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Left-Wing Russian Parties on the Road to the 2026 Parliamentary Elections



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Left-Wing Russian Parties on the Road to the 2026 Parliamentary Elections

Following the onset of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russia's political landscape has grown markedly more authoritarian. This shift has been characterized by the systematic dismantling of independent media and an intensification of repression against political opposition. Prominent political figures, such as Mikhail Lobanov, Yevgeny Stupin, and a range of younger activists and left-wing deputies, have found themselves either exiled or forced to operate under semi-legal conditions within Russia.

In this environment, officially registered political parties have been increasingly coerced into aligning, to varying extents, with the Kremlin's political agenda. This alignment has often come at the expense of their foundational principles, particularly socialist ideals rooted in internationalism and pacifism.

The two largest left-wing parties in Russia — the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF) and “Just Russia” (JRFT) — have unequivocally endorsed President Vladimir Putin's trajectory, lending their support to the war in Ukraine and backing repressive domestic legislation. These parties have merged demands for expanded social benefits with nationalist and anti-immigrant rhetoric, appealing to populist sentiments that exploit the fears and prejudices of the electorate. Over time, their positions have become increasingly aligned with those of the Kremlin, resembling more the paramilitary factions of a larger fascist movement than traditional left-wing ideologies.

In stark contrast, Yabloko, Russia's principal democratic party, stands as the sole anti-war faction in the country. The party has focused on defending civil liberties and human rights in an environment where such efforts have led to continuous repression, the stripping of parliamentary privileges, and the arrest of its political activists. While Yabloko maintains its commitment to democratic values, the broader left-wing opposition has been effectively marginalized.

Other smaller parties, which initially played a spoiler role in both federal and regional elections, have largely ceased to function, holding minimal influence within Russia's current political framework.

Despite these heavy conditions, the major left-wing parties are preparing for the 2026 parliamentary elections. However, the prospects for these parties remain uncertain, with much of their future success contingent on a variety of internal and external factors. This paper aims to provide an analysis of the current state of the CPRF, JRFT, Yabloko, and smaller political parties within Russia, shedding light on their evolving roles and strategies as the 2026 elections draw near.

The Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF)

The CPRF, established in 1993, emerged from the grassroots cells and regional structures that were once part of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) in Russia. Currently, it stands as the second most significant political force in the country, following United Russia (ER). According to estimates from the party leadership, the CPRF boasts approximately 160,000 members. The party holds 57 of the 450 seats in the State Duma (12.7%), ranking second, far behind United Russia, which commands 316 seats (70.22%). The CPRF maintains representation in all regional legislative assemblies, with the exception of Ingushetia, though it does not secure a majority in any region. Notably, in the Republic of Khakassia, as well as in the Oryol and Ulyanovsk regions, the party has secured leadership positions with communists assuming the role of heads of administration.

The party's platform outlines the strategic goal of building a renewed form of 21st-century socialism within Russia, though it stops short of explicitly advocating for communism. The CPRF's emphasis lies in reinforcing the power of the state with calls for the nationalization of natural resources and strategic sectors of the economy. The party's leadership emphasizes patriotism and the “traditional values” championed by the Kremlin, positioning social justice as its core value. Unlike the Bolsheviks of the 20th century, the CPRF adopts a notably more tolerant stance toward religion, particularly the Russian Orthodox Church. A central element of the CPRF's ideological framework is the preservation of the Soviet legacy, coupled with justification of Stalinism, viewing it as an example of the triumph of Russia's great power status.

In this vision, socialism is framed as a strong state that guarantees social security to broad segments of society, and the party seeks to garner widespread societal support for its agenda.

Gennady Zyuganov, who has led the CPRF since its founding, recently celebrated his 81st birthday. His leadership has been a defining feature of the party, and his political prominence peaked in 1996 when he came within striking distance of defeating Boris Yeltsin in the second round of the presidential elections. Since then, Zyuganov has contested the presidency several times, but has never advanced beyond the first round. In 2018, businessman Pavel Grudinin, a left-wing figure, ran as the CPRF's presidential candidate in place of Zyuganov, and in 2024, Nikolai Kharitonov, the former leader of the Agrarian Party of Russia, represented the party.

