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Examining Variations in the Kremlin's Repression of Non-Systemic Political Opposition Parties Under the Putin Regime

Abstract

What factors illustrate the differences in how the Kremlin under President Vladimir Putin has responded to non-systemic political opposition groups in Russia? While existing literature on opposition theory is expansive, more research concerning contemporary Russian opposition forces is necessary. In particular, it is useful to zoom in on specific opposition parties within Russia, as opposed to the customary method of using countries holistically as cases (Kubát 2010; Helms 2023; Eckstein 1967; Taylor 1988). As such, my research seeks to demonstrate the value of appropriate theoretical frameworks to understand and measure individual opposition parties' actions rather than the trajectory of Russia's non-systemic opposition as a whole.

The content of my research is split into two sections. First, there is no academic database or repository of what non-systemic opposition parties exist under the Putin regime, so one must be created to better contextualize this research. Then, the focus can shift toward exploring the variations in the Kremlin's responses to said parties. This allows for an answer to the question; what factors cause the Putin regime to repress some movements more remarkably than others?

Primary sources in both Western media, Russian media, and opposition media will be compiled for several non-systemic opposition parties in Russia as case studies. Through a qualitative examination of these cases, the realities of what factors have played the largest role in the Kremlin's reactions toward different non-systemic opposition parties during the Putin regime will be observed.

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**Examining Variations in the Kremlin's Repression of Non-Systemic Political Opposition
Parties Under the Putin Regime**

A Thesis Submitted to
Faculty of the Undergraduate School of International Studies
and Faculty of the Honors Program
for Distinction in a Bachelor of Arts in International Studies

Josef Korbel School of International Studies

by

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Denver, Colorado

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Abstract

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Introduction

The recent death of prevalent opposition leader Alexei Navalny once again propelled the topic of Russian political opposition into the international spotlight. Western media reacted by posing numerous questions about the state of Russian political opposition. For instance, there have been queries regarding Navalny's impact (Chappell 2024), the safety of filling voids in opposition leadership like the one left by him (Rainsford 2024a), what opposition actors remain (Papachristou 2024), and even the future viability of Russian opposition as a concept (Burrows 2024). As President Vladimir Putin's regime continues into its fifth term, immense scrutiny of the opposition shows no sign of waning.

However, it is imperative to understand how and why Russian opposition has evolved before a meaningful analysis of its future can ensue. Unfortunately, existing literature is convoluted. Within the chronology of Putin's regime, my research aims to address two items. First, what meaningful non-systemic opposition parties have emerged in Putin's Russia? Surprisingly, such a typology does not already exist, excluding informal online platforms such as Wikipedia. A brief, organized consolidation of this information is therefore essential. Second, what factors explain the notable differences in how the Kremlin responds to the actions of said opposition parties? In order to examine this phenomenon, a qualitative analysis of the extent to which different factors resulted in varying reactions by the Kremlin will be implemented via case studies.

This deviates from how opposition movements are typically measured based on electoral success. This is due to the political situation of contemporary Russia. In an authoritarian regime with performative democracy, even the most ardent opposition movements do not experience

meaningful electoral success. For instance, Navalny was often regarded as the most visible Russian opposition leader of the Putin era during his lifetime, yet never received widespread, measurable domestic support. The Levada Center, a Russian non-governmental research organization known for its objective polling of Russian citizens (Levada Staff n.d.), reported that Navalny's popularity within Russia peaked at only 20% in September 2020 (Dumoulin 2024). It sank as low as 9% about a year before his death (Levada Staff 2023). President Vladimir Putin's approval rating, on the other hand, consistently fluctuated around 65-85% (Levada Staff n.d.) over the same period of time.

These hardships with public perception are not unique to the opposition party that Navalny was affiliated with. Numerous factors associated with non-systemic opposition parties may explain the variance in the Kremlin's responses and subsequent levels of repression. This can include the competency of a party's leaders, protests, and official party/candidate registration efforts. While there are no universal or standard methods of analysis for the non-systemic opposition in particular, there are some existing ideas on what factors prove the most successful for non-systemic opposition parties. These factors will be examined and placed within the broader context of my findings.

Literature Review

While the term “opposition” is frequently used in the fields of comparative politics and international relations, theoretical analysis of the topic saw relatively limited expansion in the decades immediately following its inception in the mid-20th century. One of the few instances of a theoretical re-examination came from scholar Jean Blondel near the turn of the millennium. Blondel made several key insights highlighting the intrinsic difficulty of systematizing the study of political opposition. Since Blondel’s work, there has been a rapid expansion of literature seeking to re-examine or build upon the foundational texts of political opposition. Before the field’s evolution that began in the 1990s can be explored, it is important to first understand the core texts.

Foundational Texts - Robert Dahl

Examination of the existing academic literature surrounding political opposition yielded three primary foundational texts. The most renowned of these was Robert Dahl’s 1966 landmark work on political opposition groups entitled “Political Opposition in Western Democracies” (Taylor 1988). Dahl aimed to conceptualize political opposition in multiple broad frameworks, such as creating a breakdown of the different ways that democratic opposition groups in legislative bodies differ from one another (Eckstein 1967). However, Dahl operated extensively in the democratic world. Even for cases of opposition in democratic systems, though, he concluded that there is “no single prevailing pattern” for how these groups tend to behave (Dahl 1966). Dahl enumerated six primary ways that opposition parties can differ, one being their core strategies.

He also asserted that opposition strategies are infinite and defy “tidy classification” (Dahl 1966). Nevertheless, Dahl is the first scholar who sought to lay the groundwork for categorizing opposition strategies. Furthermore, Dahl asked - since there is no discernible pattern or playbook for opposition behavior - if there is at least a predominant factor that “causes the variations in [opposition] patterns from one country to another” (Dahl 1966). Even though his cases were democratic countries, he confidently stated that the answer to that question was no. Generally speaking, opposition literature explicitly about authoritarian regimes would not appear until much later.

Foundational Texts - Ionescu and de Madariaga, *Government & Opposition*

Political scientists Ghita Ionescu and Isabel de Madariaga’s 1968 publication was another central text concerning the theoretical construction of political opposition. These scholars covered similar subject matter as Dahl, diving more or less exclusively into the democratic and parliamentary worlds of the United States and Western Europe. Despite this, they deftly unpacked theoretical groundings of political opposition, addressing how it is frequently viewed within larger paradigms:

“In political science, it is included in the study of power, government parliaments, parties; in sociology under such headings as conflict or integration; and in history, it appears as the study of political institutions, rebellions, risings, or revolutions. In other words, if opposition has not been treated separately from these wider subjects, it is because it could not be separated from them” (Ionescu and de Madariaga 1968).

Additionally, the academic journal *Government and Opposition* was created in 1965 and is still active today. It is the only journal of its kind. Scholar Leonard Schapiro, writing in the

inaugural issue of *Government and Opposition*, posited something quite similar to Ionescu and de Madariaga's findings when discussing the inception of the journal. He observed that "The extraordinary neglect of opposition, and particularly of unsuccessful opposition, both by historians and by political scientists justifies such a forum of study" (Schapiro 1965).

Foundational Texts - Leonard Schapiro

The final piece of classic literature that my research examined was Leonard Schapiro's 1972 publication concerning political opposition in one-party states, published in association with the journal *Government and Opposition*. It was one of the earliest instances of non-democratic opposition being investigated (Brack and Weinblum 2008). Similar to Dahl's classification of the six ways that democratic opposition groups may differ from one another, Schapiro enumerated five categories of communist opposition groups' actions. These categories were all-out rejection, power struggle, a-political dissent, interest group activity, and pragmatic dissent, with the last category being the most effective. This is because pragmatic dissent is often not ideological in nature, but rather, is a matter of efficiency and being free from "party interference and from doctrinal inhibitions." In other words, it "demands rationality, not freedom or legality" (Schapiro 1972).

Overall, while Schapiro's work provided an effective definition and categorization of various opposition types in communist states, a clear analytic methodology did not seem to be included. In essence, Schapiro's writing did not shed light on a potential universal methodology for analyzing political opposition in a variety of models, let alone in communist systems. Rather, as observed in Schapiro's work and others of the time, analytic methods were often qualitative, and their application was left to the individual scholars examining their respective cases.

Scholarly Evolution of Political Opposition

Toward the end of the 20th century, the overall stagnation of new theoretical literature about political opposition ceased. The first major example was via scholar Jean Blondel in 1997, who laid out the inherent difficulty of systematizing the formalized study of political opposition. Blondel asserted that the character of the opposition is inherently intertwined with that of its government. This makes categorizing opposition types difficult but necessary in order to be meaningfully studied. Blondel appeared to clarify and update the language used and frameworks created by previous scholars rather than pioneering new methods. Blondel, like the political opposition scholars who preceded her, also concluded that, “The factors which account for the nature and character of opposition are so numerous [...] that all that can be done is to suggest some trends and possible evolution” (Blondel 1997).

One of the four types of opposition situations that Blondel presented was opposition under authoritarian systems, which most closely relates to the political landscape of modern-day Russia. Within this situation, she described optimistic and pessimistic scenarios, noting that pessimistic ones were much more realistic. This is primarily because “While the opposition may have support among some groups, the national leader, too, often enjoys substantial popularity in the country at large, a popularity which may be boosted if the leader undertakes successful foreign interventions or even merely adopts postures designed to foster nationalistic feelings among the population” (Blondel 1997). It does not matter if these initiatives are actually successful, so long as they appear to be in the best interest of the citizenry. What’s more, the passage of time tends to favor the regime over opposition groups. New generations come to accept the regime as valid and normal, (or, as Blondel puts it, “natural”), as that is the only

regime they have known. This is a startlingly accurate depiction of Russia under the Putin regime and lends itself as useful context for understanding the country's current environment for political opposition. However, as will be observed, academic research on opposition was often historically case study-heavy and did not zoom in or out beyond geographical regions or certain political systems. This made it difficult during my research to track analytic generalizations that could be applied universally within the field.

While some scholars such as Blondel have succinctly “checked in” on political opposition theory over the decades, many works have indeed been “case studies lacking theoretical inference and Dahl and Ionescu’s works remain the benchmark in comparative studies on the subject,” according to Nathalie Brack and Sharon Weinblum’s 2008 article designed to take stock of already existing theory (Brack and Weinblum 2008). Notably, these authors also concluded during their extensive review of opposition literature that historical attempts to define opposition have been nebulous at best. Furthermore, upon examining Dahl’s and other’s works, they asserted that the restrictive nature of these classical theorizations had generated unintended consequences for contemporary opposition scholarship. In particular, it caused scholars to utilize a limited scope of actors in their case studies of political opposition; for instance, the rejection of hybrid regimes as cases (until relatively recently). What’s more, these classical theorizations also “narrowed the scope of studies, assuming that the first (and only) locus of opposition would be the parliament” (Brack and Weinblum 2008). Similarly, scholar Ludger Helms wrote in 2023 that “Political opposition has long been one of the most dramatically understudied elements of real-world politics in contemporary democratic and authoritarian regimes” (Helms 2023). However, Helms asserted that the domain has recently begun to shift toward more authoritarian

and hybrid regime case studies. This observation was a deviation from the long-time precedent set by Dahl and others who predominantly focused on minority-majority relations within legislative and parliamentary arenas between formal political organizations in established Western democratic institutions (Velikaya 2019).

Competitive Authoritarianism and Other Concepts

Recent scholarship has demonstrated this authoritarian/hybrid regime shift largely through the introduction of the concept of competitive authoritarianism. Political scientists Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way have written extensively on the topic. They argue that democratic institutions can, in fact, exist under competitive authoritarianism. However, incumbents violate the rules and norms of democracy so severely that electoral competition is technically real but is functionally broken and unfair (Levitsky and Way 2020). In other words, the regime “fails to meet conventional minimum standards for democracy” (Levitsky and Way 2002). There is no room for opposition that is meaningful or can accomplish what it is ultimately striving for: regime change. A plethora of examples throughout history fit this framework, including Putin’s Russia.

Additionally, the concepts of electoral authoritarianism and liberalized autocracy both reflect positions similar to competitive authoritarianism. Electoral authoritarianism, for its part, characterizes regimes that “present an illusion of multi-party democracy at the local and national levels while effectively stripping elections of efficacy” (Tlemçani 2007). Liberalized autocracy, described as a “trademark mixture of guided pluralism, controlled elections, and selective repression” (Brumberg 2002), essentially presents the same concept but with different vernacular.

