of then Left Front leadership. In July 2017, the Left Bloc organised a remarkable protest blocking the Roskomnadzor's building, which happened to be the first direct action by the Russian left in many years. The Left Bloc takes part in demonstrations calling for the internet freedom, joins the animal rights activists' protests, and supports European anti-globalists.

Russian Socialist Movement (RSM).⁶⁸ This is another democratic, i. e. pro-workers' democracy (Trotskyist), association created in 2011 as a result of the merger of two Trotskyist groups, the Socialist Resistance and Forward, both of which had split from the Committee for a Workers' International, the international Trotskyist association. The RSM supports trade union and social protests and advocates for gender equality and the LGBT equality; in 2011 and 2012, the Movement participated in the demonstrations calling for fair elections. They have joined the protest coalition against the old-age pension reform "People Against". Apart from Moscow and St. Petersburg, the RSM is also active in Urals region (Yekaterinburg), Siberia (Irkutsk), and Volga region (Nizhny Novgorod, Saratov, Ulyanovsk, Izhevsk, etc.). The RSM is against Russia's involvement in the armed conflicts in Syria and Donbass.

In 2014, the Workers' Platform broke away from the RSM. The same year, some activists left the organisation due to its "pro-Ukrainian" position, and others, due to its "pro-Russian" position. However, currently the RSM's membership has exceeded its "pre-conflict" level.

Revolutionary Workers' Party (RWP).⁶⁹ The RWP, the pro-workers' democracy (Trotskyist) association, has existed under this name since 1999. Initially, the RWP allied with the Committee for a Marxist International, the international Trotskyist movement (later re-branded as the International Marxist Tendency), but broke up with it in the 2000s. The RWP engages with the independent unions across Russia, and helps to organise strikes and protests of the inhabitants of company-owned dormitories. The RWP has also joined the movement opposing the old-age pension reform "People Against". In 2018, then RWP leader Sergei Biets (passed away on 24 March 2019) embarked upon cooperation with the CPRF. The RWP was the only left party, apart from the CPRF itself, allowed to show their flags and banners at the CPRF's rally in Nizhny Novgorod on 26 July 2018. During the Moscow mayoral campaign, Biets recommended that the RWP members support the CPRF's candidate, businessman Vadim Kumin.

At the same time, the internal party policies got increasingly authoritarian: Biets' opponents were expelled from the RWP. Several regional members of the RWP central committee led by Oleg Bulaev and

⁶⁵ <http://www4.kasparov.ru/material.php?id=51C97E710EE50>

⁶⁶ <http://www.trudoros.narod.ru/>

⁶⁷ <http://leftblock.org/>

⁶⁸ <http://anticapitalist.ru/>

⁶⁹ <http://rwp.ru/>

Alexander Savalsky demanded amendments to the party charter to clarify the management practices and avoid abuse of power. Biets was defeated both at the Moscow party conference and at the RWP central committee, and announced a “parallel” RWP that drifted towards the CPRF.

Most of the regional party offices have remained within the “old” RWP; formally, it has collective leadership, but its *de facto* leader is Trotskyist and orientalist Oleg Bulaev. The rift among the RWP leadership has affected its regional branches: for example, the St. Petersburg office of the RWP initially supported Bulaev, but later joined the other faction. The RWP has intensified its social club and theoretical activities and has been building international connections, including support for the Yellow Vests movement in France. It also issues its newspaper called *Long Live Workers’ Democracy*.

Socialist Alternative.⁷⁰ Until 2016, the Socialist Alternative acted as the Russian section of the Committee for a Workers’ International, but later adopted a name typical for Committee’s member parties in other countries. In Russia, it actively cooperates and holds joint events, including the First of May marches, with radical feminists and LGBT activists. The Socialist Alternative has been publishing its magazine *The Socialist News* since September 2017.

Revolutionary Alternative.⁷¹ The movement identifies itself as an association of anarchists, anarcho-communists, and other non-authoritarian left activists and anarchists. They are ideologically close to the Left Bloc, but keep their autonomy. The movement emerged in St. Petersburg only three or four years ago and does not have any branches in other cities yet.

Left Socialist Action.⁷² Formed in 2007, this organisation describes itself as social democratic, and yet it cooperates both with other social democratic groups (e. g. Democratic Socialists’ Union) and anti-authoritarian left movements (mostly Trotskyists). Its activists participated in mass demonstrations in 2011 and 2012 and in protests against the war in Ukraine in 2014; the Left Socialist Action also advocates for the LGBT rights.

In 2018, some of the Left Socialist Action members joined the *Yabloko* party to run for municipal councils, with little success though. The organisation publishes its newspaper *The Obschestvennyi Resonans (Public Resonance)*.

International Marxist Tendency (IMT). The pro-workers’ democracy group that opposes capitalist exploitation of workers all over the world, the IMT espouses Marxism, Trotskyism, and internationalism. It is an integral part of the international Marxist movement and the International, and it supports workers’ protests in various countries. The IMT publishes its newspaper *The Vrag Kapitala (Enemy of the Capital)*. In St. Petersburg, they have joined the protest coalition against the old-age pension reform “People Against”.

Marxist Group “Class Policy”. This is a pro-workers’ democracy association of dedicated internationalists. They have actively participated in social protests concerning education and healthcare issues. Unlike the IMT, they have not joined either the International or the protest coalition against the old-age pension reform “People Against”. The Class Policy campaigns against the pension reform on its own calling for a general strike. The group disapproves of Russia’s involvement in armed conflicts in Syria and Ukraine.

Centre for the International Research New Prometheus. This St. Petersburg-based organisation, with a number of supporters in Moscow, mostly studies Marxism theory, translates foreign Marxists’ works into Russian, and conducts outreach activities, including via their newspaper *The Proletarsky Internatsionalizm (Proletarian Internationalism)*. The New Prometheus rarely participates in street protests.

Left-fem. This is a St. Petersburg-based feminist left group that advocates for equality for women, and opposes patriarchy and any other forms of social inequality. They collaborate with the Russian Socialist Movement and anarcho-feminists. The Left-fem has also joined the protest coalition against the old-age pension reform “People Against”.

Workers’ Platform.⁷³ Once a part of the Russian Socialist Movement, this socialist organisation of workers, trade unionists and social activists advocates for creation and strengthening of the independent workers’ democracy movement and establishment of a political party that would channel workers’ struggle. The Workers’ Platform has close links to the Russian Confederation of Labour.

Anarcho-Syndicalist Confederation (ASC). The leading anarchist organisation of the early 1990s, the

⁷⁰ <https://socialist.news/>

⁷¹ https://popygaynew.wixsite.com/revolalternative?utm_campaign=6ec39f5b-0556-40c4-8ba6-e2af9fb4b4a1&utm_source=so

⁷² <http://levsd.ru/>

⁷³ workplatform.info

ASC has no longer been a country-wide association since the late 1990s; however, several of its regional branches have kept the original name. In the early 1990s, influenced by the social changes in Russia, the ASC advocated for market economy and private property in the form of collective ownership by workforce so their views were close to libertarian ones. That is why some old anarcho-syndicalist groups refuse to recognise the ASC as traditional anarchists or anarcho-communists. The ASC keeps issuing its original newspaper *The Volya (Liberty)* from time to time.