Over the past decade, Zyuganov has demonstrated unwavering personal loyalty to President Vladimir Putin, even expressing concern for the health of the Russian leader. He is known for his vehement rhetoric against "Ukrainian Nazis" and the perceived threats posed by "Anglo-Saxons" and NATO. Zyuganov is a staunch supporter of the war in Ukraine, insisting that it must continue until a decisive victory is achieved. Notably, Zyuganov recently participated in a public event where he laid flowers at the restored monument to Stalin in a Moscow metro station, further confirming his ideological alignment with Putin's policies.

In terms of length, Zyuganov's leadership of the CPRF has now surpassed that of both Stalin and Brezhnev. The party's re-election congress, that took place on 3-4 July, has reconfirmed Zyuganov in his position, as was expected. Recently, Yuri Afonin, the first deputy chairman of the CPRF's Central Committee, has taken a more prominent role within the party. Afonin views the CPRF as the "only ideological party" in Russia and is focused on reinforcing the party's international communist affiliations.

Although there has been no official discussion of a successor to Zyuganov, his grandson, 36-year-old Leonid Zyuganov has emerged as a prominent figure within the party. In 2023, Leonid ran unsuccessfully for mayor of Moscow and was elected to the Moscow City Duma for the third consecutive term in 2024. In a 2014 interview, he criticized his "totalitarian parents" and argued that

*"the true idea of communism is
the idea of patriotism".*

His early political career was shaped by an unsuccessful attempt to enter business through Moscow City Hall during his student years, followed by a role as an assistant to a State Duma deputy. Leonid's political trajectory continued with his election to the Moscow City Duma, supported by Alexei Navalny's "smart voting" initiative. Currently, Leonid

Zyuganov is overseeing the development of the "CPRF ID" mobile application, which is expected to play a central role in the party's campaign for the 2026 State Duma elections.

The CPRF's faction in the State Duma comprises 57 members, but only 8 of them are women, including notable figures such as cosmonaut Svetlana Savitskaya and Anastasia Udaltsova, the wife of a former political prisoner. The faction also includes 14 members of the CPRF's Central Committee Presidium, including figures such as Leonid Kalashnikov, Ivan Melnikov, and Nikolai Kharitonov. However, the majority of these members are older apparatchiks, representative of the last Soviet generation. In the 2024 presidential election, 75-year-old Kharitonov received just over 4% of the vote, leaving him in second place behind Vladimir Putin. Among the CPRF faction in the State Duma, only 16 members are under the age of 50, with only three under 40.

The youngest member of the CPRF faction, Denis Parfenov (born September 22, 1987), has gained prominence for his support of grassroots opposition movements in Moscow. His recent activism includes supporting a rally in June 2024 against paid parking in the Timiryazevsky district. While a demonstration or a public gathering would need consent from police, to avoid legal consequences, Parfenov arranged this event in the form of a meeting between local residents and their deputy, which is allowed and does not require approval. Parfenov is also a vocal critic of electronic voting, arguing that it facilitates election manipulation, as evidenced during the 2021 Moscow elections. In 2024, Parfenov expressed support for opposition candidates disqualified from the Moscow City Duma elections and found himself embroiled in a scandal involving unsubstantiated allegations of sexual misconduct in the State Duma office. Additionally, Parfenov is known for his frequent calls to close the Boris Yeltsin Presidential Centre in Yekaterinburg.

One of the most recognizable figures in the CPRF faction is Sergei Shargunov, the editor-in-chief of Yunost magazine and host of the "Open Book" on Culture TV and "The Twelve" on Russia-24. Shargunov is regarded as one of the more humanistic figures within the State Duma. In 2023, Shargunov was among several deputies who refused to support a law on electronic draft notices. In 2024, he submitted an appeal to the Prosecutor General of Russia demanding an investigation into the attack on Novaya Gazeta journalist Elena Milashina in Chechnya. He has also campaigned for the return of a memorial plaque to poet Anna Akhmatova on a St. Petersburg prison building and supported the creation of an award named after investigative journalist Yuri Shchekochikhin, the first victim of Novichok poisoning in 2003. Shargunov is an outspoken opponent of censorship and has stated that he finds the term "politician" offensive. He identifies as a "Narodnik" and believes in the potential for future democratisation in Russia. However, his actions are often counterbalanced by

his strong opposition to “Russophobia” and his stance on the war in Ukraine.