The Fundamentals of Non-Systemic Opposition

However, it is possible to get even more precise when examining the current political landscape of contemporary Russia. There has been a significant development frequently applied to Russian political opposition in particular: the concept of systemic vs. non-systemic opposition. This concept acts as the foundation for my research. Systemic opposition includes political parties that are allowed to participate in the established political system, which means they have met the rigorous and intentionally complicated requirements of registering as an official party in Russia (G. Golosov 2011). However, systemic opposition is widely understood by the political institutions of Russia as ultimately being loyal to Putin and his allies. They are simply performative in order to give voters the illusion of alternatives to Putin's ruling party United Russia, such as the Communist Party, Liberal Democratic Party of Russia, Just Russia, and New People Party (Kramer 2021; Blackburn 2016; Dollbaum and Kim 2024).

This government control over systemic opposition was further illuminated by Russian political scientist Rostislav Turovksy's argument that the Kremlin purposefully manufactures political uncertainty to maintain control over the systemic opposition. This practice makes the opposition more cautious and less likely to act out of line, as it does not know if or how it will be punished for its actions. As a result, the Kremlin has achieved a balance of power with the systemic opposition that works in the Kremlin's favor. The strategy of the systemic opposition is, therefore, reduced to "playing by the rules whilst at the same time bargaining for short-term profits" (Ross 2015). Turovsky further elaborated on this dilemma; on the one hand, harshly criticizing or challenging the regime gains more votes but creates the obvious risk of punishment and the blockading of further political progress. On the other hand, being loyal to the regime

ensures being included in the “distribution of spoils,” but reflects poorly in the polls (Ross 2015). Striking a balance is the unfortunate reality of the parties that comprise the systemic opposition in contemporary politics under the Putin regime.

Conversely, non-systemic opposition involves genuine opposition movements that have been intentionally excluded from the political sphere. While the systemic opposition contains many nuances regarding its balance against the regime to maintain survival, the non-systemic opposition is more straightforward in this regard. They often actively call for the removal of Putin and his allies from positions of power. On the off-chance that they are allowed to participate in elections, their efforts are greatly restricted by the Kremlin through both official and extrajudicial means (Duncan 2017). Scholar Ora John Reuter, after completing a Russian case study on political opposition in autocracies, posited that “Opposition voters are more likely to feel disaffected from the state and, as a result, feel less moral obligation to vote” (Reuter 2021). In sum, despite the media attention that Russian non-systemic opposition groups may receive, they still perform immensely poorly in Russian elections under the Putin regime. As will be discussed, poor portrayal by state media and the popularity of the ruling party are also factors.

The only substantial collection of scholarly articles delving into the topic appears to be the aptly titled *Systemic and Non-systemic Opposition in the Russian Federation*, a compilation of academic works amassed by scholar Cameron Ross in 2015. In the publication’s introduction, Ross described the amassing of his colleagues’ research as a “detailed account of the relations between the Russian regime and the systemic and non-systemic opposition, at both the national and regional levels” (Ross 2015). Altogether, this publication critically examined systemic and non-systemic opposition within the broader protest developments of the day, rather than studying

the distinct actions of specific opposition parties and how these actions differ from one another, as my research sought to examine. They tended to inspect the non-systemic opposition in Russia holistically, examining the major civil unrest that Russia experienced in the early 2010s. They deftly placed the Duma election protests of 2011 and beyond into the broader context of what has generated and defined Russia's opposition landscape. For my research, though, these writings took on more of a contextual role and provided vital historical background on the holistic evolution of the non-systemic opposition throughout the Putin regime.

Many experts on political opposition in international relations have commended the differentiation between systemic and non-systemic opposition. This is primarily because it enables the inclusion of “weakly institutionalized opposition, non-systemic parties, and the social base of opposition in Russia” (Velikaya 2019), which are all uniquely distinct and deserving of individual scrutiny. Groups that are unable to establish an official foothold in the political sphere but still strive for political change, usually in the context of an authoritarian/hybrid/autocratic regime, now have a categorization.

Shortcomings of Non-Systemic Opposition

However, there is a critique of this approach. Cameron Ross, for instance, asserted that all political parties in the Russian Duma that are not United Russia count as systemic opposition (Ross 2015). As such, there are concerns about the fluidity of some opposition figures and parties and what box they firmly fit in. Claims like Ross' can be problematic because the boundaries of who is allowed to officially partake in Russia's political landscape shift over time (Duncan 2017). Alexei Navalny, for example, was granted the ability to run in some elections but barred from others (and his party was never officially registered, in a functional sense). This

phenomenon can be observed across various non-systemic Russian opposition movements, political parties, and their leaders. This presents difficulty in deciphering whether certain opposition groups should be labeled as non-systemic.

Overall, though, the concept's implementation appears to be generally accepted, as much modern literature has utilized systemic and non-systemic opposition to some degree when investigating political opposition in contemporary Russia (Semenov 2021; Nadskakula-Kaczmarczyk 2017; Garces De Los Fayos et al. 2020; Glazunova 2022a). However, the existing literature has still tended to use Russia as a whole as a case study, using various political flashpoints throughout time as direction for their research, rather than focusing on specific opposition parties within Russia.

Next Steps

Ultimately, my review of existing scholarly literature indicates that the classification of opposition types and opposition behavior is present, but specific methods of analysis appear lacking, especially concerning the non-systemic opposition. As such, the area that the existing literature does not adequately address is what methods to use when investigating the different factors or tactics that play a role in the non-systemic opposition parties' interactions with the Kremlin (or opposition in general, for that matter). Whether it is studying political opposition more broadly (Helms 2023) or expressly within Russia (Lyytikainen 2014), this has led scholars to qualitatively study their cases with self-created analytic strategies (Gel'man 2005). The most relevant academic studies adjacent to my research are some claims as to what tactics used by Russian opposition groups seem most effective in the Putin era, as described below.

What limited research has gone into examining specific factors of the non-systemic opposition movements in Russia have suggested that strong multimedia prowess enables opposition movements to experience enhanced visibility (Nadskakuła-Kaczmarczyk 2017; Glazunova 2022b; 2020b; 2020a). Also discussed in recent literature were factors such as simple coordination competency and leadership skills. These can play a significant role in increasing the effectiveness of opposition parties (Armstrong, Reuter, and Robertson 2020). I also investigated works delving into the success factors of social movements more generally. That literature in particular backed the notion that both media presence and leadership were indeed vital characteristics of opposition movements (Crutchfield 2018; Bleoaja 2023). However, the different factors that explain the differences in the Kremlin's responses to said movements have yet to be examined.

Analytic Framework

Countries as a whole have been the default cases for studying opposition politics in the academic world. It is quite intriguing that Russia, as a whole, has only been used as a case without honing in on the nuances between specific parties within the non-systemic opposition. Additionally, existing sources have neither universally agreed nor disagreed as to what factors explain the variations in the Kremlin's responses to non-systemic opposition movements. Zooming in on the specific non-systemic opposition movements, groups, or parties within a country and critically examining them is seemingly novel.

The closest that existing literature has come to examining this topic was observing what specific factors seem to be most successful for Russian non-systemic opposition holistically. Instead, my research assesses specific non-systemic political opposition parties in Russia as cases. This is because I intend to explain what factors cause the Kremlin's relationship and treatment of some political opposition parties to be different from that of others. My research does not, however, aim to measure "effectiveness" or "success" within either the Russian opposition as a whole or within particular parties.

My hypothesis, however, utilizes these holistic observations as a starting point. I suspect that the Kremlin perceives leadership competency as a key threat from non-systemic opposition parties and, therefore, reacts the most harshly to this factor as opposed to others. As for other factors to potentially scrutinize, I turn again to the more general literature on what elements make social movements successful. Two of the most central factors mentioned were organizational tactics and the presence of external supporters (O'Regan and Rivers 2019; Polletta and Ganz 2014). In turn, this framework aims to contribute to existing literature by shedding

light on what factors specific parties have engaged with that garnered specific reactions from Putin's regime.

Analysis

This research seeks to examine what factors would explain the differences in how the Kremlin responds to (or represses) non-systemic opposition groups. Therefore, the analysis of cases involves qualitative analysis that enables the isolation of independent variables to see how they impact the dependent variable. These independent variables (or "factors") are leadership competency, protests, and official registration efforts, with my hypothesis placing leadership competency as the most pertinent factor. The dependent variable (DV) is the overall level of repression against the party in question. The cases in my research are the select non-systemic opposition parties that I researched.

A formal procedure was followed for each case. First, background information on the origin and platform of the party were examined. Next, each independent variable (IV) was operationalized and qualitatively analyzed within the context of that specific party. This process was repeated for all three IVs for all three cases. The dependent variable was universal across cases. It was the Kremlin's level of repression. Repression could take many forms and was, therefore, operationalized by examining its subjective, qualitative severity. Essentially, what my research aims to decipher is: to what extent did the party (or case) exhibit each IV, and how significant was subsequent repression from the Kremlin in response?

Due to a lack of existing analytic methodology for my particular research framework, coding for both the IV and DV for all cases was done relative to one another, as a baseline does not currently exist. My cases were also compared this way due to a lack of sufficient information

about other non-systemic opposition parties that would have enabled the inclusion of more cases. Coding levels were either “low,” “medium,” or “high.” In practice, what this signified for the IV was the scale of its presence. A designation of “low” meant that the IV’s presence was minimal or simply less than that of the other cases. A designation of “medium” meant that its presence was typical when compared with the other cases. In other words, it was average but still noteworthy. “High” meant that the IV’s presence was significantly prominent when compared to the other cases. Coding of the DV followed a similar pattern. “Low” meant that the Kremlin’s repression of the group in question was minimal, “medium” meant its repression was typical when compared to the other cases, and so on. The goal of this coding was to yield patterns. If coding for an IV was consistently low, medium, or high across cases, then that would illustrate a clear picture of what IVs caused the Kremlin to repress the cases more or less significantly.

My cases were analyzed qualitatively utilizing the case-based method of process tracing. This was done so that the relationship between various political opposition factors and the Kremlin’s response could be better understood. Essentially, I examined non-numerical data to identify new explanatory phenomena for my cases. This data is further defined in the Data Sources section of my research. Below are further details of each IV.

Leadership Competency

Does the party have a strong, consistent vision? How qualified are its leaders? How effective is their messaging and collaboration, both within their group and concerning the broader world of Russian politics? These are all ways that leadership competency may be operationalized. Basically, how effective are they at enabling others to join them to achieve their goals under very uncertain conditions (Polletta and Ganz 2014)? As one scholar surmised,

leadership presence is an imperative factor dictating the function of non-systemic opposition parties in Russia. The non-systemic opposition, which is already meticulously weakened by the Kremlin, “lacks strong roots in civil society and [therefore] relies mainly on politically strong individuals” (Marocchi 2016).

Protests

Initial investigations into existing literature illustrated that there are primarily two components of organizational tactics observed in opposition movements. The first involves protests, including components such as size and scope. Protests are a common (albeit risky) tool that organizations which are adverse to the Putin regime and the broader political landscape of Russia utilize. Protests, in the context of my research, signify physical gatherings of people to demonstrate against the behavior of Putin and his regime. These protests can be a mix of party members and non-affiliates, but are organized or endorsed by the parties in question. The second component of organizational tactics was attempts to officially register and enter the systemic sphere of Russian politics. These two components had sufficient information available that I investigated them separately. And, in practice, they manifest as two distinct actions that the non-systemic opposition can take. As such, they are two separate IVs for my research.

Official Registration Efforts

The second component of the broader theme of organizational tactics is when non-systemic opposition parties make attempts to formally register or otherwise become involved in the officially sanctioned sphere of Russian politics. Existing literature has defined this idea as how often (and also when) they were able to secure spots on ballots, if at all. Since non-systemic opposition by definition is inherently excluded from sanctioned Russian politics,

the consistency and immediacy of the attempts made to break through into the systemic side of politics were examined. Candidate registration and party registration both fall under this IV.

Considered but not Used: External Support

External support can be defined as a combination of monetary, moral, and media backing. This support would come from actors outside the country of operation of the opposition movement in question. My strategy of operationalizing this IV within the scope of Russian non-systemic opposition could manifest itself as a measurement of the external attention that different opposition parties have received. The size and scope of these actions and how they compare to other cases would further solidify the operationalization of this IV.