Anarchist Movement Association. This is the main association of anarchist groups (with the exception of anarcho-communists); nevertheless, it is loose and not too active across Russia. The Anarchist Movement Association separated from the ASC in 1990.

Confederation of Revolutionary Anarcho-Syndicalists, Russian section of the International Workers' Association (CRAS-IWA).⁷⁴ Formed in 1995 on the base of the earlier Revolutionary Anarchists' Initiative, the Confederation is an anti-fascist, anti-nationalist and anti-militarist organisation that raises awareness, supports strike movement, and protests against infill development projects. The CRAS-IWA has survived several rifts; in particular, in 2008 the anarcho-communist group called Interprofessional Workers' Union was expelled from the CRAS-IWA for its ethno-anarchist views. The CRAS-IWA publishes *The Pryamoe Deystvie (Direct Action)* newspaper and *The Libertarnaya Mysl (Libertarian Thought)* magazine; in 1993–2008, it used to issue another newspaper, *The Chernaya Zvezda (Black Star)*.

Autonomous Action.⁷⁵ This anarcho-communist organisation distinguishes itself from the right anarchists with its anti-capitalist views. It was founded in the early 2000s and underwent a rift in the 2010s when a group called Peoples' Self-Defence broke away from it.⁷⁶ Due to rifts, now the Autonomous Action appears to be a cluster of projects, such as Antijob.net (black list of unscrupulous employers and employee support network), or Black Cross (assistance to political prisoners). The Autonomous Action activists cooperate with Antifa and eco-anarchist groups. They publish *The Avtonom* magazine and *The Situatsiya (Situation)* newspaper.

Eco-anarchists (green anarchists). They do not have a centralized nation-wide structure and include separate groups in various regions, such as Moscow, St. Petersburg, Samara, Irkutsk, Syktyvkar, and Nizhny Novgorod. They took part in environmental protests in the 2010s, for example to defend Khimki forest.

Anarcho-feminists. These are small, usually anonymous groups of activists, based mostly in Moscow or St. Petersburg. They collaborate with anarcho-communists (the Autonomous Action), Antifa, and eco-anarchist groups. Anarcho-feminist symbols include black and purple flags.

Antifa groups and anti-fascist action. These are associations and squads of anti-fascists who form local autonomous affinity groups to confront far-right ideologies. The Antifa oppose class discrimination, racism and sexism, and never cooperate with any authorities or parties. The names of Antifa groups usually become public when the group members are prosecuted, and the Antifa activists usually say that no such group has ever existed. This was the case of the Antifa-Rash group in Nizhny Novgorod in 2011–2013.

There are also “quasi-systemic” organisations, notably Sergei Kurginyan’s movement Essence of Time. The movement started to shape in the late Soviet era, in parallel with the CPRF. The movement attracted many young patriotic left activists who were often members of the CPRF at the same time. After the Bolotnaya Square and Sakharov Avenue protests, the Essence of Time movement organised a counter-rally at Poklonnaya Hill in Moscow, and Kurginyan hosted the event. Vladimir Putin personally paid the fine issued to the organisers of this counter-protest for the number of participants exceeding the number approved by the authorities.⁷⁷ After that, many left activists withdrew from the movement. In an attempt to revive the Essence of Time, Kurginyan launched a petition against the pension age raise (allegedly, one million signatures were collected), but it did not have any particular consequences.⁷⁸

Another remarkable left-wing figure is **Boris Kagarlitsky**. In the early post-Soviet years, he gained a reputation as a highly respected left theoretician. He was one of the founders of the Russian Socialist Movement and the social democratic movement Forward. As a head of the Institute of Globalisation Problems, in the early 2000s he actively campaigned against the CPRF and later created his own Institute of Globalisation and Social Movements. After the events related to the mass protests at Bolotnaya Square and Sakharov Avenue (very much disapproved by Kagarlitsky), almost all Europe-leaning left-wingers turned their

⁷⁴ <http://www.aitrus.info/>

⁷⁵ <https://avtonom.org/>

⁷⁶ <https://naroborona.info/organizatsiya/>

⁷⁷ <https://www.ntv.ru/novosti/268636/>

⁷⁸ <http://rvs.su/statia/sbor-podpisey-protiv-pensionnoy-reformy-vlastyam-ne-po-dushe>

back on him. After the invasion in Ukraine, he assumed the anti-Ukraine position and joined the anti-Ukrainian propagandists thus evoking suspicions about his links to the Kremlin. However, Kagarlitsky remains very influential among “non-systemic” left activists. He relies on media resources of his own.⁷⁹ Kagarlitsky is getting ready for the Moscow City Duma election campaign.

The above mentioned list of organisations includes those which have been politically active in the past two years; however, it is not comprehensive. Groups continue to emerge and split, often along the old fault lines.

AGE AND GENDER COMPOSITION OF THE “NON-SYSTEMIC” LEFT

There is no simple answer to the question about the predominant age groups in the “non-systemic” left wing. With certain reservations, one could say that “systemic” and “non-systemic” left-wingers belong to different generations. The age difference is largely due to the fact that “non-systemic” left-wing groups position themselves as a “more radical” alternative to the official CPRF. They more often resort to street protests which attract either youth or seniors, missing middle-aged people, according to Dmitry Gromov who researched socialist groups up to 2011⁸⁰. The “systemic” parties, on the other hand, focus on the middle-aged people and seniors. However, the CPRF’s is also interested in younger audiences and tries to increase its appeal to them. The CPRF have attempted to build its own core group of young activists, with mixed results, and there were quite a few rifts among the CPRF’s youth wing in the previous years.



Photo 5. Moscow, 7 November 2017.

⁷⁹ <http://rabkor.ru/>, correspondent network, and a YouTube channel.

⁸⁰ Gromov, D. V. «Уличные акции (молодежный политический активизм в России)» [*Street protests: Youth political activism in Russia*]. Institute of ethnology and anthropology of the Russian Academy of Science, 2012.



Photo 6. The Merry *Chekist* group in Moscow on 1 May 2018.



Photo 7. Revolutionary Alternative activists at a rally in St. Petersburg on 8 March 2019.

Both the CPRF and the “non-systemic” parties noticed an influx of young activists into the left movement. Our interviewees over 40 seemed to be very proud and contented with it: “... our party [Revolutionary Workers’ Party] consists mostly of the youth; we are old people for them. [And how do you feel about it?] Totally positive. I like it a lot”;⁸¹ “We see more and more young people among us – not only old ladies come to our demonstrations.”⁸²

In terms of the age of its activists, the Left Front stands somewhere between the “systemic” left organisations and most of the “non-systemic” left groups: along with the youth, it has many members over 30, many of whom have bolted the CPRF disgruntled over the CPRF leadership’s policy. “The CPRF is kind of amorphous. Zyuganov carefully avoids any risks or conflicts. That’s why I have to support more radical left forces.”⁸³ Many “non-systemic” left-wingers see their movement as young. “There are more young people. To join a smaller group, you have to be one hundred per cent dedicated to their cause. It’s not easy.

At public events, such groups as the Left Bloc or the Revolutionary Workers’ Party are usually represented by young men between 16 and 25 years of age and few young women of the same age. Many of our interviewees told us that they had joined left groups in high school or during their first years at the university. Some said they had got interested in left ideas and started to search for an appropriate party on the internet:

After the events in Ukraine ..., I started to think about politics. I realised how bad things were and started to look around to see which ideas attract me. These ideas turned out to be left and anti-authoritarian. I began reading VK public pages.”⁸⁴

⁸¹ Interview with a 52-years-old male Revolutionary Workers’ Party activist.

