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# **Between loyalty and opposition. The Communist party of Russia and the growing intra-party cleavage**

Abstract: The article analyzes intra-party dynamics and the transformation of the role of the Communist party of the Russian Federation (KPRF) within the Russian political system. Although the party is considered to be a member of the so-called ‘loyal’ opposition, the increasing volatility of the party system and growing political instability have implications for future relations between the KPRF and the regime. The article argues that despite the organizational strength and demonstrated loyalty to the regime, the party is currently affected by the problem of ‘dual commitment’, epitomized by a growing center-regions cleavage and ideological incoherence. These two vectors of internal divide are shaped by the context emerging from different intra-system trends and by demographic trends affecting the interaction between the leadership and the rank-and-file of the KPRF. While in the wake of some surprising results from the 2021 legislative elections the party seems still committed to demonstrating loyalty to the regime, in the long run the growing intra-party cleavage is likely to affect the role of the KPRF within the party system, opening a new window of opportunity for opposition politics in Russian regions.

Keywords: KPRF, dual commitment, center-regions, intra-party cleavage, Russia

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## **Introduction**

On 25 September 2021, a few days after a rather successful electoral performance in the Duma elections, some 400 Communist rank-and-file activists and supporters gathered in Pushkinskaia Square, central Moscow. The rally, organized under the slogan ‘For Fair Elections’ by the Moscow branch of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF) was not permitted by the authorities. Challenging the official electoral results in Moscow district, the rally accused the authorities of vote rigging. Similar rallies were organized in other cities across Russia, for instance in Ekaterinburg, Saratov, and Volgograd. The same day, however, the longstanding leader of the party, Gennadii Zyuganov, held a meeting with the Russian president, Vladimir Putin. While Communist activists were detained in Moscow and other cities, Zyuganov continued to play his institutional role within the system, pledging support to the President (Gosudarstvennaia Duma, 2021).

The dissonance between words and deeds and between the leadership and the rest of the party is not new for observers of Russian politics. Unsurprisingly, the KPRF is

usually considered to be a member of the so-called ‘loyal’ opposition. However, fundamental questions remain. What does explain the stability of regime-opposition relations? Why does the relationship between the KPRF and the Kremlin has become increasingly contradictory and unstable?

Although there is a large number of studies focusing on the role of the ‘party of power’, co-optation (see Golosov, 2014b; Panov and Ross, 2019; Reuter, 2017) and dynamics of cooperation between ‘non-systemic’ and ‘systemic opposition’ (Dollbaum, 2017; Armstrong, Reuter and Robertson, 2020), the specific role of the second party in Russia remains less investigated. Indeed, since the introduction of the pension reform in 2018 and during the pandemic, the KPRF clearly emerged as a far less reliable partner for the regime, consolidating, instead of fragmenting the protest electorate. The KPRF not only showed strong opposition during the approval of the pension reform in the second reading, with 41 out of 42 MPs voting against the bill, but also played an important role in the organization of mass protests. The Communist were also the only parliamentary party to abstain during the vote on the main constitutional reform bill in March 2020, undermining the Kremlin’s narrative that the changes to the Constitution were legitimate exactly because adopted unanimously and ‘by the will of the people’ (Vasil’eva, 2020). The KPRF’s active campaign against the amendments ahead of the popular vote between June and July 2020 caused the ire of Putin himself (Vedomosti, 2020).

The article argues that rather than determined by a zero-sum choice between loyalty and open rebellion, the relationship between the regime and the systemic opposition should be conceptualized as a constant balancing act. This fluctuation and instability in the relationship between the regime and the KPRF can be explained by intra-party dynamics that remain less well-understood in the literature. With the consolidation of the ‘dominant party regime’, several factors deeply affected the pre-existing cleavage along center-regions and ideological lines within the KPRF. Among these factors the article analyses the impact of the institutional design, the growing generational gap, variation in the electoral performance of the party of power and the strategies of the non-systemic opposition. The growing tension within the party ultimately contributes to the increasing prominence of the ‘dual commitment’ problem affecting the party leadership. Despite its demonstrated loyalty to the regime, due to its organizational and ideological

features the role of the KPRF within the political arena is then characterized by a continuous balancing act between bottom-up and top-down incentives.