In practice, it proved immensely difficult to pinpoint detailed reporting that gave insight into this potential IV. It was simply under-represented in my findings and, therefore, was deemed unfeasible to implement. For instance, due to the Yabloko party's proximity to both the systemic and non-systemic sides of Russian politics, most support was domestic rather than external. This support established itself primarily due to Yabloko often being the only significant officially registered non-systemic opposition party in Russia. Therefore, many opposition sympathizers, or those simply seeking to cast a protest vote against the current political system, have voted for the Yabloko ticket in the past (Light 2021).

Considered but not Used: Media Outreach

Media outreach can take many forms, especially concerning internet utilization. Since the Kremlin tends to restrict, censor, or outright block domestic access to many social networks (Fischer 2022), websites critical of the government (Agence France-Presse 2020), and news outlets (Milmo 2022), this could be an especially meaningful - although limited - tactic for the

opposition. This pattern of media suppression has only exacerbated itself since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 (Editors of The Moscow Times 2022), but internet censorship efforts have been ongoing under the Putin regime for quite some time (Human Rights Watch Staff 2020; Belovodyev et al. 2023).

In practice, it was challenging to gain sufficient information to properly operationalize this potential IV. Upon further examination, especially since the invasion of Ukraine, an iron curtain of internet accessibility seemed to have been implemented by the Kremlin. The only digital media presence I was often able to locate of non-systemic opposition parties was their English-facing media, which is not relevant for domestic Russians. On the flip side, I could not gain insight into what domestic Russians see online from their point of view. My online accessibility of domestic Russian media on political opposition topics, if a meaningful amount is even still around, was essentially non-existent. This was inhibitory to the implementation of media outreach as an IV.

Physical media instead of digital media would be the logical alternative to measure this IV, but that would require an insight into the “boots on the ground” opposition in Russia for maximum effectiveness. Of course, this is not feasible, due to the mind-boggling array of content that would need examining, assuming I could even locate it. The only form of media outreach left, then, would be Western reporting on non-systemic parties’ media outreach. What little information my research uncovered on the topic discussed censorship of the non-systemic opposition in a broad sense, which is a different topic altogether.

Data Considerations

Data Sources

As has been noted, no scholarly datasets have been amassed that discuss what non-systemic political opposition parties have operated in Russia in the first place. The first component of my research is an attempt at remedying this. Additionally, no formalized methods exist that examine different factors or tactics that the non-systemic opposition may induce or experience. Only upon completion of collecting and analyzing the data necessary to organize and centralize this information may the investigation of my actual research query ensue. This is the second component of my research.

Due to available resources, time, and the geopolitical considerations of conducting in-person research, the foundation of my sourcing is online media. This consists of secondary sources from Western news outlets, as well as scholarly books and articles. Primary sources such as Russian state media and reporting from the opposition parties themselves are included, contingent upon online accessibility conditions.

Data Collection

Russia's censoring of domestic access to online resources has already been discussed. However, this extends to international audiences, too. Not only does the Kremlin block information coming in, it also blocks information going out. Russia's media apparatus is widely known to censor all forms of opposition media (Arutunyan 2009; Schimpfoss and Yablokov 2014; Pietiläinen and Strovsky 2010), which restricts not only domestic but international

awareness of these topics. It is therefore imperative to make the most of the information available.

As for case selection, though, this censorship greatly hindered my research. Does Russia contain opposition movements that the West does not know about? Is there information about interactions between Russia and its political opposition that have been shielded from Western eyes? It would likely surprise very few scholars if either (or both) of those contentions were true.

As a result, case selection is unfortunately bound to those opposition parties with which the most information is available. Therefore, due to limitations of information availability, the scope of my research includes the following non-systemic opposition parties: The Russian United Democratic Party Yabloko, People's Freedom Party (PARNAS), and Russia of the Future (formerly known as the People's Alliance and the Progress Party).

It is difficult to pinpoint specific examples of repression in many instances. However, that does not mean that they are not present in the first place. As such, specific examples of repression are occasionally used throughout my research to represent broader trends in the Kremlin's repression. This is due to the information availability that exists for an external researcher primarily investigating internet sources. Since my research synthesized all available media sources at my disposal, it would not be shocking if there are major pieces of the puzzle missing simply due to a lack of documentation of such information in the Western world.

Case 1: The Russian United Democratic Party, or Yabloko

A Brief Overview

Of all the cases, Yabloko has the most extensive history, dating back to the early 1990s. It was formed as part of an electoral bloc in 1993 (Garces De Los Fayos et al. 2020), and became its own party in 2001 (Yabloko Staff n.d.). The party has several factions, including those that focus on the environment, youth outreach, human rights, and women's and gender rights. It has been occasionally labeled a centrist party (Carroll 2017) although it is most often dubbed liberal or left-wing (Politkovskaya 2009; Russian Election Monitor Staff 2024). Interestingly, Yabloko has shifted between the systemic and non-systemic oppositional spheres over the years, making it complicated - yet interesting - to examine within the broader context of contemporary Russian politics. For instance, after the further restriction of Kremlin electoral legislation in 2011, only seven registered parties remained. Yabloko was one of these parties, yet it faced a steep 150,000-signatory requirement to run in elections, which it miraculously achieved. More broadly, due to its history of being able to obtain systemic legitimacy in Russian politics, it has obtained more votes in elections than other non-systemic opposition parties, which are regularly barred from participating in elections in the first place.

Following the 2011 Duma elections, Yabloko "received enough votes (over 3%) to be able to receive public financing and free airtime in the next election" (Nichol 2011). This legal status set it apart from other opposition parties, especially non-systemic ones. However, in 2016 it failed to receive this 3% threshold, and the state funding subsequently disappeared. Nevertheless, the fact that this funding was received at some point in its history points to its legitimacy as an opposition group while also blurring the lines between systemic and

non-systemic opposition. Regardless of when and for how long it obtained this state funding, it constantly faces efforts by the Kremlin aimed at inhibiting the party from nominating candidates, efficiently organizing, and appearing on the ballot. In other words, it has faced difficulties attempting to participate in elections both before, during, and after this period of legal recognition as a systemic party (RFE/RL Staff 2010a; BBC Staff 2012a; Kotyonochkina 2024).

It should also be clarified that “parties which hold seats in the Duma or receive 3% of the votes in elections to the State Duma are exempt from gathering signatures” (Ross 2018). In effect, this legal status did not interfere with whether Yabloko was an officially registered party; it merely made it easier to appear on the ballot, as a signatory requirement was not necessary. In a political climate where opposition groups’ registration efforts are constantly undermined under questionable circumstances, this prized legal status was an immense aid for the party. As soon as this special legal status disappeared, it immediately faced decreased success rates of securing candidates on ballots at all election levels. For instance, “In 2016 the parties which did not need to collect signatures were able to register almost all of their candidates.” But, a short year later, “Yabloko was only able to register 42 of its 65 candidates,” whereas Putin’s ruling party United Russia was able to register 443 of its 445 candidates (Ross 2018).

The only other significant opposition party that has been able to gain official registration under Putin’s regime was PARNAS (next case), which it did not hold for as long as Yabloko. Yabloko, by comparison, has maintained its official registration since the early 2000s. Therefore, regardless of its legal status or discourse over its controversial label as a systemic or non-systemic party, Yabloko continues to be an officially registered party and consistently attempts to put forth candidates in elections at all levels of government. As recently as 2023,

Yabloko registered 164 candidates for municipal elections in 13 regions (ALDE Party Staff 2023). In July 2024, all Yabloko candidates were barred by the Kremlin from running in St. Petersburg's local elections (Editors of The Moscow Times 2024b). Furthermore, contemporary reporting still describes Yabloko as the “only officially registered political force that actually opposes the Russian government” (Shkurenok 2021).

While acknowledging that it is essentially a hybrid case, I posit that Yabloko still qualifies as a valid case. If it was truly covertly beholden to the Kremlin like other systemic opposition parties, then it would not have been pushed onto the fringes of the systemic sphere and faced constant electoral repression efforts. In this sense, it was never really a systemic opposition party in a literal, functional sense but was rather a non-systemic group that occasionally achieved the same access as systemic opposition parties. In line with this reasoning, a report from the European Parliament asserted that Yabloko “initially represented a democratic tendency and claimed the status of political opposition, but it was progressively marginalised.” Additionally, the report concluded that “Yabloko [has] become so marginal in the electoral process that it is growing closer to non-systemic movements” (Garces De Los Fayos et al. 2020). However, this balance between systemic and non-systemic identities has not swayed its core beliefs shared with other non-systemic opposition groups, such as condemning and striving to oust the Putin regime (Rybakov 2020).

Yabloko IVs Operationalized

Yabloko Leadership Competency

The party's namesake originated from the acronym “YaBL,” which represents the last names of the party's founding leaders (Hale 2004). These leaders were Grigory Yavlinsky, Yury

Boldyrev, and Vladimir Lukin. Additionally, the party's current leader is Nikolay Rybakov, who assumed the role in 2019. Of the group, Yavlinsky in particular has stood out as playing an outsized role in the party and being an outspoken critic of the Kremlin, while Boldyrev had negligible impact as he left the party shortly after its founding.

Grigory Yavlinsky has been described as an outspoken and charismatic leader (White 2006). He possesses a consistent track record of sharply criticizing government officials, namely President Putin. The longevity and magnitude of these criticisms are what sets him apart from the rest of the Yabloko leadership. For instance, he was awarded the Liberal International Prize for Freedom in 2004 for his "defence of liberal democracy" (Liberal International Staff 2004). Yavlinsky never shied away from fierce criticism of the Putin regime. He has gone on record describing the system that Putin created as one that is "based on the permanent power of one dominant group of the supreme bureaucracy, [...] driven by self-renewal and eliminates the possibility of natural evolution or self-reform in accordance with the evolving situation, [and] rules out the replacement of the ruling group without the simultaneous demolition of the actual system and profound political crisis" (Yavlinsky 2019). Yavlinsky has not held back on labeling Putin's regime as authoritarian and asserting that it has made no meaningful progress in the economic, energy, environment, political, technological, or geopolitical sectors of the country. Over time, Yavlinsky used his political power to vocalize his discontent with Putin's propaganda machine and has continued issuing scathing asides even after his time as the official leader of Yabloko. For instance, in a 2022 interview, Yavlinsky condemned the Putin regime and the system of fear and corruption it has created. In particular, he pointed out how it continues to impact Russia's stance on Ukraine (O'Malley 2022). Some of Yavlinsky's more contemporary

comments such as these have bravely been made while he still lives and works in Russia (online records did not indicate that he has ever being physically exiled). Despite stepping down from Yabloko's leadership in 2008, he has remained deeply connected with the party and continues to be a symbolic face of the organization. Contemporary online resources indicated that positive charismatic perceptions of him have not changed significantly over time. Yavlinsky's political career with Yabloko was extensive, including a few presidential bids and an abundance of responsibilities assumed as party leader that are neither fully traceable nor quantifiable.

Vladimir Lukin was another founding member of Yabloko, but he does not appear to be with the party anymore. It was difficult to formulate a concrete timeline of his changing relationship with Yabloko, but he reportedly departed the party in 2020 after supporting controversial constitutional changes proposed by President Putin that many interpreted as a brazen attempt to extend his presidential power for several more terms (Wilson Center Staff n.d.). As recently as 2017, though, he appeared to be on good terms with the party (Yavlinsky 2017). However, before his departure he was an integral member of Yabloko and a vocal critic of the Putin regime. Curiously, he was the first member of Yabloko to be offered a position in Putin's administration (Yabloko Staff n.d.). He was elected ombudsman of Russia (also known as the Human Rights Commissioner of the Russian Federation), a post he maintained for an impressive ten years.

Despite having history as an official member of both Yabloko and Putin's regime, he did not shy away from investigating and criticizing the Kremlin. Even though the examples uncovered from my research were primarily during his official capacity as ombudsman, they are still included due to Lukin's longstanding and overlapping relationship with Yabloko. Mere

months after assuming his post, Lukin had “taken on some of the country's most powerful interests -- the Interior Ministry, Moscow Mayor Yurii Luzhkov, the Federal Security Service (FSB), the Kremlin, and even President Vladimir Putin -- in a startlingly energetic and aggressive manner” (Coalson 2004). In Russia’s 2008 report on human rights practices, it was recorded that Lukin took the Kremlin to task on various issues. In particular, he “commented on a range of human rights problems, such as police violence, prison conditions, the treatment of children, and hazing in the military.” He also “defended the rights of participants in the dissenters’ marches” (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor 2009). The Dissenters’ March was a series of largely unsanctioned political protests in Russia spanning from 2006-08. It was remarkable that Lukin voiced his discontent as frequently and fiercely as he did toward the very regime that appointed him.