⁸² Interview with a 50-years-old female Left Front activist.

⁸³ Interview with a 41-years-old male Left Front activist.

⁸⁴ VK – popular Russian social media platform Vkontakte Interview with a 19-years-old male Left Bloc activist.

Others were brought to the left movement via punk rock, "At first, I was just a teen punk rock activist, like Antifa. Then I learned a few things about life, and read some of Marx' works."⁸⁵ The punk rock aesthetics (Mohawk hair, clothes with rivets and spikes, black leather, punk group logos, etc.) is particularly characteristic of the "new" ("democratic") left-wingers and anarchists.

Some of the activists said that their decision to join the left movement resulted from their keen interest in history and Soviet aesthetics. They romanticise the Russian revolution and the early years of the Soviet Union and engage in a sort of historical reconstruction: using the fonts similar to those popular in the 1920s in their banners, carrying around Trotsky's portraits, singing "White Army, Black Baron" Soviet marching song, and wearing the NKVD uniform (the Merry *Chekist* group). Their reconstruction enthusiasm is frowned upon by some other activists; for example, the members of the Revolutionary Workers' Party and the Socialist Alternative scornfully called it "cosplay".

There are many more men than women among the "non-systemic" left-wingers, especially the younger ones, except for the feminist or LGBT left groups.

SUPPORT BASE AND RELATIONS WITH TRADE UNIONS

Although our respondents usually answered the question of "Who supports left ideas today?" with "Students and workers and vast groups of people in various regions of Russia",⁸⁶ our field research shows that university and high school students seem to constitute the majority in the "non-systemic" left wing. Neither the CPRF activists nor most of the "non-systemic" left-wingers could provide us with any meaningful information about their contacts with trade unions. When asked about the activities of their organisations, they usually said that they advocate for the social issues and promote communist ideology to achieve communism in the remote future ("Public outreach at demonstrations and on the internet"⁸⁷; "We discuss social agenda"⁸⁸).

Intellectual activities and contemporary art are another two channels that bring young activists into left organisations. Left activists educate university students through social clubs where they study the works of left classics, and YouTube channels. The Workers' Platform activist from Kaluga told us that he and his associates (in Kaluga, Moscow, Nizhny Novgorod and Irkutsk where the group has its branches) mostly reach out to workers, rather than organise street protests:

Street protests are not the Platform's priority. We help trade unions to create their cells at plants and educate the most active workers.⁸⁹

The Left Bloc activists said that they supported environmental protests, particularly those against the landfills in Serpukhov and Solnechnogorsk.

Activists and sympathisers of the "non-systemic" groups include famous artists (Anton Nikolaev, Nikolai Oleynikov, and Victoria Lomasco), authors (Kirill Medvedev, Nikita Sungatov, Pavel Arsenyev, Roman Osminkin, and Galina Rymbu), critics (Gleb Napreenko and Alexei Artamonov), theoreticians and political analysts (Vlad Sofronov, Ilya Budraitskis, and Vlad Tupikin).

Anarchists and some of the "non-systemic" left wingers are often sceptical about the current trade unionism in Russia and trade unions like the Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Russia⁹⁰ accusing them of being bureaucratic, non-revolutionary, linked to the capitalist interests, and cooperative with the ruling United Russia party.

... We believe Russia needs new trade unions, radical and revolutionary, those that will be really independent of any political parties, both ruling and opposition, or business owners, or any internal bureaucrats.⁹¹

At the same time, the activists of the Revolutionary Workers' Party, Socialist Alternative, Russian Socialist Movement, ROT Front and Left Front told us about their cooperation with the Russian Confederation of

⁸⁵ Interview with a 25-years-old male Workers' Platform activist.

⁸⁶ Interview with a 17-years-old male Left Bloc activist.

⁸⁷ Interview with a 28-years-old male ROT Front activist.

⁸⁸ Interview with a 33-years-old male Left Bloc activist.

⁸⁹ Interview with a 28-years-old male Workers' Platform activist.

⁹⁰ The largest trade union federation in Russia and successor of the All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions (VTsSPS), the Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Russia has never been a part of the Russian Confederation of Labour (the major bloc of alternative trade unions) and, in fact, has always been its main rival.

⁹¹ Interview with a 59-years-old male anarcho-syndicalist.

Labour, the Interregional Trade Union “Workers’ Association”,⁹² and some other unions; their outreach activities at manufacturing plants; legal aid to the workers who were not paid their salaries (e. g. at the plants in Mytishi and Serpukhov); and migrant rights advocacy. The Russian Socialist Movement activists noticed that, in fact, they worked as labour and social rights defenders:

The Russian Socialist Movement helps the “Workers’ Association” because of their close and long-standing relations. The main idea behind it is to help, to cooperate, and to build relations between hired employees and left intellectuals, rather than offer some guidance.⁹³

According to the activists who reach out to “ordinary people”, they encounter same problems, such as lack of trust (they are usually mistaken for extremists or agent provocateurs), and unwillingness of working people to support political demands. “People want to earn money and don’t want to think about things that upset them.”⁹⁴ Even those treated unfairly by their employers or authorities “are afraid of politics and believe that if they avoid political issues, the authorities will concede.”⁹⁵ According to our respondents, workers tend to listen to those who work at the plant like themselves, rather than to some agitator at the plant entrance.

Among our left activists respondents there were workers, but not many of them (several activists of the Socialist Alternative, Workers’ Platform, and Left Bloc mentioned that they worked in manufacturing). Some activists share “factory romanticism”. For example, the Revolutionary Workers’ Party activist from Moscow said that he had quitted an office job to stop being a part of the capitalist system and became a worker at a plant.

In general, the “non-systemic” left movement has weak links with trade unions and workers. The idea of bringing together left wing organisations and trade unions has been circulating in Russia for a quarter of the century. However, no one has ever managed to do it. The Revolutionary Workers’ Party has dealt with workers’ problems from time to time, but the party membership has never exceeded several hundreds, and its influence among workers is negligible. Generally, the Revolutionary Workers’ Party and other small-size left-wing organisations look more like small social clubs of the left intellectuals incapable of communicating with workers properly or finding common language with them. Both “non-systemic” left groups and trade unions are weak and unable to provide mutual support to each other.

Another obstacle to the possible alliance between the left wing and workers is workers’ reluctance about any attempts by politicians, including those from left parties, to drag them into their activities. The “non-systemic” left wingers are often be too “subcultural” and unable to offer a current political agenda that could be attractive for workers.

“TWO PEOPLE, THREE PARTIES”: ATOMISATION AND MIGRATION

The major problem of the “non-systemic” left movement is lack of unity among its numerous groups resulting in conflicts, small membership, and continuing migration of members from one group to another.

The left-wingers fully understand the problem: “The left movement is patchy”,⁹⁶ “Everyone is atomised”,⁹⁷ “The left movement totally lacks unity. That is why left parties offer little support to each other”,⁹⁸ “Two people, three parties – that’s how it is in the left movement.”⁹⁹ At the same time, they like to criticise their “competitors” for nationalism, Stalinism, toothlessness, over-compromising, extremism, freakiness, sexism, etc.