In terms of legislative activity, the CPRF faction made a notable attempt at the end of 2023 to prevent the passage of a new law on local self-government, which sought to reduce the powers of municipalities by consolidating authority within the federal bureaucratic structure. In March 2024, the CPRF introduced a new draft of the Labor Code, proposing a reduction in the standard workweek from 40 to 30 hours and additional benefits for single mothers and large families. However, the chances of these bills passing remain slim, particularly following the Russian government’s decision to block the CPRF’s proposal to ban vapes and vaping liquids.

Looking ahead to second half of 2025, the CPRF plans to introduce several key legislative initiatives, including a new Electoral Code, amendments to the Tax Code, and a push to reduce the Central Bank’s key interest rate. However, given the party’s lack of a majority in parliament and its inability to form a coalition with other parties opposed to United Russia, the likelihood of these bills passing under the current parliamentary configuration is low.

The CPRF’s political strategy is evident: while it generally votes in favor of legislation deemed necessary by the Kremlin, it also attempts to position itself as a defender of social issues, using high-profile proposals such as the push to repeal the 2018 pension reform to appeal to voters.

As the 2026 parliamentary elections are approaching, it is expected that the CPRF will continue to focus on social issues and other areas of concern for its base. Public opinion polls currently indicate the CPRF’s approval rating remains stable at around 9.3–9.8%, positioning the party as the third-largest political force, following United Russia and the Liberal Democratic Party. However, the CPRF faces a real risk of losing its status as the second most significant political force in the country in the upcoming year.

The “Just Russia”

“Just Russia – Patriots – For Truth” (JRFT) was founded in 2006 through the merger of the “Party of Life,” “Rodina,” the Pensioners’ Party, and the Socialist Unity Party. The party was also present at the height of the protests following the 2011 Duma elections (the so-called Bolotnaya protests) — most notably through Gennady Gudkov, who at the time appeared publicly as a Duma deputy and member of “Just Russia.” During this period, the party leadership actively sought to demonstrate solidarity with citizens protesting against electoral fraud and even entered into public conflict with Vladimir Putin.

However, after 2011, the party changed its strategy: it expelled its most regime-critical members, including Gennady and Dmitry Gudkov as well as Ilya Ponomarev (all of whom now live in exile), and moved toward closer cooperation with the government.

Its strategic aim apparently was to be absorbed into the core power structure of Russia as a second state-supporting party, allowing for a controlled political competition between “United Russia” and “Just Russia.” From an oppositional platform, “Just Russia” gradually evolved — first into a spoiler and eventually into a government-steered “systemic opposition” party focused on social justice.

The party adopted its current name in 2021 following another merger with the “Patriots of Russia,” led by Gennady Semigin, and Zakhar Prilepin’s “For Truth” party. However, in October 2024, both Prilepin and Semigin notably did not attend the party’s congress, with Semigin subsequently losing his position as co-chair. Despite these internal shifts, JRFT remains closely associated with its leader, Sergei Mironov.

As of 2021, JRFT officially claimed the party had over 144,000 members. However, the accuracy of this figure is in question, as it was revealed during the most recent congress that, over a period of 18 months, only 10 new members had joined across 17 regional branches. This raises serious questions about how the party has managed to maintain a relatively large membership, especially by Russian standards, despite such a low recruitment rate.

In the State Duma, the “Just Russia – For Truth” faction holds 28 seats (6.2%), placing it third, after United Russia and the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF). Regionally, JRFT is represented in the legislative assemblies of most constituent entities of the Russian Federation and has branches in all regions. However, despite this extensive presence, the party struggles to wield significant political influence.

Ideologically, JRFT positions itself as an advocate for a just state and “new socialism”, initially focusing on the fight against poverty. At its 2024 congress, the party shifted towards “patriotic socialism,” emphasizing the state as the primary force capable of protecting citizens from injustice.