Finally, Yabloko’s current leader is Nikolay Rybakov. A simple examination of Yabloko’s media apparatus in recent years reflects Rybakov’s attempts to keep his party relevant in the digital age. Clearly committed to keeping Yabloko in the public eye, he has made attempts to distinguish Yabloko from other opposition movements and leaders, decrying Navalny in particular (Meduza Staff 2021). In recent years, Rybakov has led significant efforts to expand Yabloko’s voter base beyond its stereotypical core of highly educated urbanites (Shkurenok 2021). Under Rybakov’s leadership, Yabloko’s efforts to geographically expand its voter base have proven productive (ALDE Party Staff 2020b). While documentation of his public condemnations of the Putin regime may not be as damning or explicit as the other Yabloko leaders examined, Rybakov has clearly put forth an immense amount of effort to keep the party relevant and true to its values. That isn’t to say that he has not condemned the Putin regime’s

actions at all, though (Rybakov 2020). This dedication to keeping the party's trajectory consistent can also be seen via various party member exclusions that have occurred under Rybakov's tenure due to supposed conflicts of interest with the values of Yabloko. Regardless of potential ulterior motives or the fallout of these exclusions, they illustrate Rybakov's efforts to lead a party that does not waver in its foundational principles and how it approaches implementing them.

All things considered, Yabloko's leadership is simultaneously portrayed as strong, stable, and quite stubborn. This likely both helps and hurts their public image. Recently, there has been some infighting among Yabloko leaders regarding whether/how to boycott elections (they did not put forth a presidential candidate in 2024, for instance). Their electoral success in recent years across all levels of government has plummeted. Nevertheless, I would assess their leadership as professional with strong personalities. Unlike the rest of the non-systemic opposition, the Kremlin likely feels as though it cannot exercise explicit violence against Yabloko leaders as a form of repression due to Yabloko's straddling of the systemic and non-systemic spheres. However, the Kremlin has clearly exhausted all other forms of repression against the leaders of Yabloko. Yet, Yabloko party leaders are not oblivious to the treatment that non-systemic politicians receive. For instance, Yavlinsky has insinuated that all opposition politicians in Russia face threats to their personal well-being, but he has not gone on record indicating if specific incidents regarding his own safety have occurred (O'Malley 2022).

Despite Lukin's questionable departure and Rybakov's party exclusions, the leadership competency of Yabloko's leaders appears to be consistent. They are all highly educated and had prior political experience before becoming involved in Yabloko. They were (or still are) involved in Yabloko for extended periods of time after joining. These leaders are instrumental in ensuring

that the party continues to endure over thirty years after its inception. Due to its unique status as often the only viable opposition party in the non-systemic world of Russian politics, it is quite impressive that its leaders have managed to continue implementing a party platform and put forth candidates, although inconsistently. Nevertheless, the fact that its leadership achieved these objectives as an opposition party that sometimes officially operated in the systemic sphere is noteworthy. I coded the presence of this IV as high, due to the overall impressive commitment and action of its leaders, despite recent electoral challenges.

Yabloko Protests

The most impressive component of Yabloko's protest efforts over time was uncovering the variety of causes that they organized in support of or in opposition to. One aspect that set Yabloko's protests apart from those of the other cases was that many of Yabloko's were officially sanctioned, likely due to their status as an official political party. This did not eliminate Kremlin repression of said protests, though. Due to the variety and frequency of these efforts to organize, they were analyzed in chronological order. Yabloko demonstrations dating back to the early 2000s have been logged online. For instance, 2005 in particular saw Yabloko members, led by Yavlinsky, hold a rally in Moscow in support of free speech in Russia. While organized by Yabloko, it comprised many opposition groups (Human Rights House Staff 2005). The size and scope of the protest as well as the Kremlin's response are not known. However, a plethora of media has recorded Yabloko's involvement in the multitude of protests against the Kremlin that occurred in the early 2010s. These protests have been known as the Snow Revolution in Western media, and were the largest in the country since the fall of the USSR.

Yabloko's official website has documented dozens of instances of the party's environmental activism, exhibiting further diversification of its protest focuses. Many of these instances manifested as pickets, with organizers and party leaders often being arrested or intimidated (Yabloko Staff n.d.). With records dating back to 2003, most of these protests occurred in the early 2010s (although the party's records on its English-facing website seemingly halted in 2013, despite protests still continuing to this day). As of 2015, for example, environmental protection initiatives continued to be organized by the party (Bennetts 2015). Throughout these protests, it was not uncommon for Yabloko affiliated protestors to be harassed, arrested, and then released without being charged (RFE/RL Staff 2010b).

Controversial legislation was passed in the early 2010s repressing the opposition's ability to organize and express their discontent, among other restrictions. Members of Yabloko participated in subsequent protests, and some were arrested (BBC Staff 2012b; Editors of The Moscow Times 2013). There was also much controversy surrounding the fairness of elections across all levels of the Russian government throughout 2011-12. Yabloko was a participant in these protests, as their party was likely the victim of voter fraud designed to keep the group on the fringes of official political involvement (Meduza Staff 2022; Trenin et al. 2011). Some Yabloko members experienced physical harassment or assault from Putin supporters during this time as well (Human Rights Watch Staff 2012b). Overall, Yabloko members organized and attended numerous rallies during this time period, advocating for freedom of assembly, election fairness, and against electoral corruption and media suppression. A multitude of arrests of party members ensued (Yabloko Staff n.d.).

At the start of the Russia-Ukraine conflict in 2014, Yabloko was one of the key organizers of a peace march in protest of the Kremlin's actions in Ukraine. The authorities responded by exercising extrajudicial discretion and prohibiting slogans and banners that the party had created for the event. The party also reported that supposed "provocateurs" attempted to physically fight its members, but the demonstration ended peacefully (Yavlinsky 2014).

Putin's constitutional changes in 2020 created another notable surge of Yabloko engagement in protests. In addition to elected Yabloko officials voting against the measure, protests were organized by the party. These protests took the form of one-person pickets in over fifty regions, as this modality of picketing did not require formal approval from the authorities like a group of protesters would (ALDE Party Staff 2020a). Especially since the turn of this decade, many opposition movements have felt the squeeze as the Kremlin tightens its grip on protests and all other forms of dissent. In 2021, Yabloko cleverly circumvented the Kremlin's crackdown by having one of its protests be "officially billed as a meeting between candidates and voters, to avoid accusations of staging an unauthorized rally" (RFE/RL Staff 2021b).

Despite these more recent gatherings being much smaller and supposedly less widespread than, say, the protests during the Snow Revolution, they were still notable due to the radically different protest landscape that Russian opposition movements now encounter in the 2020s. An interview with Yabloko's Nikolay Rybakov in 2021 underscored this social climate, in which he observed that "police violence against protesters has raised the stakes against participants of opposition protests, [and] criminal prosecutions of potential participants in [2021's] parliamentary elections have severely reduced the ranks of the Russian opposition" (Shkurenok 2021). Overall, Yabloko's sheer volume and variety of protests were much more significant than

the other cases in my research, and it also occurred over a longer period of time. It was also the only case that continues to protest to this day, as it was the only one of my cases that has not yet been officially liquidated. As a result, the presence of this IV is coded as high.

Yabloko Official Registration Efforts

As can be seen, the Kremlin has made significant efforts to impede Yabloko's participation in politics. And, this repression has only worsened over time. Yabloko does not face the difficulties that other non-systemic opposition parties have faced with regard to official party registration; despite gaining and losing various legal/funding statuses over time, the party has been officially registered since around the turn of the century.

While Yabloko candidates being barred from election participation is nothing new (RFE/RL Staff 2012a), it drastically increased in the 2020s following aforementioned law changes regarding the further restriction of opposition rights, especially following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 (Human Rights Watch Staff 2024; Amnesty International Staff n.d.). Additionally, Western media began covering the difficulty of opposition participation in elections more in-depth following the invasion of Ukraine. This trend is not unique to Yabloko and continues to impact the entirety of the non-systemic opposition.

Technicalities such as invalid signatures, administrative errors (such as the supposed failure to secure endorsement from Yabloko to run as a Yabloko candidate), and other suspicious claims have led to hundreds of Yabloko candidates nationwide being barred from participating in elections, especially since the onset of the 2020s (Yabloko Staff 2024b; RFE/RL's Russian Service 2024; Novaya Gazeta Europe 2024). In the 2024 Moscow municipal elections, for example, this led to one in five of the 179 Yabloko candidates being disqualified under dubious

circumstances (Kotynochkina 2024). Though, Yabloko's efforts to put forth candidates have persisted. While legal action is typically cumbersome and not in favor of the opposition, the party has a history of attempting to appeal such decisions. All things considered, the party has encountered no presence of party registration efforts due to never having its party registration revoked. However, it has experienced a very high volume of candidate registration attempts; therefore, this IV is coded as medium.

Kremlin Repression of Yabloko

Overall, the DV for this case is coded as medium. This is due to repression of one of the IVs being high, one being medium, and one being low. The Kremlin's repression of the leadership competency of Yabloko is low because of the observed reluctance of the authorities to repress Yabloko leaders as intensely or lethally as the rest of the non-systemic opposition. As was observed, though, that is not to say that Yabloko leaders faced no repression at all. Interestingly, repression from the Kremlin against their rhetoric manifests itself as disciplinary action taken against their party, rather than against the specific leaders of Yabloko. For instance, other opposition groups' leaders have been directly assassinated, exiled, etc., for similar behavior. Yabloko, on the other hand, only seems to experience this repression on a party level, not an individual one, despite individual leaders speaking on behalf of the organization. Perhaps their unique status of having history with the systemic opposition in the past drives this type of limited response. As such, it was admittedly difficult to pinpoint explicit documentation of Kremlin repression efforts against specific Yabloko leaders, rather than against the Yabloko party as a whole. This is quite distinct from how other Russian opposition leaders are repressed.

The Kremlin's repression of Yabloko's protests, on the other hand, is significant. I assessed that the consistency and scale of the Kremlin's repression matched that of Yabloko's remarkable protest history. Therefore, the Kremlin's repression of these protests is coded as high. All documented protests included Kremlin repression during or in response to said gatherings. This repression manifested itself as intimidation, arrests (with party members often being released without charges), physical attacks, and the presence of Kremlin-backed agitators.

While Russia's repression of any form of dissent has become drastically more severe throughout the 2020s, Yabloko has still found ways to voice its discontent - much more so than other non-systemic parties that were liquidated around the same time. Daringly, small-scale rallies across the country have continued to be held for a variety of social, political, and environmental causes (Moscow Times Reporter 2024; Shablinsky 2024). However, Kremlin retaliation has continued to escalate because of laws regarding the rights and conduct of the opposition, including unprecedented measures such as police raids and criminal investigations being launched against party members (Human Rights Watch Staff 2022; RFE/RL 2024). Yet, despite this crackdown, Yabloko has found ways to persist. As of 2023, party members have engaged in writing supportive letters mailed to domestic political prisoners (Yabloko Staff 2023; 2024a). At a time in history when most of the non-systemic opposition has been formally eradicated by the Kremlin, Yabloko is still seeking ways to further its mission, no matter the scale. Many of these individuals had been imprisoned relatively recently from the time my research was conducted, as "the number of prosecutions grew rapidly after Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022 and public criticism of the war was outlawed" (Dasha Litvinova 2024).

As mentioned when examining official registration efforts, Yabloko continues to face little to no presence or repression of official party registration. However, it has experienced a high presence of both candidate registration and efforts to undermine said registration. Numerous aforementioned technicalities led to constant disqualifications of a plethora of Yabloko candidates over time. In sum, the Kremlin’s overall repression efforts against Yabloko’s official registration efforts are coded as medium when compared to the other cases of this research. This is due to repression of the party’s official registration being nonexistent, but repression of candidate registration being immense.