Members of “non-systemic” left groups often mention that they migrated from one organisation as a result of discontent with the leadership, repression or banning of the organisation, which may cause forced re-shuffle, rebranding, or amendments to the organisation charter.

“Moving from one group to another is inherent to the left platform. One organisation ceases to exist, and several others are formed in its place (usually under pressure).¹⁰⁰”

⁹² http://rabkor.ru/columns/events/2018/01/11/mpira_dissolved/

⁹³ Interview with a 29-years-old male Russian Socialist Movement activist.

⁹⁴ Interview with a 41-years-old male Left Front activist.

⁹⁵ Interview with a 32-years-old male Trotskyist.

⁹⁶ Interview with a 28-years-old male ROT Front activist.

⁹⁷ Interview with a 20-years-old male activist.

⁹⁸ Interview with a 25-years-old male activist, picket against the old-age pension reform, Moscow, 19 July 2018

⁹⁹ Interview with a 27-years-old male Russian Socialist Movement activist.

¹⁰⁰ Interview with a 33-years-old male Left Bloc activist.

During demonstrations, each left group usually goes in a separate rows; they do not mix or mingle, except for the parties that have similar views and cooperate closely (for example, the Russian Socialist Movement and the Socialist Alternative). Members of one party sometimes make pejorative remarks about members of another:

Now the Stalinists will tell us about another Jewish conspiracy. [about Stalinists]

Who are those flies buzzing? [about feminists and participants of the Monstration].

The relations between the “non-systemic” left-wingers and Alexei Navalny’s supporters are very complicated. Some left activists express their strong disagreement with Navalny and accuse him of having a neo-liberal, right conservative programme or no programme at all. His statements about the Labour Code, visas for the Central Asian countries and other issues have antagonised many left organisations.

This attitude, however, is in conflict with the desire to participate in protests and make them massive (“All of us are opposition!”, “Atomization is evil”). Some of the “non-systemic” left-wingers do not draw a line between themselves and Navalny’s supporters; others, on the contrary, allege that Navalny’s activists are children of businessmen and class aliens.

Oleg Zhuravlyov and Kirill Medvedev, the Russian Socialist Movement members, stated in their article on the relations between the left wing and Navalny’s movement that by switching the focus of his criticism from dictatorship to oligarchy, Navalny contributed to the left shift of the opposition agenda. The authors did not politically align themselves with Navalny, but did not call for complete separation from him either.

We believe that left-wingers should express solidarity with the repressed opposition activists, including those who participated in the demonstrations organised by Navalny. Without basic solidarity and mutual support, everyone will be “swallowed” ... the left-wingers should participate in current protests, but they have to keep criticising Navalny. First, we have to participate in both “parts” of the Russian protest movement: in demonstrations organised by Navalny and in the social, local and municipal activist groups independent of Navalny ... Second, we need a public discussion ... on the main issues concerning our future. Those left-wingers who combine scientific analysis and political vision could become the principled and prominent opponents of the liberals and conservatives in discussions about economic, social and political reforms. Third, the left wing needs its own programme for social, political and economic reforms. We need to show ... that our programme against oligarchy and for social equality is more consistent, realistic and, at the same time, radical than that of Alexei Navalny.¹⁰¹

The “non-systemic” left-wingers frequently disagree about the participation in the CPRF’s protests. On one hand, the CPRF is the only visible “red” force officially allowed to take thousands protesters to the streets, for example to the First of May demonstrations. On the other hand, cooperation with the CPRF during such demonstrations may lead to accusations of “tailism” and perpetuating the image of “non-systemic” left-wing groups as “little brothers” of the official communists.

Absence of charismatic and well-known leaders, lack of any significant media resources and government repression have been further hampering the “non-systemic” left wing consolidation.

As earlier noticed the most charismatic and well-known leader in the left wing is Sergei Udaltsov, the chair of the Left Front. However, he does not seem to be capable of uniting the whole left flank because of his great-power nationalist, Stalinist views, and lack of any serious strategic vision or distinct political programme. It is not clear what Udaltsov could offer his constituents if he comes to power. However, apart from him, the “non-systemic” left wing has no other leaders recognisable even by the opposition-leaning citizens.

Media resources, online platforms and other media tools can also contribute greatly to the political success. But left newspapers and magazines basically remain intraparty press while online resources belonging to various movements have very limited audience.

The most significant resources that bring together some of the left-wing activists include: *Rabkor* (<http://rabkor.ru/>), Political News Agency North-West (<http://www.apn-spb.ru/>), *Svobodnaya Pressa* (<https://svpressa.ru/>), *Vestnik Buri* (their website <http://vestnikburi.com/> is linked to the exiled associate of Udaltsov, Alexei Sakhnin), Marx Station, Agitprop, and September (<http://september>).

¹⁰¹ <http://anticapitalist.ru/2017/07/21/базис-и-навальный/>

media/). “Non-systemic” left activists can also publish their materials on Anatoly Baranov’s website <https://forum-msk.org>. Some of the left intellectuals write their op-eds for liberal or cultural media.¹⁰² Lack of influential media is in part due to the absence of any meaningful sources of income.

Because of this combination of factors, young activists soon get disappointed and move from one group to another or to other ideological movements. “Today’s leftists are either subculturalists and bookworms who associate with parasites, or revanchists who want to revive the USSR,” one of Bolotnaya activists said explaining his departure from the left movement.¹⁰³ However, there is also an opposite trend: radical high school or university students initially mobilized by Navalny join left groups if liberal organisations turn out to be too moderate for them or otherwise do not meet their expectations. For example, one of the protesters at the St. Petersburg march on 7 November 2017 told us that Navalny’s demonstration on 26 March was his first ever street protest:

There came a guy who said, “I’m against them [the authorities] too. Let’s take to the streets together.” And so I did ... But since then, my attitude towards Navalny has changed completely... Now I don’t like him ... I used to think that liberalism can lead to normal life, but Marx and Lenin’s works... .. and liberal ideas themselves made me strongly doubt it. Communist philosophers, on the contrary, offered scientific approach ... they have already proved that capitalism is an outdated model.¹⁰⁴

“UKRAINIAN ISSUE” AND RIFT AMONG THE LEFT

The Maidan events and the armed conflict in Donbass split Russian opposition throughout its whole spectrum. It came as a severe blow to the already atomised “non-systemic” left groups and caused rifts in many organisations and movements. The conflict was so heated that many ex-associates stopped shaking hands.

Some activists bolted the Left Front after its jailed leader Sergei Udaltsov called Maidan “a junta”, and supported the annexation of Crimea and the armed conflict in Ukraine. These activists established their own movement, the Left Bloc, where Darya Polyudova who founded the Left Resistance came from. Udaltsov was re-elected as the Left Front executive committee member by a margin of one vote.¹⁰⁵ On 23 August 2014, the Left Front congress in Moscow adopted its resolution “War Against War”. It criticised supporters of both the Donetsk People’s Republic (DNR) and Luhansk People’s Republic (LNR), and Kyiv: “Peoples need a peace campaign that would go over the heads of bloodthirsty politicians and greedy oligarchs who profit from the grief of the others.”¹⁰⁶ However, our observers saw the Left Front activists at a meeting in support of Novorossiya in St. Petersburg on 18 February 2017.