Beyond enriching literature on the internal dynamics of opposition parties in autocracies, the article appears relevant to understanding the specific process of organizational and ideological transformation and adaptation of unreformed communist successor parties in Eastern Europe and Eurasia such as the Party of Communists of the Republic of Moldova, the Communist Party of Belarus and, until recently, the Communist Party of Ukraine.

The study proceeds as follows. First, it provides the theoretical foundation for the argument, introducing the concept of ‘dual commitment’ adopted to explain the importance of intra-party dynamics in authoritarian regimes. The next section discusses the methodological approach of the study followed by an overview of the evolution of the role of the KPRF within the system, including the analysis of organizational preconditions for the growing tension within the party. The article proceeds with the analysis of two vectors of intra-party divide concluding by the examination of demographic trends and the specific political ‘environment’ that undermine the organizational cohesion of the party. The general argument of the paper is summarized in the conclusion.<sup>1</sup>

### **Party-level factors and the ‘dual commitment’ problem in authoritarian regimes**

While there is no generally agreed upon definition within the growing literature studying the increasing number of authoritarian regimes that preserve seemingly democratic institutions, scholars agree that within these regimes electoral competition remains a tool, preserving the status quo, legitimizing the regime, ensuring the victory of the ruling party and solving possible intra-elite conflicts (Gandhi and Przeworski, 2007).

To reduce the degree of uncertainty before and during elections this type of regime relies on two main tools. One is that it gains access to the broader population through the construction and consolidation of an executive-controlled pro-regime party (Magaloni, 2006). The other is a parallel process through which the opposition and regional elites are co-opted. This process is based on both institutional and informal tools of the partial distribution of spoils, providing oppositional parties with career opportunities and

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<sup>1</sup> This study lays the conceptual foundation of a larger project that aims to include a quantitative examination of the impact of the KPRF’s internal dynamics on the party’s electoral performance.

resources and preventing the consolidation of a unified anti-regime platform (Armstrong, Reuter and Robertson, 2020). Thus, members of the opposition willing to bargain with the ruling regime and participate in official politics are usually dubbed as ‘loyal’ or ‘systemic’, while the component that remains excluded from this informal compact is labelled as ‘non-systemic’ or ‘radical’ opposition (Helms, 2021).

While these arguments can provide a general theoretical understanding of the formation and consolidation of the dominant party regime, they nonetheless obscure important nuances shaping the dynamics of inter and intra-party interaction in contemporary Russia. First, despite some important exceptions (Dollbaum, 2017; White, 2020), the literature on party co-optation tends to represent all the parties of the systemic opposition as similar in their interaction with the regime (Turovsky, 2015). Although the parties of the systemic opposition might share a similar role in providing the regime with the necessary legitimacy, their ideological, historical and organizational features play an important role affecting the ability of the regime to co-opt them.

Second, this approach tends to consider the relationship between the systemic opposition and the regime as mostly stable, overlooking the consequences of the ‘environment’ in which the interaction takes place as well as that of intra-party dynamics. Finally, national-level explanations overlook the growing geographic asymmetry of a federal state (at least nominally) like Russia and the specific institutional context in which the parties operate at different levels of governance. Although it remains reasonably excluded from any chance of victory at the national level, the competition is more open at the regional and local level, structuring different set of incentives for party members.

This perspective should be then integrated by an analysis of intra-party organizational features and their impact on the stability of the party-regime relations in an authoritarian setting. As argued by several scholars, internal characteristics played an important role in the evolution of the Communist successor parties (see Ishiyama and Bozóki, 2001; Tavits, 2013; Grzymala-Busse, 2018). The vast body of literature investigating intra-party organizational features highlights several important aspects theoretically relevant in the authoritarian context. A critical component of party organizations is organizational extensiveness (or strength). As demonstrated by studies looking at the development of party competition in post-communist Europe, organizational extensiveness is generally highly correlated with electoral success (Grzymala-Busse, 2002; Tavits, 2012). However, in the authoritarian context

extensiveness plays also another important role. By enhancing party's mobilizational capacity and potential electoral threat to the regime, extensiveness helps to maintain linkage with voters and increases the bargaining power of the leadership vis-à-vis the regime (Buckles, 2019). Thus, strong parties appear less likely to be easily co-opted. Further, even when integrated into the dominant party system, strong parties are more likely to preserve bargaining power which allows them to maintain a degree of independence and extract more concessions from the rulers, making the interaction with the regime far less stable in the long run.