Yabloko Findings, Visualized

Yabloko	Leadership Competency	Protests	Official Reg. Efforts	Overall Kremlin Repression
Repression	Low	High	Medium	Medium

Case 2: People’s Freedom Party, or PARNAS

A Brief Overview

The People’s Freedom Party, also known as PARNAS, underwent several identity shifts over time. Its origins can be traced to the Republican Party of Russia (RPR) founded in 1990. The party’s ideology placed great emphasis on human rights and was described as liberal (Library of Congress Staff n.d.; GlobalSecurity Staff n.d.). RPR, like other non-systemic opposition parties, heavily condemned Putin. RPR advocated for a democratic regime in Russia and had plans for a “decommunization” process. This included measures such as declassifying all Soviet-era documents and creating a parliamentary republic to promote self-governance. RPR also stated its desire to reform the judiciary to improve political independence, as well as remove government censorship from all forms of media (IIAPHAC Staff 2017).

RPR lost its legal status in 2007 and was ordered by the Russian Supreme Court to be dissolved. This caused it to be denied formal registration as a political party and, thus, was unable to participate in elections from 2007-11 (GlobalSecurity Staff n.d.). In 2011, the European Court for Human Rights deemed the party’s dissolution to be unlawful (Republican Party of Russia v. Russia 2011). That same year, another Russian opposition group known as the People’s Freedom Party merged with the RPR, and the party was re-labeled as RPR-PARNAS (Reuters 2012). The party name was eventually shortened to just PARNAS. After the high-profile assassination of one of its key leaders in 2015, as well as the contentious loss of its last seat in 2018, the party continued to struggle throughout the 2010s with leadership woes and intense party repression. Repression efforts by the Kremlin came to a head in 2023 when the Kremlin once again officially liquidated the party, this time for good.

PARNAS Leadership Competency

Over the course of PARNAS' history, the party had three primary leaders. Although their tenures overlapped, these figures were Mikhail Kasyanov, Vladimir Ryzhkov, and Boris Nemtsov. There was speculation in the mid 2010s that other prominent opposition leaders such as Alexei Navalny or Mikhail Khodorkovsky might join the party's ranks as co-chairs, but this never came to fruition (Editors of The Moscow Times 2015b). Vladimir Milov was also a co-chair in the party's early days, but my research yielded little information about the relevance of his role (IIAPHAC Staff n.d.).

It does appear as though PARNAS gained something of a reputation for being ineffective due in part to leadership turmoil throughout its history. While likely not the only source of its electoral woes, this perception gradually increased over time in tandem with the party's declining electoral success. Of course, the Kremlin's repression of the group and other challenges likely played crucial roles in the party's decline in relevancy as well.

The first widely-documented disagreement within the party occurred when Vladimir Ryzhkov departed in 2014. Ryzhkov assumed the role of party leader of PARNAS' predecessor, RPR, in 2006 after prior leadership experience in the Yeltsin administration and State Duma. Before his departure, Ryzhkov was a steadfast leader of the party. Like the rest of the opposition, he was a staunch critic of Putin. He consistently advocated for human rights and critically examined Russian economic, social, and geopolitical policymaking. His political writings called attention to the Kremlin's suppression of dissent and other problematic actions by the Putin regime (Ryzhkov n.d.; Russia in Global Affairs Staff n.d.). In 2013, Ryzhkov and other opposition leaders met with Putin, to the disapproval of his co-chairs at the time, Kasyanov and

Nemtsov (Team of the Official Website of the President of Russia 2013). The move was polarizing amongst the party's leadership and the non-systemic opposition more broadly (Podrabinek 2013). Shortly thereafter, Ryzhkov was dismissed by his fellow co-chairs as PARNAS' official representative with the authorities. Additionally, Ryzhkov did not support his co-chairs' decision to embrace left-wing nationalist opposition figures such as Alexei Navalny, which caused further tension with his fellow leaders (Krainova 2014; GlobalSecurity Staff n.d.). This all culminated in Ryzhkov and his supporters quitting the party in 2014.

Boris Nemtsov, like Ryzhkov, had prior government experience in the Yeltsin administration and State Duma, as well as being the first governor of Nizhny Novgorod Oblast. He was perhaps best known for his intense criticism of President Putin, even by oppositional standards. He provided a continuous stream of withering asides and critical analysis of the regime throughout his political career. Nemtsov was, therefore, considered an opposition figure even before joining PARNAS in 2012. Several high-profile instances of his activism included reported arrests in 2007, 2010, and 2011. These arrests were tied to participation in protests against Putin and his regime.

During his time in PARNAS, his condemnation of the Kremlin did not waver. In 2012 Nemtsov publicly accused Putin of inappropriately wielding his power to acquire valuable property and assets that should have instead belonged to the state (GlobalSecurity Staff n.d.). A 2013 report by Nemtsov heavily criticized the Kremlin's handling of the preparatory work for the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, Russia. He claimed that billions had been embezzled for the personal gain of Putin and his allies (RFE/RL 2013). Additionally, that same year saw Nemtsov doing a great service to his party by successfully winning a seat in Yaroslavl's regional

parliament (Rogoza 2013). This victory granted PARNAS the ability to automatically run in Duma elections without having to meet signature requirements for prospective candidates, due to successfully obtaining a seat in a regional parliament (Kozenko 2018). As has been noted, existing documentation suggested that Yabloko was the only other opposition party to achieve a similar status under the Putin regime of not requiring signatures for candidates in certain elections. My research yielded that this status for PARNAS only applied to state legislative elections. The seat itself was lost by PARNAS in 2018, at which point the party also lost its status of being able to automatically run in State Duma elections without signatory requirements.

Russia's military actions in Ukraine in 2014 took Nemtsov's rhetoric to new heights and may have played a role in his death. Nemtsov was incredibly vocal and blunt about Putin's actions in Ukraine. For instance, Nemtsov stated that, "Putin's war against Ukraine [is] the most serious of crimes. I want to say right away: this isn't a war between Russia and Ukraine. I don't believe in that definition. This war belongs to Putin. It's an absolutely cynical, deceitful, bloody, and fratricidal war against our brothers in Ukraine" (Editors of The Moscow Times 2024a). Nemtsov claimed that he was preparing a report that would provide undeniable proof of Russia's military and economic involvement in Ukraine, as well as the human cost of said actions (Boldyrev 2015; Price 2022). But in 2015, in the midst of this work, he was assassinated in Moscow mere blocks from the Kremlin. In the weeks leading up to his murder, Nemtsov increasingly began to reportedly fear for his life (Stanglin and Winter 2015; Kramer 2015). The consensus in the West is that Nemtsov, who was often described as sharp, witty, charismatic, and integral to PARNAS' public image, was killed at the behest of the Kremlin in order to silence his dissent and investigations into government wrongdoing (BBC Eye Investigations 2022; Jackson

2015; Menkiszak 2015; Gutterman 2023). He was killed days before an opposition march he was involved with was set to take place. He had given an interview criticizing Putin mere hours before his death (Reuters 2015a). Despite a short history with the party, Boris Nemtsov's impact was significant for both PARNAS and the broader non-systemic opposition.

The third and final significant co-chair of PARNAS was Mikhail Kasyanov. He had an even more extensive background in government than his contemporaries. Kasyanov had stints in the 1990s in the Ministries of Economy and Finance. He was also the Prime Minister of Russia under President Putin from 2000-04. However, he increasingly grew at odds with Putin over the actions of his regime (Associated Press 2004). As such, Kasyanov was a victim of the president's mass dismissal of government officials in 2004. Soon after, he began his journey as a key figure of the Russian opposition. He continued to ardently criticize Putin and was spotted participating in the Snow Revolution from 2011-13. Kasyanov has been described as a "principled and consistent critic of [Putin] and his regime" (Magnitsky Staff n.d.). He was instrumental in the merging of the RPR and PARNAS parties and became a co-chair of the new coalition in 2012 (RFE/RL Staff 2012b).

In the wake of Nemtsov's assassination in 2015, Kasyanov was elected as the party's sole leader. This leadership status would be maintained until PARNAS' dissolution in 2023. Notably, Kasyanov played a key role in working with Alexei Navalny's opposition party and several others to create a political coalition ahead of the 2016 elections in Russia. But, it also appeared as though Kasyanov inadvertently played a key role in the coalition falling apart. Unbeknownst to him, a secretly filmed intimate video with another PARNAS party member was greatly publicized, possibly at the behest of the Kremlin. Additionally, a state-sponsored news outlet

released a secret audio recording of Kasyanov criticizing his colleagues in the coalition (Ormiston 2016; Pertsev 2016). These two incidents appeared to directly cause the coalition to falter and eventually collapse. Key leaders began withdrawing their support for the procedures of the coalition's electoral primaries. The official narrative was often something akin to "the coalition broke down due to differences in opinion on how to order the list of candidates within the parties" (Editors of The Moscow Times 2016b). But these differences in opinion blossomed in the first place in large part due to Kasyanov's scandal. To elaborate on the previous quote, many coalition members "called on Kasyanov to remove himself from the top of the coalition's ticket, arguing that the primary should determine all spots on the list. (The December 2015 agreement stipulated that the primary vote would determine the coalition's ticket, except for the manually assigned top three spots.)" (Meduza Staff 2016). Coupled with the fact that Kasyanov, despite all the negative press, refused to withdraw from the list of potential candidates, the coalition quickly fell apart (Kolotilov 2016; Walker 2016). Kasyanov defended himself by stating that it was too late in the electoral process for the coalition to make such a large procedural change. To make matters worse, another contributing factor was the local media's unequal treatment of airtime for opposition candidates across all parties in the elections (although, this repression tactic was neither novel nor unique to just the 2016 elections). Kasyanov still ran under the PARNAS ticket but with little electoral success. Russian state media reported that Kasyanov rebuffed calls for his resignation after this debacle (TASS Staff 2016).

Little information was found documenting concrete achievements or shortcomings of Kasyanov's leadership during his reign as PARNAS leader following the 2016 elections. However, it was noted that he attempted to formulate another coalition with other opposition

groups in 2017 in preparation for the 2018 presidential election. However, these efforts did not materialize. PARNAS, as a result, did not put forth a presidential candidate in 2018.

Additionally, the loss of the party's last seat in 2018 and the party's dissolution in 2023 were major setbacks under Kasyanov's leadership but were by no means his fault. But, these events were the consequences of the evolving political climate for opposition movements in Russia more broadly, which have continued to only worsen over time. Likely to protect his safety due to his status as an opposition leader and harsh critic of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Kasyanov fled Russia in 2022 (AFP 2022). In 2023, the same year that PARNAS was liquidated, the Kremlin deemed Kasyanov a "foreign agent," ultimately sealing his fate if he were to ever return to Russia under the Putin regime (Agencies 2023).

Some analytical sources have accused the party's leaders of being ineffective and causing the party's relevancy to fade over time (GlobalSecurity Staff n.d.; Garces De Los Fayos et al. 2020; Kozenko 2018). When examined from a holistic perspective, my research surmised that the leadership competency of PARNAS was average throughout its existence. Admittedly, they experienced more documented infighting than my other cases. Yet, the party still managed to attempt to run candidates in elections at all levels for three decades, a remarkable feat in the political climate of contemporary Russia. Its leaders routinely made the press (at least in Western media) for their opposition efforts and achievements, not just for their infighting or shortcomings. Overall, the shortcomings of some leaders (such as Kasyanov's disastrous 2016 coalition) could be compensated for by other leader's successes (such as Nemtsov's key electoral victory and relentless investigative reporting). As such, the IV of leadership competency for PARNAS is coded as medium.

PARNAS Protests

My research did not yield significant, extensive documentation of PARNAS organizing for a variety of causes in a variety of scenarios, compared to a party like Yabloko. However, there were still plentiful examples of the party participating in protests over time, manifesting as physical gatherings of citizens directly condemning Putin and his regime. For instance, the party publicly protested the Kremlin's refusal to register the party in 2011. The party was also a key organizer behind nation-wide protests in Russia from 2011-13 that questioned the validity of Putin's re-election (Library of Congress Staff n.d.). PARNAS members were among those arrested for partaking in the protests (Human Rights Watch Staff 2012a).

Boris Nemtsov was a fierce critic of the Kremlin's actions in Ukraine starting in 2014, as has been noted. This also manifested in protests organized by Nemtsov on behalf of PARNAS in favor of an end to the conflict (RFE/RL Staff 2015). Additionally, after Nemtsov's assassination, the party attempted to hold annual peace marches in remembrance of his death (and in protest of the Kremlin's political repression).

The last major documented push of PARNAS participating in mass protests before its liquidation took place in 2021 in solidarity with Alexei Navalny, which was documented by both Russian media and PARNAS itself (Антонов 2021; ПАРНАС Staff 2021). In this instance, both PARNAS' protest efforts and subsequent Kremlin repression seemed typical when compared to a holistic examination of the Russian opposition's broader protest efforts and subsequent repression during the same time period. Most other data concerning PARNAS protests efforts led me to conclude that the presence of PARNAS' protests was average and, therefore, is coded as medium when compared to my other cases.