The Russian Socialist Movement and the Committee for a Workers’ International were also against the war. However, a significant number of left-wingers supported the DNR and LNR, and some even went to fight in Donbass, mostly in the LNR.

The rifts among the Ukrainian left organisations also contributed to the disagreements on the Russian left flank. Between 2013 and 2014, Ukrainian left organisations divided into three categories: 1) groups that actively supported the Anti-Maidan and the pro-Russian DNR and LNR, notably *Borotba* (which tried to agitate at EuroMaidan at first, with little success though); 2) small groups that supported the Maidan movement, for example some anarchists, such as *Avtonomna Spilka Trudyaschikhsya*; 3) groups “against all parties” – those who opposed the new regime without supporting Yanukovich and opposed the armed conflict without supporting the DNR and LNR or Russia, for example *Sotsialnyi Rukh*.

In Russia, some left activists saw the Maidan protests as a revolution by right radicals with anti-communist rhetoric. Others considered it a revolutionary struggle against the anti-national government. No one liked Poroshenko considering him an oligarch. The left-wing groups did not attach much importance to the Crimea issue (although some of the left, in articles and speeches, discussed the danger of “preventive annexations” that opened the door to new imperialistic interventions by right-wing governments).

However, Donbass, according to a Moscow-based activist and expert, “became a place where two ideas clashed (and not only for left-wingers): On one hand, rebellious people have a right to armed resistance and secession from the state. On the other hand, Russia, the main actor, behaved as an imperialistic state. Thus, the key point in question was how significant Russia’s role was and whether the Donbass

¹⁰² Such as Colta or Snob.

¹⁰³ Interview with an ex-Left Front activist.

¹⁰⁴ Interview with a 17-years-old male Revolutionary Workers’ Party activist.

¹⁰⁵ <https://rusplt.ru/society/kogda-lyudi-kotoryih-tyi-schitaesh-tovarischami-govoryat-cto-tyi--vatnik-12354.html>

¹⁰⁶ <http://leftfront.ultimatum.su/vojna-vojne-edinstvennoe-reshenie-sotsializm-rezolyutsiya-iv-sezda-levogo-fronta-23-avgusta-2014-g/>

population was a really independent actor. Some thought that Russia was an aggressor and believed that there were no separatists in Donbass, only “trash” and “lowlifes” eager for gain and easy money. Others, who supported the events in Donbass, denied any Russia’s involvement and said that Russia had just offered some help at some point, but otherwise the Donbass population self-organised. Those people were very much inspired by the events in Donbass. For once, there was a real left uprising, with left ideas and criticism of the oligarchs who had subjugated Donbass. They saw the events as a revolution with social slogans. Some even went to the LNR or DNR to support them /militarily-Authors/ – some for a week, others for good.”¹⁰⁷

The organisations that follow Soviet traditions, such as ROT Front or the United Communist Party, typically use tough rhetoric about the Ukrainian authorities (“Nazi coup”, etc.), but do not directly support the Russian involvement. The “new left” and Ukrainian left organisations friendly to them usually belong to the anti-war, “against all parties” camp.

The organisations that have been actively supporting armed opposition to the official Ukrainian authorities in Donbass constitute a separate category and include the Union of Communist Youth and Eduard Limonov’s “Other Russia”.

The rifts related to the “Ukrainian issue” have spotlighted all the long-standing disagreements that seemed rather abstract until 2014. The political culture of the “non-systemic” left groups also played an important role in the rifts. As ideological organisations, they put emphasis on principled political statements and clear political assessment of the foreign policy. Therefore similar external events may lead to new rifts and splits in the “non-systemic” left wing while they remain generally rather unsuccessful in domestic social and political life.

SELF-ASSESSMENT OF THE MOVEMENT’S POTENTIAL, ATTEMPTS TO CONSOLIDATE, AND REPRESSION

Since the early 1990s, old “non-systemic” left groups (those that follow Soviet traditions) have been optimistically claiming that, due to economic hardships, most of the people will soon “awaken” and, therefore, the political situation will change (“the rule of the people will be restored” and oligarchs’ property will be nationalised).

Most of the “new” left groups, however, are more pessimistic about their immediate perspectives backing this up with class analysis about the resistance of the bourgeois audience, and call for reaching out to the target audience and self-education.

An expert and activist explained,

... there is a demand for the social agenda, but it does not correlate with the popularity of left groups. People have narrow, short planning horizon. They just want to solve their immediate problems ... People think that defending private interests is legitimate while defending common interests is dangerous. Left activists, however, push them to further escalation. People are not ready for that. This is not their core value, and they do not believe in success. People need to be socialised in activism, have opportunities for communicating with each other, and get some protest experience. The old unionists at least have some previous experience within trade unions while the new young activists have none. Thus the younger members come and go, often with great disappointment: they had huge expectations and no idea about the difficulties and the degree of the government repression.¹⁰⁸

There have been numerous attempts to address the atomisation. Any real opposition to the current authoritarian regime has a common goal of democratisation of political life and political system in Russia, so amid the mass protests of 2011 and 2012 a loose coalition that included almost full political spectrum (liberals, left-wingers, and moderate nationalists) started to form. Its Opposition Coordination Council regularly helped left and liberal activists to organise joint rallies and negotiate rally programmes.

In January 2012, against the backdrop of the mass protests, the Left Forces Forum was held in Izmailovo Hotel in Moscow, and it was the first attempt to unite the “non-systemic” left flank. Around 500 delegates representing various left parties, movements and groups and individual activists participated in the Forum. The fact that the Other Russia (the ex-National Bolshevik Party (NBP)) had been invited to the Forum immediately sparked contention and caused a rift among the Forum participants. Democratic left internationalists urged that the NBP should be removed from the Forum, but their initiative did not pass. Another strong disagreement was about allowing rainbow flags at joint left demonstrations. Some

¹⁰⁷ Interview with a left-wing female activist, Moscow, May 2018.

¹⁰⁸ Interview with a left activist and expert, Moscow, March 2018.

organisations moved to include the LGBT issues in the agenda; however, others (the majority) did not approve the idea.¹⁰⁹ Therefore the crisis and rift in the Forum loomed long before the events in Ukraine.

Initially, many left activists supported the movement For Fair Election and actively participated in demonstrations. The Left Front was increasingly popular, and its leader, Sergei Udaltsov, together with other opposition leaders, met with President Dmitry Medvedev at the Gorki residence. Several Left Front activists were detained for their participation in the march on 6 May 2012; homes of Left Front members in various Russian cities were searched. Many left activists believe that they were the main victims of the Bolotnaya repressions while the liberals “poured the protest down the drain”.

A Bolotnaya activist and then Left Front member said:

During the rallies, liberals just stood on the stage while left-wingers worked on the ground, and so did nationalists, in a more aggressive manner. But the protest was diverted – and it ended up in mere letting the steam off. Alexei Anatolyevich [Navalny] was not ready to advance to the Kremlin. The people who occupied the stage and tried to become the media faces of the Bolotnaya protests wanted all that to go away. They turned their backs on Sergei Udaltsov as he was a rival for the liberal opposition. Those liberals are children of the Bolshevik commissioners who had a certain place in the society. They think that are entitled /to special treatment/, and they think that everyone around them is trash. The liberal *intelligentsia* is more afraid of ordinary people than of the authorities. They are more dangerous than those in power.

