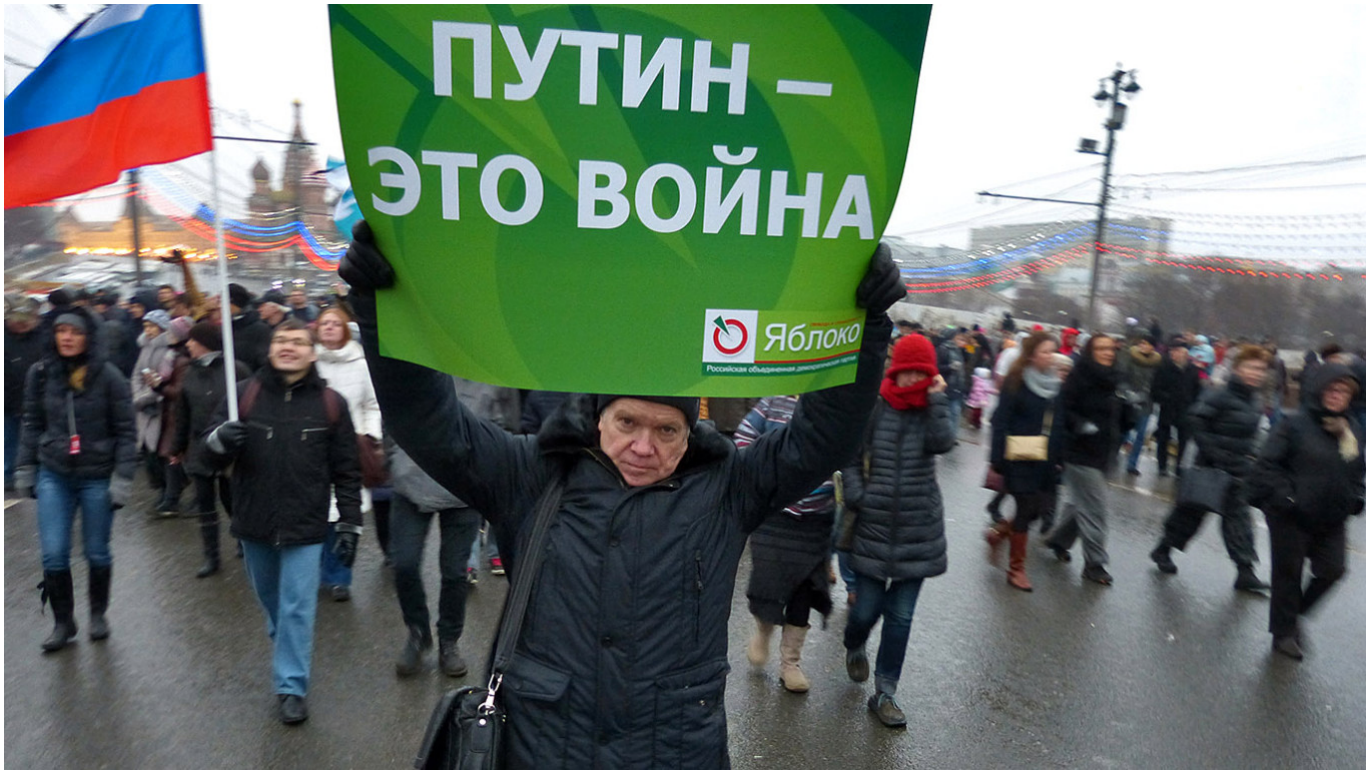
The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Explainer: Does Russia's 'Systemic Opposition' Still Exist?

By Leyla Latypova

April 28, 2025



The Nemtsov memorial procession in Moscow, 2015. The Yabloko party's poster reads: "Putin is war."
Poka tut (CC BY-SA 4.0)

Russia's so-called "systemic opposition," a term referring to the political parties accepted by Vladimir Putin's regime, has long been a defining feature of the country's political landscape.

Though these parties — including the Communist Party, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDPR), and the New People party — are expected to align with the Kremlin and the ruling United Russia party on major issues, they have been able to take a deviating stance on some social issues, such as the notorious 2018 pension reform.

That is, until Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

With the "systemic opposition" having no choice but to back the war, even marginal differences between the parties have seemingly vanished. The exception to the rule is the

veteran liberal opposition party Yabloko, which maintains a firm "pro-peace" position.

To understand whether the term "systemic opposition" can still be applied to the Russian context and what role parties like Yabloko play in politics today, The Moscow Times gathered expert opinions and looked at the latest developments in party politics.

Does 'systemic opposition' exist in the Russian parliament?

Five political parties are currently represented in Russia's State Duma. In addition to the ruling United Russia party, which maintains a parliamentary supermajority of 319 seats out of 450, there is also the Communist Party, LDPR, New People and A Just Russia.

Embed:

"For those who oppose military actions, it may seem that the opposition does not exist at all, since all parliamentary parties officially support the 'special military operation'," Stanislav Andreychuk, the co-chair of Russia's leading independent election watchdog Golos, wrote on Telegram.