PARNAS Official Registration Efforts

Following the European Court for Human Rights' 2011 ruling to reinstate the party after the Kremlin dissolved it in 2007, the party attempted to re-register as an official party. However, this effort was blocked by the Kremlin due to supposed incorrect paperwork, which PARNAS leaders claimed was politically motivated (RFE/RL Staff 2011). The U.S. Department of State claimed government authorities were intimidating PARNAS supporters so that they would "resign positions or disavow their signatures on required lists" (Clinton 2011). In 2012, after an additional attempt by the Kremlin to block the party's registration, the Supreme Court of Russia reversed its 2007 decision of blocking the party in light of the European Court for Human Rights' ruling (Krainova 2012; Editors of The Moscow Times 2012). The party was successfully registered soon after (ПАИЦИ Staff 2012). Afterward, though, the Kremlin worked tirelessly to keep PARNAS on the fringes of the political landscape. Despite some modest victories in regional elections in 2013, the party largely remained inconsequential in the broader world of Russian politics. For instance, Nemtsov's previously noted victory in Yaroslavl in 2013 was short-lived. That same year, all the party's gubernatorial candidates as well as several of its regional legislative candidates were disqualified from running on "formal and technical grounds," despite local election observers claiming that these exclusions were politically motivated (G. V. Golosov 2014).

The party, in line with the rest of the opposition, faced constant electoral exclusions based on technicalities such as signature requirements, which its leaders often claimed were deliberate. Other notable examples of this repression occurred during Russia's regional and gubernatorial elections from 2015-17, which PARNAS had to collect signatures for in order to field candidates.

Despite being an officially registered political party, it faced substantial efforts from the Kremlin to inhibit its electoral participation. The Kremlin significantly manipulated these elections, and PARNAS was not spared (Ross 2018; Cragg and Bolchakova 2015). In 2015, the party's candidates were initially denied registration in all four regions that they applied for, but one was later overturned on an appeal and allowed to run. The candidate in that race was Ilya Yashin, a notable opposition politician. Of the four regions that the party applied for, the one least likely to be conducive to a PARNAS victory - due to its geopolitical nature - was the one successfully overturned on appeal. It would likely surprise few if the Kremlin did this intentionally. As the BBC reported, "The liberal opposition draws what support it has from Russia's urban, educated middle-class - those with access to information other than that provided by the heavily controlled state media. But attempts to run in more promising regions were blocked. PARNAS was only cleared to field a list of candidates in Kostroma on appeal" (BBC Staff 2015b). In essence, "The opposition has said the Kremlin allowed it to run in Kostroma under disadvantageous conditions to give it a demonstrative loss" (Luhn 2015). In sum, the volume of effort that PARNAS put into attempting to officially register both its party and to a greater extent its candidates leads to the presence of this IV being coded as high.

Kremlin Repression of PARNAS

Specific instances of leadership repression by the Kremlin are not always publicly documented nor easy to uncover in the digital world. This is not unique to PARNAS leaders, of course. Considering Vladimir Ryzkov's or Mikhail Kasyanov's level of involvement within the opposition, for instance, it is reasonable to assume that they faced surveillance and intimidation from the Kremlin, which is typical of an opposition leader in contemporary Russia (Kirk 2017;

Hofmann 2011). He has not faced documented attempts against his life or other severe measures of repression. Boris Nemtsov, of course, faced the most intense form of Kremlin repression for his opposition efforts: assassination.

Repression against Kasyanov significantly increased following the assassination of his colleague Nemtsov in 2015. He reportedly feared for his life and faced many death threats, especially in the period immediately following Nemtsov's death. In 2016, Kasyanov was repeatedly harassed and verbally accosted at public political events, and both he and several of his assistants were physically assaulted. Dmitry Gudkov, who at the time was the only remaining liberal opposition MP in the Russian government, wrote that these incidents were "similar to those that Nemtsov received before his death, [and] weren't given due attention by law enforcement organs" (Luhn 2016). Kasyanov, for his part, said that the "Kremlin and nationalist groups had designated him as 'enemy number one' now that Nemtsov was dead and because of his decision to head his party's list in parliamentary elections in [2016]" (Osborn 2016). Other significant party figures were threatened around this time as well (BBC Staff 2016; U.S. Mission OSCE 2016a). One, Vladimir Kara-Murza, was likely poisoned on more than one occasion. Both Kara-Murza and fellow prominent PARNAS member Ilya Yashin have since endured prison sentences due to their opposition activities, despite no longer being affiliated with the party (Amnesty International Staff 2023; 2022; Editors of The Moscow Times 2024d). Overall, PARNAS' three primary leaders faced an immense amount of repression. Of the three, two faced documented physical and verbal harassment, one of which ended up being assassinated. As such, the repression of PARNAS' leadership competency is coded as high.

Pivoting to protests, one key instance of Kremlin repression were Zelyonka attacks, which were documented at peace marches commemorating Boris Nemtsov. The attacks involved brilliant green dye being thrown on the faces of opposition activists by Kremlin sympathizers (Schreck 2017; France 24 Staff 2016, 24). The dye is difficult to remove and is usually more symbolic than harmful. That is, if it is not mixed with other chemicals, as was the case with these Zelyonka attacks, which Kasyanov was a victim of.

It is common knowledge that many opposition members, especially leaders, have faced consistent intimidation, harassment, and surveillance under the Putin regime. Admittedly, some scenarios are easier to prove than others. One such documented instance involving PARNAS occurred in 2016 when a secret video recorder was found in the apartment of a PARNAS party member (Editors of The Moscow Times 2016a).

A holistic analysis of my research determined that it is reasonable to assume that such examples are representative of much wider patterns of the Kremlin's repression of opposition figures. Many of the sources I synthesized would mention in passing or allude to the fact that it was (and still is) commonplace for opposition leaders to experience repression, intimidation, surveillance, and harassment. Although not always easily traceable or verifiable as coming directly from the Kremlin, a broader analysis of the state of the Russian opposition vastly narrows down potential culprits of these actions. As such, the aforementioned incident is logically concluded as being part of a broader pattern of repressive activities that often go unreported or underreported, and is, therefore, incorporated into my analysis. The Kremlin's repression of PARNAS protests, overall, was quite severe and as a result is coded as high.

Finally, when examining repression of official PARNAS candidate registration efforts, a striking example presented itself. Relative to the small scale of both the seat Yashin ran for and the city he campaigned in, the Kremlin's repression of his campaign was substantial. It is commonplace for intimidation tactics and smear campaigns against the political opposition to occur during elections in contemporary Russia. However, the scope of these repression efforts when compared to the scope of the election were out of the ordinary; efforts to undermine Yashin's campaign were elaborate (BBC Staff 2015b). Yashin only needed to secure 5% of the vote to win a spot in the regional parliament. PARNAS' exit polling claimed that he did, but state polling disagreed. Eventually, it would be determined that Yashin did not reach 5%. However, independent observers reported thousands of electoral and voting violations during the election, a startling figure considering the small locality and minimal political implications of the election for the ruling United Russia party (Luhn 2015).

Another example of explicit Kremlin repression against PARNAS presented itself in the 2015 gubernatorial elections. As scholar Cameron Ross described, "often opposition candidates are faced with the absurd task of having to turn to United Russia [Putin's party] to ask for help in collecting signatures." Generally, this tactic has worked; gubernatorial candidates from several opposition parties "were forced to appeal to the Mari-El branch of United Russia for help in collecting their signatures and they were eventually registered." However, in contrast, PARNAS member Sergey Gulyaev "failed in his bid to register in Leningrad. In this case [United Russia] declined his appeals for help in collecting signatures" (Ross 2018).

As previously mentioned, Kasyanov was verbally and physically harassed numerous times on the campaign trail in 2016. However, this reflected a broader environment of

intensifying repression against the party's candidates. Several PARNAS members were assaulted in front of their homes. Smear campaigns of opposition figures such as Kasyanov were broadcast on state media (U.S. Mission OSCE 2016b). As Bellingcat, an investigative organization that has collaborated with other opposition figures in Russia, stated in 2016, "Ultimately, it is impossible to deter all of Russia's opposition politicians using coercion, an obstacle circumvented by subverting the democratic process itself. Electoral misconduct takes many forms, and seems to be especially pervasive this election cycle: by September 9th [2016], 1,330 complaints had been registered with Golos, an election-monitoring organization threatened with liquidation by the Ministry of Justice" (Pigman 2016). Of course, perpetrators were rarely caught or punished by the authorities. PARNAS was also a top target in 2016 from a candidate registration perspective. Initially, all of its party lists were rejected. It was not until the intervention of the Central Electoral Commission that the issue was somewhat resolved (Ross 2018).

Elections in 2017 showed no lessening of these extensive repression efforts. As mentioned when examining the Yabloko case, that year saw 443 of United Russia's 445 candidates registered. Yabloko saw 42 of its 65 candidates registered. PARNAS, on the other hand, saw none of its candidates make it through the registration process (Ross 2018).

Additionally, 2018 saw the contentious loss of the party's last seat which was won by Nemtsov. Despite Nemtsov's death in 2015, the seat was still able to be held by PARNAS for five years, from 2013-2018. When the seat came up for re-election in 2018, PARNAS' efforts to put forth a candidate were foiled by pro-Putin systemic opposition parties LDPR and Patriots of Russia. They legally challenged the party's ticket, claiming PARNAS' candidate list had violated electoral regulation. Despite an appeal, Russia's Supreme Court upheld the decision. The loss of

this seat meant the end of PARNAS’ previously stated special status of being exempt from collecting signatures for State Duma elections. In short, PARNAS would “need to collect signatures like any other opposition group, if it wishes to field candidates for public office at any level [including at the state level]” (Kozenko 2018). PARNAS would go on to never win an election in Russia again.

In 2023 the Russian Supreme Court, in agreement with the Ministry of Justice, asserted that PARNAS’s number of regional offices had shrunk to less than half of all regions in Russia (Meduza Staff 2023; PБK Staff 2023), deeming it ineligible to continue functioning as a political party. However, this assessment included the four newly annexed regions of Ukraine as a result of the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. PARNAS disputed the inclusion of these regions, as it claimed that the Kremlin has “no full-fledged executive authorities there” (Editors of The Moscow Times 2023). Nevertheless, the decision was final. The group was dissolved shortly thereafter (RFE/RL’s Russian Service 2023). Other than the hybrid case Yabloko, PARNAS seemed to be one of the non-systemic opposition parties in contemporary Russia to be granted official registration as a political party, even if it faced repression at every turn. Overall, the DV for this case is coded as high.

PARNAS Findings, Visualized

PARNAS	Leadership Competency	Protests	Official Reg. Efforts	Overall Kremlin Repression
Repression	High	High	High	High

Case 3: Russia of the Future

A Brief Overview

Originally known as the People's Alliance and then as the Progress Party, Russia of the Future was often closely linked with its most well-known member, famous Russian political opposition leader Alexei Navalny (Garces De Los Fayos et al. 2020). The intensity of this connection makes it essentially impossible to discuss one without acknowledging the other. However, the party was created by allies of Navalny, not Navalny himself.

Founded in 2012 by Leonid Volkov, the party heavily emphasized anti-corruption awareness, likely influenced by Navalny's enduring popularity as an investigator of the illicit activities of the Kremlin. Accountability and restructuring of the criminal justice system and eliminating government ownership/censorship of the media were significant pillars of the party. Another major focus of the party was the decentralization of governmental power (RFE/RL 2018). This included limiting presidential powers and increasing the independence of the judiciary. Russia of the Future also favored alignment with the West, for economic and social gains. The party was usually labeled centrist or slightly center-right (Рус Монитор Staff 2019, Sukhov 2013). Of course, it fiercely opposed Putin and his government.

Originally a member of Yabloko, Navalny was expelled from the party in 2007 for nationalistic views (Faulconbridge 2024). In fact, the party grew so distasteful of Navalny that a party leader stated in a 2021 interview that he considered Navalny's ideas "dangerous and destructive." Another Yabloko leader stated that Navalny's politics were nothing more than a mix of nationalism and populism (Shkurenok 2021). After Navalny participated in the 2013 Moscow mayoral election - where he ran under the PARNAS ticket - he felt ready to join Russia of the

Future, a year after its initial founding (d'Amora 2013). He became party leader shortly after. The party would eventually become more closely associated with Navalny's broader political network. This network included various iterations of his anti-corruption foundations, as well as his individual career as a politician and his investigative work into the Kremlin's wrongdoing.