However, according to Sergey Davidis, head of the political prisoners support program at the Memorial Human Rights Center, left activists were not the main victims of the Bolotnaya case:

The main victims were various kinds of nationalists ... Of course, Udaltsov, Razvozhayev, Ponomarev, Gaskarov, and several other left activists were prosecuted in the Bolotnaya case, and yet it was one big case where the majority of those sentenced were not left activists.¹¹⁰

On 8 September 2012, the second Left Forces Forum gathered over 50 organisations, and the divisions between the democratic left internationalists and left groups that follow Soviet traditions (left nationalists and “left imperialists”) deepened even further. Democratic socialists offered to distance from the imperialists, but their initiative, once again, did not gain the necessary support. One of the revealing speeches by the “left imperialists” was delivered by the veteran of the post-Soviet left movement, ex-leader of the Labour Russia Victor Anpilov who suggested that the attendees took a closer look at Vladimir Putin who was shifting to the left.

After the second Forum, its Coordination Council (CC) was established. At one of its meetings, the CC attempted to expel the most odious nationalists, the Other Russia, from the Forum. The results of the voting on the motion appeared to be controversial: both democrats and “left imperialists” claimed that they won. Eventually, both the CC and the Forum itself ceased to exist. In October 2013, the Opposition Coordination Council that facilitated cooperation between the left, liberals and nationalists ceased to exist too.

Another attempt to consolidate left groups – this time only anti-authoritarian ones – happened in 2014 in the context of the events in Ukraine. The association included the Committee for a Workers’ International, the Russian Socialist Movement, the Left Socialist Action, and several other organisations and individual activists. They created their joint e-newsletter and tried to cooperate with the liberals who consistently opposed the Kremlin’s domestic and foreign policies. And yet, this project also failed.

Even two anti-war mass demonstrations in Moscow on 15 March and 21 September 2014 that gathered at least 20,000 protesters each did not facilitate the consolidation. Like in 2011 and 2012, all three political “curiae” – liberals, left-wingers, and, to less extent, nationalists – organised both events.

The last mass demonstration that gathered over 50,000 participants of mostly liberal or left-leaning views was the memorial march for Boris Nemtsov, who was killed near the Kremlin, on 1 March 2015. Another attempt to consolidate the left wing was brought about by the old-age pension reform (see below).

The repressions of the left activists continue although they are still not the most persecuted group. On the current Memorial’s list, there are only two left political prisoners, Maxim Smyshlyaev and Alexander Kolchenko, but their prosecution was not directly related to their left views.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ For example, the Autonomous Action, the Committee for a Workers’ International, and the Left Socialist Action.

¹¹⁰ Email interview with Sergey Davidis, February 2019.

¹¹¹ <https://memohrc.org/ru/defendants/smyshlyaev-maksim-nikolaevich>, <https://memohrc.org/ru/defendants/kolchenko-aleksandrleksandrovich>

According to Sergey Davidis, head of the Memorial’s political prisoners support program, several more people are considered “potential victims” by the Memorial (there are signs that their prosecution may be unfounded and politically motivated, but for some reasons the Memorial currently does not have sufficient evidence to recognise them as political prisoners). First of all, those include the 11 co-defendants in the Network case who are mostly anti-fascists. “In all those cases, the correlation between the left views and the prosecution seems to be weak,” said Davidis.¹¹²

THE LEFT-WINGERS AND NAVALNY’S SUPPORTERS: STRUCTURE VS. NETWORK

The relations between the “non-systemic” left wing and Navalny’s supporters are complicated. Both groups actively engage in street protests and promote social agenda. Nevertheless, they might find it difficult to join forces for common protest activities not only because of their ideological divisions, but also due to their different *modus operandi*. Moreover, opposition politics, although it challenges the official politics, works by the same rules. It also has a certain hierarchy, clans, and intrigues. Therefore, the alliance between the left and Navalny is further hampered by the fact that Navalny, with his own media, his Anti-corruption Foundation, volunteers, and ability to mobilise thousands of people all over Russia, is widely acknowledged as the opposition leader while the left are much more marginalised. So Navalny just does not need such alliance.



Photo 8. The Russian Socialist Movement formation in Moscow on 7 November 2017.

“Non-systemic” left groups prefer to appear as a rigid structure. During street protests, they walk in tight rows and columns “belted” around with long banners and carry many flags.

During marches, they instantly show their group unity by collective singing or chanting. Unlike Navalny’s supporters, left-wingers love singing in chorus, which is especially the case of the Left Front – they often bring musical instruments (for example, guitars) to demonstrations.

Left-wing groups often chant numerous slogans they create for each event, for example:

¹¹² Email interview with Sergey Davidis, February 2019. The Memorial’s list of potential victims: <https://memohrc.org/ru/aktualnyy-spisok-potencialnyh-zhertv>

“Class struggle is our life!”; “Fight for rights is the only direction – come join the Workers’ Association!” [in relation to the persecution of the independent trade union “Workers’ Association”]

“Stas and Nastya! We remember and won’t be shushed: capitalists will be crushed!” [the anti-fascist memorial march for Stanislav Markelov and Anastasia Baburova in Moscow on 19 January 2018]

“World Cup or other occasion – we demand our pension” [Kaluga, 1 July 2018]

Navalny’s supporters also create slogans for chanting. But while the left usually chant about themselves and their political programme (“Go, working class, go!”; “Capitalists will be crushed”), Navalny’s supporters use their slogans to engage the public in their activities (“Don’t stand aloof!” “Police and people get along – don’t serve some moron!”; “Support!”).

Left parties seek to unify their public statements. Most of the “systemic” left-wingers prefer to carry unified banners. The activists of such “non-systemic” left groups as the Russian Socialist Movement or the International Marxist Tendency often draw hand-made banners, but sign them with the abbreviation of their party. The protesters who support left ideas sometimes dress in all red or all black (anarchists) for the public events.

The choices of left-wingers are influenced by both present and past structures. That is why the left groups that follow Soviet traditions wear red ribbons, red armbands with the USSR symbols, Young Pioneer red scarves and shirts, and pins of that period (including Octobrist, Young Pioneer or Komsomol). Many left activists insist that those should be genuine items with some personal history attached: “This is an old Komsomol pin ... It belonged to my Grandma. [Buying an old one from a collector] is not the same.”¹¹³

While anarchists and certain left movements reject any party organisation or formal hierarchy, at the street protests, they still resort to some unification and collective structured statements in their banners, placards, and chanting.

Alexei Navalny’s supporters act differently. Being increasingly pressured by the authorities (the pressure on them is much higher than that on left groups), they employ the “network organisation” tactics. They arrive to the public protest location in small groups; the meeting points for leaflets distribution are usually announced in Telegram a few hours before the event. Activists are met by volunteers or campaign office staff. For example, before the General Campaigning Day in November 2017, a Moscow campaign headquarters volunteer raised her phone with a “2018” sticker and showed it to passers-by so that she could be recognised by those arriving to the protest.

During demonstrations, Navalny’s supporters’ formations (if any) look different from those of left groups. Prominent campaign headquarters activists are usually detained in days prior to the scheduled protests, and it affects the organisation: the columns are led by people who are not activists of the headquarters, or leaders constantly change on the march. At the protests, Navalny’s supporters usually do not use large banners to present their messages. Instead, they distribute small promotional items throughout the area where the demonstration takes place. A manager from the Moscow campaign headquarters called it “creating the visual for the event”.