Unlike the CPRF, JRFT does not commonly reference Lenin’s works nor actively support Stalin, although Prilepin, one of the key figures in the party, is known to be a staunch admirer of Stalin. The party also aligns itself with the Kremlin’s policies, promoting “traditional values” and advocating for stringent anti-immigrant measures.

The use of terms like “justice” and “socialism” is likely intended to appeal to older generations, many of whom still associate these concepts with positive ideals. For the 2026 elections, JRFT plans to incorporate patriotism more explicitly into its ideological framework, a theme that has gained particular relevance in the context of the ongoing war.

After being expelled from the Socialist International for supporting Russia's aggression in Ukraine, the party has accused the European left of betraying socialism's core principles, despite JRFT's own commitment to these ideals remaining ambiguous.

Sergei Mironov, Chairman of JRFT (turned 72 in February), has been a prominent political figure in Russia for over three decades. A trained geophysicist and former airborne troops officer, Mironov entered politics in 1994 as a member of the St. Petersburg regional parliament, quickly rising to the position of first deputy chairman. In 2001, he became a member of the Federation Council, where, at the recommendation of President Putin, he replaced Yegor Stroyev as the speaker of the upper house of the Russian parliament. In 2003, Mironov founded the “Party of Life,” which later evolved into “Just Russia.” He ran for president in both 2004 and 2012, often emphasizing his close and trusted relationship with Putin.

Initially known for his eccentric persona as a “kind madman”, Mironov's rhetoric has become more extreme, particularly after the onset of the war in Ukraine. In 2022, he proposed recognizing Ukraine as a “terrorist state” and advocated for the confiscation of Ukrainian citizens' property within Russia. Subsequently, Mironov called for attacks on decision-making centers in Kyiv and key Ukrainian infrastructure. In 2025, he again proposed reinstating the death penalty. He has also been accused by independent journalists of kidnapping and illegally adopting a 10-month-old Ukrainian child.

Mironov has been a staunch supporter of Yevgeny Prigozhin, and photographs of him with a sledgehammer—a symbol of bloody execution used by the Wagner private military company—further cement his association with this controversial figure. Leaked reports from spring 2023 suggested that Prigozhin intended to seize control of JRFT and create a new conservative political movement.

Following the failed “March of Justice” uprising and the subsequent death of its organizer, Prigozhin, the activities of JRFT were temporarily scaled back. In the

2024 presidential election, Mironov did not run for office; instead, his party expressed support for the “incumbent head of state,” Vladimir Putin.

Of the 28 members of JRFT in the State Duma, only four are women, including actress Elena Drapeiko, known for her ultra-patriotic views, and Galina Khovanskaya, a former member of the “Yabloko” party, who focuses on housing and utilities issues. Other notable figures in the faction include actor and director Nikolai Burlyaev, who has made controversial remarks about Jews and the murder of poet Lermontov, Anatoly Wasserman, an Odessa native who actively supports the idea of Ukraine joining Russia, and economist Mikhail Delyagin, a proponent of statist policies. Only three deputies in the faction are under the age of 50, the youngest being 36-year-old Yana Lantratova, who has recently proposed creating a register of telephone scammers and allowing teachers to retire early.

Among the more recent legislative initiatives of JRFT is a bill proposing long prison sentences for immigrants convicted of crimes against Russian citizens, alongside the expulsion of their relatives “along with the entire clan”. Earlier, the party leadership floated the idea of introducing a visa regime with Central Asian countries. JRFT deputy Dmitry Gusev has also proposed making Easter and Holy Trinity Day official holidays. In May 2024, Mironov sent a letter to the prime minister demanding the development of “measures to curb prices” for food and utilities. At the close of last year, the party proposed a bill aimed at banning “propaganda against traditional values” among children.

Tainted by its close association with Prigozhin, JRFT has sought to demonstrate its loyalty to the Kremlin. This effort includes aligning with Putin's policies on Ukraine and defending “traditional values” while also adopting a hardline anti-immigrant stance. However, this strategy, which places JRFT in a “radical-extremist niche”, limits the party's chances of significant electoral success in the upcoming parliamentary elections. The party's official approval rating remains stable at around 4%, which is below the threshold required to enter the State Duma. Political analysts close to the presidential administration acknowledge that JRFT risks losing its parliamentary faction in 2026 unless it can establish itself as a more genuinely left-wing party.