"But it is important [to note] that politics is never limited to [a party's] position on a single issue. Even if they agree on one thing, they can differ greatly on other matters. For example, socio-economic issues that concern many people," Andreychuk added.

Earlier this month, New People deputy Ksenia Goryacheva spoke out against moves by regional officials to offer monetary rewards to schoolgirls who give birth in line with the Kremlin-directed policy aimed at reversing Russia's demographic crisis.

"A child giving birth to another child is a tragedy. Not a heroic act," Goryacheva said in a rare statement of dissent.

Communist Party deputy Nina Ostanina backed Goryacheva's position, petitioning the Labor Ministry to halt all such payments.

In general, Andreychuk of Golos said the "systemic opposition" label is not a useful tool for understanding Russia's political landscape.

"There has never been a clear boundary [within the opposition] — you can easily find political prisoners among almost all parliamentary parties these days," wrote the Golos co-chair.

He noted that the Kremlin invented the terms "non-systemic" and "systemic" opposition to discredit certain political players, such as Navalny and his movement, by alleging that they do not have any actual support and therefore cannot be represented in political institutions.

Political scientist Jan Matti Dollbaum, whose research focuses on opposition movements in Russia, in turn, believes that there is *nothing but* systemic opposition left in Russia.

"Whether you're talking about the Communists, Yabloko or [the unregistered] Rassvet, at

least they exist and they can do something," Dollbaum told The Moscow Times.

"Let's take the Feminist Anti-War Resistance, one of the most courageous and numerous activist groups that are...very principally against the war and the regime. They [operate in Russia] anonymously...but they can't currently be a real political actor," he added.

What is the role of the Yabloko party?

Founded in 1993, the center-left Yabloko party is one of the oldest liberal opposition movements in Russia. It once served as a career launching pad for prominent opposition figures including Alexei Navalny, Ilya Yashin and Maxim Katz — though all were expelled from the party under varying pretexts.

But despite its foundational status, Yabloko has not held a seat in the Russian parliament for nearly two decades.

"This severely limits the party's ability to influence federal politics and even to communicate its position to voters," wrote Andreychuk of Golos.

The party's absence from parliament also puts a strain on its finances by both depriving it of access to state grants and making private donors more reluctant to support it, he said.

"It is [also] harder [for the party] to attract new politicians who hope to build a parliamentary career," Andreychuk added.

Related article: Russia's Opposition, Past and Future: A Conversation With Jan Matti Dollbaum

Yabloko's performance has been comparatively more successful at the regional level, where it is represented in three regional parliaments and several local administrations.

Moscow, St. Petersburg, the republic of Karelia and the Pskov and Novgorod regions are Yabloko's strongest outposts, something that could help reverse its fortunes in next year's State Duma elections.

"For Yabloko to enter the State Duma, it would be enough to perform well in 15 to 20 of the country's largest cities...But there is a clear lack of strong branch leaders and much depends on their daily work," wrote Andreychuk.

Yabloko's "pro-peace" position has put it under additional pressure from the Kremlin, with several prominent members arrested, jailed or silenced with a "foreign agent" label.

"Yabloko is hanging by a thread that could be pulled at any moment, causing the party to simply cease to exist," Andreychuk warned.

In March, authorities designated the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE), a European party of which Yabloko was a longtime member, as an "undesirable" organization — a likely attempt to pave the way for exerting more legal pressure on the party.

Yabloko hastily left the European party after the designation, citing divergent views on the

Ukraine war resolution and accusing ALDE of warmongering.

ALDE's press office did not respond to The Moscow Times' request for comment.

Is there any other party to keep an eye on?

Rassvet ("Dawn"), a yet-to-be-registered party founded by the 2024 presidential hopeful Yekaterina Duntsova, is the most notable up-and-coming player in Russia's electoral politics.

Though the Justice Ministry refused to register the party last year, citing alleged application errors, Duntsova and her team vowed to go through the process again.

In the meantime, the party, which advocates for "public dialogue" and "the development of a democratic society," hopes to open 50 regional branches across the country.

But only two regional branches of Rassvet have been established since Duntsova announced the grand plan in December last year, with one dissolved months after opening due to infighting.

Do these political players actually matter?

"They obviously don't matter at all for what happens to the war or the regime in the short term. It would be overly optimistic to think that. But maybe we were overly optimistic before, too, when we thought that Navalny could be able to change something?" political analyst Dollbaum said.

Dollbaum believes that the mere fact that dozens of young people showed up at Rassvet's branch openings in Perm and Tula signals that these players "matter to those who remain in Russia."

"They offer a chance to do something," said Dollbaum. "There are many, many people in Russia who would like to do much more...These organizations — like Yabloko, Rassvet and so many others — take up the energy that exists and that we should never forget about in the West when we think about Russia."

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2025/04/28/explainer-does-russias-systemic-opposition-still-exist-a88868