Left groups centralise the delivery of flags and campaign materials to their rallies and pay very much attention to their distribution. Since there are many parties and their membership is low, each of them tries to promote itself and explain its specific agenda on various issues. Navalny’s supporters often design their campaign materials themselves although sometimes the materials might be reviewed by the team. However, they may also just print out the existing templates.

Left activists, mainly due to their organisation and readiness for direct actions, constitute the most steadfast, if not radical, part of the protesters, even at unauthorised Navalny’s demonstrations. For example, on 5 May at the protest rally “He is not our tsar” left activists stayed in the square to the last, until they were taken to the police bus. On 9 September at the demonstration against the old-age pension reform in the Pushkin Square in Moscow, the Left Bloc activists called for blocking the streets, but other protesters did not support them. Thus several young activists picked up sticks from the ground and started throwing them at police busses. Navalny’s supporters, on the contrary, tend to avoid direct actions.

Another important difference between the left and Navalny’s supporters lies in the structure of their party offices. Navalny established his first offices in early 2017 and then started to spread them across Russia. Many activists feel that these offices are not places for political gatherings, but rather community interest clubs.

¹¹³ Interview with a 17-years-old male United Communist Party activist.



Photo 9. The march of the “non-systemic” left in Moscow on 1 May 2018.

In their interviews, Navalny’s volunteers frequently use the word “family”. One of the activists told us that the team at the Moscow headquarters was very friendly, that other activists of the “organisation have become like family to him”, and that “he has never seen such close-knit team before”. At the meetings, activists often play games and joke around. One activist complained that at the Navalny’s headquarters in Moscow she missed hanging out together as they did at the St. Petersburg office where, after campaigning activities, activists would go straight to the bar. The activists of Navalny’s offices in cities V. and C. socialise in a “mad tea party” manner.

Left movements tend to organise theoretical intellectual activities in their offices. The Revolutionary Workers’ Party, Left Bloc, Russian Socialist Movement and International Marxist Tendency activists translate the works of modern Marxists and political articles, or participate in book clubs where they read the works of Marxism-Leninism classics. A left-wing expert noticed that Navalny owed his success to the fact “that he appeals to common sense, rather than ideology, and speaks the language of facts, figures and visible validity while the left speak the doctrinal language.”¹¹⁴

Some of the offices of pro-democracy left organisations also work as common-interest groups. For example, the public space Walls in St. Petersburg, where the Russian Socialist Movement’s and the Revolutionary Workers’ Party’s headquarters are, hosts lectures, seminars and various discussions open to the general public (not only to the parties’ activists). It remains unclear how common the practice of creating such spaces is.

But under certain circumstances, disagreements can go away, partially or almost completely: in smaller cities and towns, Navalny’s offices may be the only places that offer options for pastime activities. Offices of political organisations, in fact, turn into community clubs where activists of different views, including left ones, and other people can have some tea with friends, play a guitar, discuss the political situation, listen to an interesting lecture, or even do their homework. And drinking tea together with friends at a nice place becomes much more important than political preferences.

¹¹⁴ Email interview with a left analyst and activist, April 2019.

“APPROPRIATE” OR “REFORMAT”: TWO STRATEGIES OF THE “NON-SYSTEMIC” LEFT

The “non-systemic” left find it difficult to organise public events of their own due to both external obstruction by the authorities and internal disagreements. For example, the public event organised by the Left Resistance in the residential Maryino District in Moscow on 15 September 2018 gathered less than 50 participants, and the Anti-capitalism march at Oktyabrskoye Polye gathered around 200 activists. “Non-systemic” left-wingers regularly hold two rather massive events: the Left-Wing Forces March on 1 May and the memorial march for Stanislav Markelov and Anastasia Baburova on 19 January.

That is why “non-systemic” left activists often participate in the CPRF’s demonstrations (“It doesn’t matter who applied to the district authorities for the rally approval.”¹¹⁵) even if they do not like the CPRF itself (“The CPRF is an organisation that provides opposition services to the public. So, we attend their demonstrations as our rallies are never authorised.”¹¹⁶).

Under such political circumstances, “non-systemic” left-wingers try to either “appropriate” or “reformat” any political public event organised by the CPRF or Navalny or by anyone else.

They often resort to these tactics at the CPRF’s rallies to present their ideas. If the CPRF does not allow “non-systemic” left activists to march in their own columns holding their banners, they come one by one and hand out their leaflets hoping to draw people into their orbit:

What we come for is ordinary people, not the stage.¹¹⁷

We came to the *Aurora* ship on 7 November to recruit the CPRF’s and Stalinist youths to our side.¹¹⁸

At the same time, the “non-systemic” left wingers draw a clear line between themselves and the CPRF and its leaders. One such “reformatting”, for example, occurred during the anti-pension reform rally in Moscow on 22 September 2018 when the Revolutionary Workers’ Party and the Left Bloc activists were singing “The Internationale” and chanting “Zyuganov retire!” to howl down Zyuganov’s speech. On 7 November 2017 and 2018 in St. Petersburg, the “new left” activists marched in their tight formations together with the CPRF activists, but upon reaching the *Aurora* ship they would orderly leave the event before the start of the rally.

The same tactics is employed by left activists at the events organised by Navalny. We observed how the left-wingers attempted to “reformat” or “appropriate” several of public events held by Navalny’s supporters. They were trying to “convert” those present by handing out their leaflets and promoting “the right social system”. The Revolutionary Workers’ Party activists told us that they managed to recruit several new supporters after Navalny’s demonstration. We recorded several interviews with Left Front activists who distributed their tiny leaflets (“nanoleaflets”) at the pension reform protest held by Navalny’s headquarters on 9 September 2018.

LEFT-WING CAMPAIGN AGAINST THE OLD-AGE PENSION REFORM: HAVE LEFT ACTIVISTS MADE ANY DIFFERENCE?

Protests against the old-age pension reform significantly invigorated the left movement. Left-wingers realised that there was a huge demand for their agenda in the society:

“Our government has helped us greatly – it creates all necessary conditions for the left ideology to be popular.”¹¹⁹

“The relevancy of the left agenda grows as the authorities act more and more arrogantly.”¹²⁰

Left-wing activists told us that they were trying to meet this demand: “We do everything we can.”¹²¹ However, they sounded very disconcerted: “Will the left movement be able to accommodate so many new people? That remains to be seen.”¹²²

¹¹⁵ Interview with a 33-years-old male Left Bloc activist.

¹¹⁶ Interview with a 20-years-old female Revolutionary Workers’ Party activist.

¹¹⁷ Interview with a 28-years-old male ROT Front activist.

¹¹⁸ Interview with a male New Prometheus activist between 18 and 20 years old.

¹¹⁹ Interview with a 25-years-old male Workers’ Platform activist.

¹²⁰ Interview with a 33-years-old male Left Bloc activist.

¹²¹ Interview with a 25-years-old female Revolutionary Workers’ Party activist.

¹²² Interview with a 25-years-old female Revolutionary Workers’ Party activist.