The second important organizational feature is the balance of power between party leadership and lower cadres. The degree of party centralization has important consequences for the behavior of party members. In authoritarian context, the centralization of the decision-making process may grant party leaders a greater degree of discretion over party strategies vis-à-vis the regime (Meng, 2021). Party centralization, however, affects the third organizational feature of opposition parties, intra-party ideological coherence and political cohesion. As demonstrated by Anna Grzymala-Busse (2018, 163), while cohesion and ideological coherence were conducive to the initial success, excessive party centralization created intra-party conflicts leading to fragmentation and decay of communist successor parties in Eastern Europe. Competition and conflicts are further intensified by electoral successes that make the party label more valuable and the role of regional leaders and file-and-rank members more significant. In the context of co-optation, when short-term benefits for the narrow circle of party leadership is preferred over the long-term political strategy, a compromise with the regime is more likely to meet resistance from lower cadres creating intra-party conflicts, thus affecting the stability of regime-systemic opposition relationship over time (Buckles, 2019). This is particularly true for organizationally strong parties that rely on an extensive network of active members and regional and local branches. Theoretically, these problems can affect the party across the center-periphery (Close and Gherghina, 2019, 6) and ideological dimension (Lupu, 2016), the two main cleavages analyzed in this study.

Finally, the impact of different types of linkage between parties and their voters provides a useful theoretical tool. Kitschelt (2001) distinguishes between three types of linkage: 'charismatic', in which parties mobilize support using the charisma of a leader; 'clientelistic', in which the main catalyst of support is based on the exchange of specific benefits; and 'programmatic', in which parties mobilize voters relying on programs of

policies based on a general conception of public goods. Although scholars have argued that in the post-communist context linkage mechanisms for new and reinvented parties were not particularly developed in shaping party competition (Grzymala-Busse, 2006), this typology remains important for parties that preserved much of the organizational and ideological features after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Programmatic parties are more likely than clientelistic and charismatic counterparts to develop or preserve an organizational structure that relies on large active membership. By the same token, programmatic parties are usually less federalized as the aim of their programs and structure is to represent the entire nation rather than single constituencies with specific social and interest groups (Kitschelt, 2001). If on the one hand this makes programmatic parties less susceptible to leadership change than charismatic parties, on the other hand it may also constrain the party leadership's ability to manage intra-party conflicts. While Kitschelt looks at the party organization emphasizing the incentives of electoral competition, a particular type of intra-party and inter-party competition emerges in the context of dominant party regimes. In this particular setting, conditions under which opposition party leaders accept or resist co-optation are also an important element that shapes regime-opposition relationship (Buckles, 2019; Kavasoglu, 2022). While charismatic and clientelistic parties are more likely to preserve the necessary degree of flexibility, it is reasonable to expect that programmatic parties are less flexible, hence more prone to internal conflicts due to the larger active membership and general programmatic commitment (Ishiyama and Bozóki, 2001).

A common drawback for systemic parties is then the problem of 'dual commitment'.<sup>2</sup> This is the problem of needing to find and preserve a balance between showing loyalty to the regime and preserving an oppositional nature in front of rank-and-file members. Too much loyalty risks losing support from core constituencies and party members and trigger internal dissent, leading to electoral and political defections of the party leadership undermining party cohesion and centralization. Too much opposition shrinks the space for participation in the political process and reduces access to resources and privileges, leading to marginalization and repression by the regime. The variation of

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<sup>2</sup>The idea of 'dual commitment' is a revision of the concept of 'common agency', namely the situation in which the agent has several principals at the same time. For an overview of the 'common agency' problem see Dixit, Grossman, and Helpman (1997).

regime-opposition relationship is thus affected by the dual commitment problem and its internal and external implications are intertwined.

Internally, the willingness and ability of the party leadership to negotiate with the regime is affected by intra-party organizational features and the specific 'environment' in which the bargaining process takes place. The combination of organizational extensiveness, centralization and the programmatic nature is more likely to affect negatively the ideological coherence and political cohesion of the party, exacerbating the dual commitment problem. Further, the fluctuation of the performance of the party of power and the role of the non-systemic opposition may increase the costs of co-optation for the leadership of the loyal parties by building internal pressure further undermining party cohesion and centralization. Intra-party organization is also affected by the institutional environment in which opposition parties operate. The federal structure of the state and the impact of institutional engineering may affect intra-party dynamics by providing different incentives for its leadership and file-ad-rank members (Magaloni, 2006; Kitschelt and Smyth, 2002).