The Russian Ministry of Justice routinely denied or suspended the party's registration attempts over the years. In particular, the ministry denied the party's registration several times from 2012-2014, during the party's infancy. Over time, this led to numerous unsuccessful party congresses being held seeking to register the party. Peculiar justifications were listed for these denials, such as incorrect documentation submissions or the party's name conflicting with existing parties (Editors of The Moscow Times 2014, RAPSI Staff 2014). The party never officially succeeded in registering for a meaningful amount of time and fell victim to the liquidation of Navalny's broader political network in 2021.

Russia of the Future Leadership Competency

Available records identified Leonid Volkov as the original founder of the party (Garces De Los Fayos et al. 2020). He founded its first iteration, People's Alliance, in 2012. Despite Navalny being elected to lead the party a short year later, Volkov continued to play a pivotal role in the organization, as well as in Navalny's broader political apparatus. Volkov had prior government experience as a member of the Yekaterinburg City Duma (Library of Congress Staff n.d.). He was also the head of the central election committee of the Russian Opposition Coordination Council, a short-lived attempt at formally organizing the Russian non-systemic opposition in the early 2010s, which included Navalny and his party. Volkov was also a key coordinator during Navalny's 2013 Moscow mayoral campaign and 2018 presidential campaign.

It has been noted that he oversaw “all regional political operations of the Russia’s Future Party over Russia’s 11 time zones,” a significant responsibility within the party (World Fellows Staff 2018). He held this post from 2017-2021 (Wilson Center Staff n.d.). My research did not yield succinct information on what sort of leadership roles Volkov held before or after this assignment. Nevertheless, considering his known leadership qualities and proximity to Navalny, it can reasonably be ascertained that Volkov’s involvement within the party was extensive, both in terms of duration and accomplishment. Volkov has repeatedly been dubbed by Western media as Navalny’s right-hand man and one of his closest allies.

In addition to these leadership roles, Volkov has maintained an impressive online presence in which he continues to condemn Putin and his regime. He possesses an extensive record of blogging and posting YouTube videos about various aspects of Russian politics and the Putin regime, similar to the efforts of Navalny’s anti-corruption investigations. Volkov also has a presence on Western social media, such as on Facebook and X. Some of his social platforms are more consistently active than others. Since at least 2020, Volkov has been living and working in Lithuania out of concern for his personal safety.

By far the most notable leader of Russia of the Future was opposition icon Alexei Navalny. Navalny has stood out as Russia’s most persistent and impactful opposition leader during the Putin regime. A trained lawyer, he rose to prominence in the early 2000s when he began blogging about his investigations into corruption within many aspects of the Russian government and Putin’s regime. Via social media, he garnered a following among Russia’s younger generations, and his YouTube channel’s investigative content has accumulated hundreds of millions of views (Daria Litvinova 2021). Navalny endured an immense amount of varied

repression over time. However, it was in response to an immense amount of effort that he put into contributing to the non-systemic opposition.

When examining the connection between Navalny and Russia of the Future, a similar track record of involvement was found. After initially declining to join, Navalny was selected as party leader after his 2013 mayoral campaign in Moscow, in which he almost forced a runoff with the incumbent after an unexpectedly strong performance. Navalny explained that his initial refusal to join the party was because “the authorities are obsessed with banning everything that is connected to my name” (Sukhov 2013). He would go on to assist in the party’s efforts to register over the years, all of which were foiled.

Shortly after assuming this leadership role, Navalny experienced legal troubles which further charged his base. He was convicted and received a suspended sentence on two occasions from 2013-14. One of the cases involved a stint under house arrest and being banned from using the internet, which his team worked around on his behalf (Burrows and Litvinova 2024). He was convicted on charges of fraud, embezzlement, and other financial crimes, which his supporters and much of the West regarded as politically motivated. Both cases were ongoing from before his time with Russia of the Future, but the fallout from said cases occurred after he had assumed his leadership position with the party. Shortly thereafter, the European Court of Human Rights ruled that both cases were unfair toward Navalny. The court stated that the Kremlin had violated Navalny’s right to a fair trial in the first case. For the second case, the court wrote that the trial proceedings were “arbitrary and unfair” (RFE/RL 2016; Saeed 2017). This was all relevant to his involvement with Russia of the Future due to the fact that the sentence from the second of these

two cases caused him to be barred from running in Russia's 2018 presidential election as a result of his criminal record.

Navalny was detained and fined in 2017 for his involvement in anti-corruption protests (Coleman and Werbeck 2024). Practically every major protest that Russia of the Future took part in under Navalny's leadership could in some way be traced back to Navalny himself. Vice versa, all protests that Navalny organized or participated in while leader of Russia of the Future, even if not labeled Russia of the Future events, can reasonably be assumed to include members of - and have been understood as linked to - Russia of the Future. This manifested itself in Navalny either playing a key role in organizing the protests, attending the actual protests themselves, or both. As a result, Navalny spent a multitude of days either detained or jailed during the years in which he was the leader of Russia of the Future (RFE/RL Staff 2021a).

It should be noted that repression against Navalny often seemed to be directed toward him for what he represented, not necessarily as a result of specific actions tied to being party leader. Nevertheless, instances of repression against Navalny during the same timeframe that he was party leader are included in my research. This is due to Russia of the Future being a key pillar of his broader political network, as he was its leader for almost the party's entire existence, and he completely immersed the party into his broader organization. (The party was, after all, essentially created for him by his supporters: the party's attempts to officially register spanned from 2012-21, of which he was party leader starting in 2013.) In other words, it was impossible to separate Navalny from his political party due to their inherent proximity. Since Russia of the Future never officially existed, it can be assumed that the actions of his supporters from 2013-21

were, by extension, representative of the non-systemic party, as the party was a part of the Navalny political machine.

Transitioning back to 2018; Navalny charged his base to boycott the presidential election after being barred by officials from running due to his past convictions (Associated Press in Moscow 2017). Navalny was detained and jailed on multiple occasions in connection to protests calling for the boycott of the election. International organizations and administrative bodies such as the European Union and the Council of Europe publicly voiced their dissatisfaction with the Kremlin's decision to exclude Navalny from the presidential race (Rainsford 2017; Council of Europe Minister's Deputies 2017). Never before under the Putin regime had such international outcry in support of a Russian opposition figure been documented, highlighting Navalny's popularity and political prowess.

Navalny was once again jailed for his participation and organization of unauthorized protests and unsanctioned public events in 2019. These arrests were tied to Navalny's support for independent candidates in the 2019 Moscow Duma elections. Since Russia of the Future was routinely denied official registration, sometimes its leader would extend his support to other candidates outside the party instead. It was also during this election that Navalny instituted his Smart Voting tactic. Smart Voting is "an online service designed to promote candidates that have the best chance to defeat those backed by the Kremlin and the United Russia party. It doesn't promote any particular opposition party." Furthermore, "Navalny's team maintains that Smart Voting is not about voting for an ideal candidate, but rather is about defeating United Russia and Kremlin-backed politicians" (Daria Litvinova 2021b). Navalny's creation was met with attempts

by the Kremlin to scrub it from search engines and app stores. Smart Voting would continue to be used in future Russian elections with modest success.

In 2020, Navalny, along with many others in the opposition, vocally opposed President Putin's proposed constitutional amendments to enable himself to run for more terms. Navalny was deeply critical of the move, warning that "Putin will be president for life" (Gershkovich 2020). Also in 2020, he famously survived a medical emergency while on a domestic flight in Russia. He was poisoned with Novichok, a Soviet-era nerve agent that is also a banned chemical weapon. Global reactions to the poisoning were swift. In the days following his poisoning, the United States and several European heads of state, the UN, the EU, Amnesty International, and NATO, among others, voiced concerns about Navalny's health. Navalny was later able to prove that the Kremlin orchestrated the attempt on his life (Bellingcat Investigation Team 2020).

The Kremlin's pursuit of Navalny did not cease after Navalny's poisoning, though. Upon his recovery and subsequent return to Russia in 2021, he was detained by the authorities and later faced prison time. He received a multitude of accolades for his bravery and advocacy for human rights. Notably, he was awarded the Boris Nemtsov Foundation for Freedom's Boris Nemtsov Prize for Courage in 2021 (Boris Nemtsov Foundation for Freedom Staff 2021). As can be seen, the competency of Navalny and Volkov's leadership was unprecedented in the political opposition. This IV is coded as high.

Russia of the Future Protests

As previously mentioned, protests specific to Russia of the Future and protests carried out as a part of Navalny's broader political network were essentially the same, due to the party being interwoven with Navalny's broader political apparatus. When examining Navalny's leadership

competency, the strategic aspect of said protests was alluded to via Navalny's ability to mobilize his base. This section, on the other hand, attempted to assess the protests themselves. However, succinct data highlighting specific metrics of the size and scope of protests beyond what Navalny himself participated in/organized were not found. This was due to the fact that Western media attention surrounding these protests focused on the repression of Navalny and other key opposition figures in particular. However, for every protest that Navalny himself participated in, other members of Russia of the Future participated in and were also repressed.

These protests spanned the entirety of Navalny's tenure as party leader and beyond. Under Navalny, his supporters participated in anti-corruption protests and protests concerning general government transparency and accountability. Navalny's base also protested in support of independent Moscow Duma candidates in 2019, as well as against Putin's constitutional amendments in 2020. Of course, all these protests possessed an overall theme of expressing discontent with Putin and his regime. After Navalny was arrested in 2021 following his return to Russia after being poisoned, the protests his team organized that ensued were some of the largest under the Putin regime in support of an opposition figure. The Kremlin fiercely cracked down on these protests (Human Rights Watch Staff 2021a; 2021b).

Even after his death in 2024, his supporters still mobilized (and were still repressed). Amnesty International reported that "peaceful mourners across the country [were] arbitrarily arrested, beaten, put on trial and jailed" (Amnesty International Staff 2024). Memorial activities for Navalny included a mix of mourning and protesting. Nevertheless, this instance further exemplified the scope and breadth of protests affiliated with Navalny and his party. It also further exemplified the Kremlin's determination to stifle such activities.

Russia of the Future Official Registration Efforts

Russia of the Future consistently attempted to register as an official party from 2012-2021 to no avail. As a result, the party occasionally resorted to supporting independent candidates or other opposition party's candidates. The most obvious example of this was Navalny's Smart Voting system. Additionally, it sometimes had its own candidates run under other party's tickets (Luhn 2013; Editors of The Moscow Times 2015a).

Originally founded as the People's Alliance in 2012, the party's attempts to register in 2012 and 2013 were rejected by the Justice Ministry (Sukhov 2013). It held another founding congress toward the end of 2013, during which authorities rejected its official application once more. Early the following year, the Justice Ministry rejected the party's registration again, due to having the same name as an existing party. This tactic would be applied several times throughout the party's history. Curiously, despite Russia of the Future attempting to register for three years up until that point, another political party was able to change its name to Russia of the Future and block Navalny's party's registration rather quickly (Editors of The Moscow Times 2014). The other party made this name change the day after Navalny was elected as Russia of the Future's leader. The petition was approved by the Kremlin just 10 days later.

Following this event, the party was relabeled as the Progress Party in 2014. (Directly translated from Russian as "Party of Progress," it was often called the "Progress Party" in Western media.) After successfully completing initial registration requirements, a Russian judiciary news outlet reported that the party faced rejected applications for its regional branches due to supposed errors in the party's submitted documents (RAPSI Staff 2014). As a result, the party was not able to successfully register enough regional branches, a required step in becoming

a legitimate political party. For all intents and purposes, it was, therefore, never officially registered. The party's calls for legal action to address the issue were rejected by judicial authorities. Other reporting later elaborated that the documentation for many of the regional branches was not submitted in time (Meduza Staff 2015). However, "Navalny and his fellow party members pointed out that the Ministry of Justice branches refused to register the regional branches of the Progress Party for far-fetched reasons" (Meduza Staff 2018a). Navalny believed that the Kremlin's actions were an attempt to disrupt the planned coalition between PARNAS, Navalny's movement, and other opposition groups during the 2016 election cycle in Russia (BBC Staff 2015a). In 2015, after yet another party congress, the group's official registration was annulled by the Ministry of Justice due to the aforementioned supposed errors in its submitted documents (Reuters 2015b).