In summer and autumn 2018, people took to the streets to protest against the pension reform in many Russian cities. “Non-systemic” left groups held very few rallies of their own. Between June and late September, we observed 18 rallies: in Moscow, in St. Petersburg, Vologda, Kaluga, and Nizhny Novgorod. The small-scale demonstration in Kaluga on 1 July was organised by the Interregional Trade Union “Workers’ Association” and the Workers’ Platform. Another small-scale demonstration by “non-systemic” left-wingers in Maryino District in Moscow on 15 September gathered less than 50 participants and was unsuccessful.

We documented several attempts by left parties and groups to form a coalition with each other and with the liberals in the context of the campaign against the old-age pension reform.

Protests with a common goal resulted in warmer relationships between “non-systemic” left-wing groups and the CPRF. Some “non-systemic” left organisations gave the CPRF their conditional support. The CPRF, in turn, opened its public events for “non-systemic” activists. Whereas a year ago, in 2017, the CPRF members did not let activists from the “non-systemic” communist groups inside the fences area for the 1 May rally near the Ulitsa 1905 Goda Metro station in Moscow, in 2018 the “non-systemic” left-wingers were allowed not only to participate in the rally on 22 September, but also to hold their flags and banners. A Moscow-based “non-systemic” left activist explained that there was “a thaw in the CPRF’s top management”,¹²³ hence the tolerance on part of the CPRF towards the “non-systemic” left in the context of the campaign against the old-age pension reform.

“Non-systemic” left-wingers have various explanations for this tolerance and temporary coalition: “the CPRF feels its weakness and fewness”;¹²⁴ “the campaign against the old-age pension reform united the entire opposition”;¹²⁵ “apparently, everyone wants to get some publicity over this pension reform”.¹²⁶

During the protest campaign against the old-age pension reform, left groups successfully formed a coalition in St. Petersburg. Their first public event was scheduled for 27 June 2018. The CPRF submitted a request to authorities and received an approval for a rally in Ovsyannikovskiy Garden, but the day before the event the authorisation was withdrawn. Eventually, around 100 activists from various left parties held a “people’s gathering” instead.

After this gathering, the executive committee of the coalition “St. Petersburg against the Raise of the Retirement Age” was created right on the park bench. The parties were elected to the coalition by voting, and almost all St. Petersburg-based “non-systemic” left groups, including the Russian Socialist Movement, the Revolutionary Workers’ Party, the International Marxist Tendency, the United Communist Party, ROT Front, the Russian Communist Workers’ Party, Left-fem, the Left Front, the Left Bloc, and several trade unions, joined. Social democratic faction of the *Yabloko* party also joined the coalition. Ivan Ovsyannikov, the coordinator of the St. Petersburg office of the Russian Socialist Movement, was elected to coordinate the work of the coalition executive committee. The coalition organised mass demonstrations and picketing in summer and autumn 2018.

Navalny’s campaign office in St. Petersburg also announced a rally against the pension reform on 9 September 2018. The “St. Petersburg Against” coalition wanted to join forces with Navalny’s campaign office, but the latter did not want to do it on equal terms so left activists attended the rally as ordinary protesters.

In Nizhny Novgorod, a very unusual coalition was formed. On 26 July 2018, the first demonstration against the old-age pension reform was organised by the CPRF. The youth faction of the local branch of the Revolutionary Workers’ Party was the only “non-systemic” group allowed to participate in the rally. Other “non-systemic” left organisations arrived to the rally in small groups and led their counter-campaign secretly distributing their newspapers and leaflet.

On 28 July 2018, the second rally was organised by the coalition of various liberal and “non-systemic” left organisation, including the *Yabloko* party, the Russian Confederation of Labour, Democratic Nizhny Novgorod, the Social Action, the Revolutionary Workers’ Party, the Workers’ Platform, and the Socialist Action.

The CPRF organised the most massive left demonstrations against the old-age pension reform in Moscow in late July and in early September gathering around 12,000 and 9,000 protesters, respectively. Groups (formations) of “non-systemic” left activists participated in the CPRF’s and libertarians’ rallies. In Moscow, the coalition “People against the Pension Reform” large part of which consisted of “non-systemic” left groups held several demonstrations with up to 2,000 participants each. The pension

¹²³ Interview with a 28-years-old male activist.

¹²⁴ Interview with a 25-years-old male Left Bloc activist.

¹²⁵ Interview with a 26-years-old male activist.

¹²⁶ Interview with a 50-years-old male anarcho-syndicalist.

protests attracted new supporters to the left movement. However, our interviews and observations showed that those people did not care much about who organised the protests. We noticed that one and the same persons with the same banners and slogans came to pension reform protests of various political orientations. These protesters usually regretted that there was no way to hold a larger joint demonstration.

At the September 2018 elections, the CPRF was the main beneficiary of the pension reform protests. This was not so much the result of their active protest campaign as the outcome of the “strategic voting” when citizens disappointed by United Russia voted for the second largest alternative party.

After the law on raising the retirement age was passed in October 2018, the protests stopped as there were no more real campaign goals left. The protests could not halt the reform, and the mechanisms for solving this problem were exhausted. The protests against the old-age pension reform brought new people to the left movements: some of them lost interest after the bill was adopted; others, the smaller part, stayed in the left organisations.

The struggle against the pension reform was an example of successful cooperation between “systemic” and “non-systemic” left organisations and independent trade unions which initiated the campaign by collecting two million signatures under the petition against the reform. However, the campaign revealed the weakness of the left groups, even joined together, – there were more people who wanted to join the protests than the left groups or the trade unions could “process”. Cautiousness of the independent unions, electoral goals of the “systemic” left parties and organisational deficiencies of the “non-systemic” left groups prevented them from holding a more effective campaign.

IV. CONCLUSION

Our analysis has showed that the values and ideology of the CPRF and some of the “non-systemic” left groups in Russia in fact do not belong to the classical left wing with its values of democracy and internationalism. Rather they are right-wing patriotic organisations behind red flags. The “systemic” left parties are not independent political actors and operate within the niches assigned to them. The “non-systemic” left groups have been weakened by the sustainability of the existing regime that skilfully uses social agenda in its propaganda and has attracted a significant part of the left-leaning electorate. Other reasons for their weakness include political repressions and the existence of “systemic” parties that imitate the left movement.

Highly atomized and divided, engaged in rivalries and conflicts with each other and with the CPRF, and cut off from any legal political activities by the authorities, the “non-systemic” left organisations (comprised mostly by young people under 30) are used to operate in small groups. Some of the left organisations look more like common-interest groups, football fan groups, subcultural gatherings or intellectual clubs, rather than political movements. However, the Russian Socialist Movement, the Revolutionary Workers’ Party and the Socialist Alternative keep in touch with trade unions and make efforts to defend the rights of hired employees and minorities. During the protests against the old-age pension reform, “non-systemic” left parties tried to overcome their atomisation, take the lead on Navalny’s and the CPRF’s agendas, and form coalitions to continue struggle, but still were unable to make a significant difference.

Left beliefs and ideals of social equality and paternalistic welfare state remain prevalent in Russia. Therefore, left-wing groups still have great potential. But to realise it, the left movement will need to reinvent itself. They need to offer workers and other groups focused on social agenda an action plan that would resonate with them and reflect their current interests and aspirations. In Part Two of this report, we will analyse what workers we interviewed think about these processes.