Yabloko

The Russian Democratic Party Yabloko was initially formed in October 1993, just prior to the first post-Soviet elections to the State Duma. It originated as the Yavlinsky-Boldyrev-Lukin electoral bloc (YaBLoko), established by representatives of the Social Democratic Party and several other political groups. Five years later, this bloc evolved into a full-fledged political party. As of the most recent data, Yabloko officially claims a membership exceeding

28,000, although some sources report only 16,100 members as of 2021. In April 2022, the party introduced stricter admission protocols, extending the required membership period to two years and expelling at least 98 members. Currently, Yabloko maintains regional branches in 78 of Russia's constituent entities¹.

Historically, the Yabloko faction was represented in the State Duma during its first decade of existence, from 1993 to 2003, with its highest representation occurring between 1995 and 1999, when the party held 45 seats. However, in the 2021 elections, the party garnered only 1.34% of the vote. The 2024 regional elections marked another setback for the party, which was left with only five representatives in the legislative bodies of St. Petersburg, Karelia, and the Pskov region. Today, Yabloko has slightly over 50 deputies serving in local government bodies in Moscow and other regions. Its representation has also been adversely impacted by the labelling of 11 of its leaders and activists as "foreign agents."

Of all political parties in Russia, Yabloko is distinguished by its clearly articulated ideological stance, located at the intersection of social liberalism and social democracy. Since 2007, the party has housed a social democratic faction, led by Academician Alexei Arbatov.

In its 2021 election program, Yabloko called for the release of political prisoners, increased funding for healthcare and education, and a cessation of interference in the internal affairs of neighboring countries, advocating for respect for their sovereignty and territorial integrity. In the face of growing Russian authoritarianism, Yabloko has consistently fought to preserve fundamental values such as freedom, justice, equal opportunity, democracy, and human rights.

Following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Yabloko became the only legal political entity within Russia to publicly condemn the aggression and demand an immediate, unconditional ceasefire. This pacifist position has drawn criticism from some Russian liberal émigrés, who argue that Yabloko's stance is "convenient for Putin". In 2024, Lev Shlosberg, a prominent party member, faced intense scrutiny for expressing support for residents of settlements in the Kursk region captured by Ukrainian forces.

Given the current political climate, Yabloko's position represents the maximum possible compromise

between remaining faithful to its ideals and staying within the confines of the law. Notably, the party was forced to voluntarily leave the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe after it was declared an "undesirable" organization in Russia.

Since 2019, Yabloko's leadership has been under the direction of 46-year-old Nikolai Rybakov, who previously shared the role with Sergei Mitrokhin and Emilia Slabunova. The party's founder, Grigory Yavlinsky, has served as head of Yabloko's federal political committee since 2008, a body responsible for formulating the party's stance on key political issues. Yavlinsky has remained the party's central figure throughout its history, a position that has led to accusations of "leaderism" and the transformation of the party into a sect centered around his personal following. Since 1996, Yavlinsky has participated in every presidential election, with his most recent bid in 2018 resulting in a fifth-place finish, securing just 1.05% of the vote. He chose not to run in the 2024 presidential race.

The party's core priorities include aiding refugees and victims of war, supporting political prisoners and opposing the re-Stalinization of Russian society.

In April 2024, Yabloko raised 2.9 million rubles through its sixth auction in support of political prisoners. The proceeds are earmarked for supporting left-wing sociologist Boris Kagarlitsky, electoral expert Grigory Melkonyants, and six other prisoners of conscience. Two leaders from Yabloko's regional branches in Kamchatka and Ryazan are currently incarcerated, and Lev Shlosberg is under house arrest in Pskov.

Despite mounting pressure, Yabloko intends to participate in the 2025-26 regional and federal parliamentary elections. Although the party's official approval rating was recorded at 3% in 2024, its electoral prospects are influenced less by voter preference than by the repressive actions of the Kremlin.