Early in 2018, the party's name was once again stolen by political rivals. An already existing political party applied to change its name to the Progress Party. Russian media explained that "a party is prohibited from renaming itself into an organization of the same name if it has the status of a legal entity." However, Navalny's party had no such legal status (PBK Staff 2018). Less than a month after these rivals' application materials were submitted, the Justice Ministry approved the change. Since Navalny's party did not technically exist due to denied registration, the process was quick and seamless. Navalny and his team would have to change their own party's name yet again. Two months later, another founding congress was abruptly ended by the landlord of the meeting location a mere hour after Navalny notified the Ministry of Justice of the time and location of the congress. Navalny, of course, suspected foul play by the Kremlin. He reported that the landlord stated that there were forces out of both his and the building owner's

control, and that the owner had ties to the government (Навальный 2018). The only source detailing this event was Navalny's blog. Regardless if details were embellished, this was yet another example of a clear pattern of the Kremlin trying to hinder (in varying levels of subtlety) Navalny's movement from creating a party to represent itself. Navalny also commented that this was his party's seventh founding congress to try to establish a political party.

Shortly afterward, another founding congress was held, this time for a party called Russia of the Future. The name was concealed until the last minute to avoid spoiler parties attempting to steal the name. The creation of the party was suspended for several months due to alleged violations in its charter. Navalny called the reasoning behind the suspension "baseless and contradictory" (Meduza Staff 2018b). In the midst of this suspension, Navalny's team again submitting documentation, which was again denied by the Justice Ministry on a technicality (Meduza Staff 2018c). In 2019, Navalny's party would hold its ninth and final congress to found a political party. The Ministry of Justice issued a denial once more under the pretext that a party of the same name had already been established. Navalny stated that "one of the technical Kremlin parties' was registered under this name; previously it was called 'The Party of Free Citizens.'" Suspiciously, "there [was] no information on the registered party 'Russia of the Future' on the Ministry of Justice website. The 'Party of Free Citizens' [had not] announced a name change either" (Радио Свобода Staff 2019). The spoiler party first appeared on the Justice Ministry's website in late May 2019, shortly after Navalny's paperwork was submitted for his party of the same name. A short month later, Navalny's team received the denial announcement (Meduza Staff 2020). Navalny's party did not attempt to re-register, instead reporting the situation to the European Council of Human Rights.

In 2021, the Moscow prosecutor's office suspended all aspects of Navalny's political apparatus in anticipation of labeling them as extremist organizations. In the wake of this action, Navalny's team preemptively shut down all components of his political network (Volkov 2021, Editors of The Moscow Times 2021). The extremist designation came shortly after, and Russia of the Future was dissolved. Despite never successfully registering as an official political party, Russia of the Future essentially served as the de facto party of Navalny's broader political movement that spanned nationwide (Noble and Petrov 2024). The frequency and fervor of its efforts clearly illustrated that the party refused to step down in the face of an impassable political environment. As such, this IV is coded as high.

Kremlin Repression of Russia of the Future

Starting first with leadership competency, Navalny and Volkov's leadership performance was unprecedented within the broader non-systemic opposition. This can also be observed via the extreme repression that they faced. When it came to the repression of Russia of the Future leaders, some unsettling results were unearthed. In 2024, Leonid Volkov was physically attacked with tear gas and a hammer outside his home in Lithuania, causing significant injuries. Volkov described the attack as "an obvious, characteristic, typical, gangster-style greeting from Putin" (Meduza Staff 2024). The attack was suspected by authorities to have been due to Volkov's status as a prominent Russian opposition figure. Lithuanian authorities stated that the attack was likely "Russian-organised and implemented." Additionally, the BBC reported that Lithuanian security officials "suggested the attack was an attempt at preventing Russia's opposition from carrying out 'projects in connection with the forthcoming undemocratic Russian presidential elections'" (Rainsford 2024b). At the time of my research, the investigation was still ongoing,

with Navalny's team claiming - via its own investigation - that a Russian opposition rival was to blame (Sauer and Walker 2024). Regardless if the attack was ordered by the Kremlin directly or a result of opposition infighting, it was clear that the attack was directly tied to Volkov's political affiliations (Editors of The Moscow Times 2024c).

Navalny, of course, faced many instances (and types) of repression in response to his illustrious political career. He endured a plethora of arrests and imprisonments tied to his organization of various protests across Russia. He survived physical attacks and an assassination attempt. He implemented Smart Voting techniques to undermine Putin's party in elections, created two anti-corruption foundations, and ran for political office himself multiple times.

Additionally, Navalny was the victim of two Zelyonka attacks while participating in protests. The second one likely included other added chemicals, as it required medical treatment and reportedly caused partial blindness in one eye (BBC Staff 2017). Navalny accused the Kremlin of being behind the attacks. Video surveillance yielded two suspects who were identified as having ties to a pro-Kremlin political group (Editors of The Moscow Times 2017). Other aforementioned instances of repression toward Navalny all followed the formula of Navalny being reprimanded for his opposition activities, and then accusing (or proving) that the Kremlin or its cronies were behind it. This adept self-awareness and unwavering defiance of the Kremlin helped propel him into becoming Russia's de facto opposition leader before his ambiguous death in prison in 2024. The repression of this IV is coded as high.

Shifting to protests, Kremlin repression was immensely high across all protests that Navalny and his supporters participated in, likely in large part due to Navalny's presence/organization of said events. Similar to the Yabloko case, overall themes of protest

repression were more easily discernible rather than specific documented cases of certain individuals facing repression. Overall, the Kremlin repressed party members at these protests on the same level as Navalny, but Navalny’s repression was more widely documented due to his status as party leader. At protests organized by/inspired by Navalny, his supporters faced constant intimidation and harassment by the authorities, as well as numerous arrests (often being released without charges). As a result, the repression of this IV is coded as high.

Efforts by Russia of the Future to register candidates were unsuccessful and essentially nonexistent due to the party’s struggle to become an official party in the first place, as described earlier. As for repression of official registration efforts, my research did not yield any documentation of another non-systemic opposition group that faced the same quantity or severity of attempts by the Kremlin to undermine their attempts at establishing a political party. Essentially all aforementioned aspects of their registration efforts, whether it was the emergence of spoiler parties or the multitude of rejection explanations given by the Kremlin, were unprecedented. Additionally, Navalny and his team’s resilience and perseverance to continue attempting to establish a political party for almost ten years was also unprecedented. As such, the repression of this IV is coded as high, even though some of the Kremlin’s actions were more easily traceable than others (almost certainly by design).

Russia of the Future Findings, Visualized

Russia of the Future	Leadership Competency	Protests	Official Reg. Efforts	Overall Kremlin Repression
Repression	High	High	High	High

Analysis

	Leadership Competency Repression	Repression of Protests	Repression of Official Reg. Efforts	Overall Kremlin Repression
Yabloko	Low	High	Medium	Medium
PARNAS	High	High	High	High
Russia of the Future	High	High	High	High

The repression of leadership competency is coded as low for Yabloko, but high for both PARNAS and Russia of the Future. Repression of protests across all cases is coded as high. Repression of official registration efforts is coded as medium for Yabloko but high for both PARNAS and Russia of the Future. Although it usually did, in a few instances my research did not yield a consistent IV–DV relationship. For example, the presence of PARNAS protests was coded as medium, but subsequent repression is coded as high. Therefore, when considering the overall findings of the IVs that were examined, the Kremlin is likely indiscriminate in its repression so long as the opposition poses any sort of threat.

My hypothesis suspects that the Kremlin perceives leadership competency as a key threat from non-systemic opposition parties, and therefore reacts the most harshly to this factor compared to the others. However, the results were surprising, as the opposite proved to be true. When the repression of each case is broken down and observed on an individual IV level, leadership competency proved the most erratic in its coding. With varying levels of IV presence, subsequent repression among cases was coded as low in some instances and high in others. Prior to this research, I was under the assumption that repression of leaders was one of the highest

forms of repression the Kremlin could employ toward the non-systemic opposition. This impression was founded in large part due to Western reporting on repression of opposition politicians in Russia being much more pertinent than coverage on other tactics of the opposition such as protests or official registration efforts. The recent death of famous opposition leader Alexei Navalny likely exasperated this coverage and further influenced my assumptions.

Protests proved the most highly repressed IV, narrowly topping official registration efforts. Despite slight variations in the presence of protests, the Kremlin by and large took this IV the most seriously when it came to repression. Although the IV–DV correlation was not perfect (the presence of PARNAS protests and repression of said protests were coded at different levels), it was usually consistent, and is coded as the most highly repressed IV, illustrating its significance as a valuable tactic for the non-systemic opposition. This also insinuates that it is the tactic most feared by the Kremlin, as it was by far the most repressed. An alternative explanation could be that the Kremlin may find this to be the simplest/most direct IV to repress: protests are observed, and authorities are dispatched to put them down. Repressing leaders or stifling registration efforts, on the other hand, require more forethought.

The presence of official registration efforts, like protests, is overall highly present and highly repressed. However, it is the only IV in my research that yielded matching IV–DV coding relationships for all the cases. This brings forth the idea that, unlike the other IVs researched, the Kremlin matches the repression of official registration efforts in line with its presence. Perhaps the Kremlin is more methodical with its repression of official registration efforts as opposed to the other IVs examined?

Regarding the overall coding of Kremlin repression, a notable inconsistency in the data is the Yabloko case. The primary explanation for Yabloko's overall repression being less than that of its fellow cases is likely due to the Kremlin's low repression of Yabloko's leadership competency in particular, despite the presence of that IV being coded as high. This is different from my other cases, where repression is coded as high regardless of the level of leadership competency. Why this unique coding of Yabloko's leadership competency exists in the first place, though, is not entirely clear. It could possibly be due to the aforementioned reality of Yabloko functioning as a hybrid case, compared to its truly non-systemic counterparts. As such, its leaders may have been subliminally granted less severe repression in line with the systemic opposition, whereas PARNAS and Russia of the Future leaders were not given such grace due to their true non-systemic nature. However, repression of Yabloko's leadership was still in the same realm of severity as their non-systemic contemporaries rather than that of the systemic opposition. The repression they experienced was slightly less, not significantly less, than that of their non-systemic contemporaries. Therefore, Yabloko leaders being less suppressed than their non-systemic peers due to their party's status as a hybrid case can not singlehandedly explain this unique imbalance between the coding of Yabloko's leadership competency and subsequent Kremlin repression.

Additionally, Yabloko's display of official registration efforts and the subsequent repression it experienced are both coded as medium. This also contributed to Yabloko's overall repression being coded as medium rather than high, as both the presence and repression of this IV are high for the two other cases.

Conclusion

All things considered, overall repression being coded as high for two of the three cases - despite being measured relative to one another instead of compared to a baseline - speaks volumes of the lengths that the Kremlin will go in order to silence political dissent. The categorization utilized provided incredibly valuable insight into the inner-workings of these non-systemic opposition parties, as well as their place within Russian politics more broadly. The effective operationalization of my methods suggests that it could prove useful if expanded to include other non-systemic opposition parties. Although, this inclusion would likely be limited to parties that have already existed. Due to the present state of the non-systemic opposition, such an expansion of new cases could prove difficult - as a symptom of the political landscape of contemporary Russia, new cases are not presenting themselves (at least, not to a Western audience). This is a reflection of the inherently extreme repressive environment that contemporary Russia has produced, especially since the turn of this decade.

As the situation currently stands in Russian politics, the non-systemic opposition is essentially non-existent, both in terms of formation and function. Especially since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the Kremlin has tightened its already brutal grip on any sort of political dissent. The non-systemic opposition in Russia was weak to begin with, from the perspectives of electoral success and official membership. But, how many individuals may have supported or been sympathetic to the causes of these parties but did not affiliate themselves out of fear for their own safety? If this data point was relatively unknowable or difficult to gauge in the past, it definitely is now. The Russian political landscape has only grown more insular over time, with Kremlin repression of political dissent growing seemingly exponentially. Existing

information posits that since 2022, the Kremlin has effectively forced an already meticulously weakened non-systemic opposition to a grinding halt. The only succinct way this changes is if the very thing that non-systemic opposition parties feel is of utmost priority is achieved: a regime change within Russia. Whether this includes Putin or the Kremlin's framework in a broader sense, the premise remains that the current political state of Russia has rendered the non-systemic opposition totally inoperable.

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