Left-Wing Minor Parties in Russia

Among the non-parliamentary political organizations in contemporary Russia, the Communists of Russia occupy a significant position, positioning themselves as a challenger to the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF) in the struggle for the legacy of the Soviet Communist Party (CPSU). The party operates branches in 75 regions of Russia and has 11 deputies in regional legislative

¹ The number of regional branches is incorrectly stated on the English version of the Yabloko party website. The correct number can be verified here: yabloko.ru/ro

assemblies. The Communists of Russia espouse Stalin's economic model as a model to follow, advocate for the restoration of the USSR, and support Russia's military actions in Ukraine. In contrast to the CPRF, the Communists of Russia maintain strongly atheist views and regard the establishment of communism as their strategic objective. In recent years, the party has fielded candidates in regional elections, including the Leningrad and Perm regions. In the 2021 parliamentary elections, the party secured 1.27% of the vote, while its leader, Sergey Malinkovich, was not registered as a candidate in the 2024 presidential election. One of the party's primary objectives is to siphon votes away from the CPRF during federal and regional elections, positioning itself as an alternative to the larger communist faction.

The Russian Pensioners' Party for Social Justice was initially founded in 1997, integrated into "Fair Russia" in 2006, and re-established itself as an independent political entity in 2012. Its principal goal is to safeguard the rights of senior citizens and improve their quality of life. The party's agenda revolves around social policy, pension reform, and healthcare reform. With membership numbers not exceeding 1,000, the party maintains official branches in 70 regions of Russia and holds one or two seats in 28 regional parliaments. However, the party's leaders have not sought presidential or regional leadership positions.

Founded in 2002 by Gennady Seleznev, the former Speaker of the State Duma who departed the CPRF, the Party for the Revival of Russia aims to "revive Russia as a great power" and to establish a social state in line with the current Russian Constitution. Despite having a broad network of regional branches, the party lacks representation in both regional parliaments and local government bodies. Its last two candidates failed to secure seats in the Moscow City Duma. Since 2012, the Party of Social Protection has focused its campaign on the slogan "For the rise of salaries and pensions", advocating for a progressive tax system and a series of social protection measures, many of which remain largely declaratory. Notably, the party's representation in regional or local government bodies is minimal, and the latest news surrounding it concerns the arrest of its Ryazan branch leader for forging an identity card of a Federal Security Service (FSB) officer.

Finally, the Russian Party of Freedom and Justice, previously known for its involvement with left-wing publicist Maxim Shevchenko and media manager Konstantin Rykov, is currently inactive and has ceased maintaining its official website. The party's last significant action was nominating Andrei Bogdanov, a Russian Freemason lodge master, for the presidency in late 2023. However, Bogdanov ultimately withdrew from the race. This indicates a profound stagnation within the party and underscores its diminished role in Russia's political landscape.

About the author

Dr. Vasily Zharkov is a historian and political researcher. He is currently a visiting scholar at the European Humanities University (Vilnius, Lithuania), Director of the New Political Science Program at the Faculty of Liberal Arts and Sciences (Budva, Montenegro), an expert at the School of Civic Education (London, Great Britain), and a member of the Advisory Board at the Independent Institute of Philosophy (Paris, France). He is also a columnist for The Moscow Times.

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Since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russia's political system has entered a new stage of authoritarian consolidation. Independent media have been dismantled, opposition figures driven into exile, and officially registered parties compelled to align with the Kremlin's agenda.



Left-wing movements have been especially affected: leading figures such as Mikhail Lobanov and Yevgeny Stupin operate under semi-legal conditions, while the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF) and "Just Russia" (JRFT) have abandoned their internationalist and pacifist roots. Both parties now endorse President Vladimir Putin's policies, support the war in Ukraine, and promote a blend of social populism with nationalist and anti-immigrant rhetoric, making them resemble loyalist factions of an authoritarian system rather than independent socialist actors.



In contrast, Yabloko remains the only anti-war parliamentary party, persistently defending civil liberties despite harsh repression. This paper analyzes the current trajectories of CPRF, JRFT, Yabloko, and minor parties as they prepare for the 2026 parliamentary elections.

Further information on this topic can be found here:

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