Finally, internal party organization for programmatic parties is affected by long-term demographic factors. As different age cohorts are more likely to have different views, attitudes and values based on differences in their collective experience (Mickiewicz, 2014), the generational transformation of the party membership affects its degree of geographical cohesion and ideological coherence, thus exacerbating the problem of dual commitment for its leadership.

Externally, the dual commitment problem affects the relationship between systemic parties and the regime. Several examples exist where intra-party dynamics in the context of dual commitment problem allowed even the loyal opposition to creep into a more independent role destabilizing the status quo. In Mexico, for instance, changes to regime strategies, the mobilization capacity of the systemic opposition at the subnational level and socioeconomic modernization, among other factors, allowed the National Action Party (PAN) and the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) to take advantage of a few marginal successes at the subnational level to strengthen their reputation and organization (Magaloni, 2006, 159). Through the late 1980s and early 1990s these factors contributed to the decline of the dominant Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI).

## Data and methods

The article relies on the analysis of qualitative evidence from a combination of different type of primary and secondary sources to show that intra-party dynamics in the context of ‘dual commitment’ affect the status of the party within the system. Concerning the analysis of the party’s ideological and structural organization, essential to contextualize the case of the KPRF from a broader theoretical perspective, beyond the existing literature the study draws on official documents (including party’s Charter and Program) as well as interviews and public statements of leaders and party members reported by official party media and federal and regional outlets.

The analysis of such primary sources is complemented by electoral data from federal and regional elections, hand in hand with sociological and biographical characteristics of the party executive body and First Secretaries (FS) across all the regions of the Russian Federation. The composition of the Presidium has been tracked over time including all the 60 members that were part of the narrow party executive body since its creation in 1993. This allowed to trace the impact of the generational and center-region divide on intra-party dynamics. The biographical characteristics of party regional leaders were collected from open-source information available online on the party’s central and regional branches official websites. When not available, online search of newspaper articles in specific regions was conducted to ensure that any change in the leadership of regional branches was traced. The resulting dataset includes elements such as age, gender, year of appointment and previous experience for all the current FSs of regional branches (Table 1 and 2). This data is cross-referenced by the available secondary sources on the socio-economic composition of party supporters provided by several surveys conducted in different periods by Levada Centre.

**Table 1.** Average age and gender at appointment of current Regional First Secretaries

<b>Period of appointment</b>	<b>Number of appointments</b>	<b>Average Age</b>	<b>Proportion of men</b>
2004-2011	18	51.9	88.9%
2011-2016	25	45.8	80%
2016-present	27	44	85.2%

Overall since 2004	70	46.7	84.3%
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*Source:* Data collected by the author

The analysis of organizational cohesion of the party also draws on evidence based on press reports and journalistic sources that provided an in-depth account of events, intra-party debate and the context at the regional level over the period under investigation. The analysis relies mainly on four online outlets. *Kommersant*, a nationally distributed daily newspaper with well-developed regional offices. The other newspapers are *Znak.com*,<sup>3</sup> considered an independent source of information and analysis with the specific focus on the broader Ural region, and *Ura.ru* (Rossiiskoie informatsionnoe agenstvo), an online outlet dealing with regional politics in general and reputed to be close to regional authorities of the Ural macro-region. Finally, the analysis relies on the content provided by the news agency *FederalPress* that covers regional politics across the Russian Federation. Although journalistic sources may be subject to problems of validity affected by the ‘selection’ (biased selection of the topic of the report) and ‘description’ (biased representation of the event) bias, the process of selection of multiple sources and triangulation, whenever possible, is a common strategy adopted in this research to minimize such problems (Earl *et al.*, 2004).

The qualitative analysis has been conducted through a time-restricted online search of these news media sources and the selection and coding of the material describing events concerning intra-party dynamics such as internal conflicts, the process of informal party centralization, center-region interaction and ideological intra-party discussion through the use of specific keywords. Different time periods have been selected according to the relevant theoretical expectations. Specifically, periods before and in the aftermath of 2011, 2016 and 2021 federal elections have been selected to trace organizational cohesion before elections and the possible impact of electoral results on the intra-party dynamics. Time-restricted search in the proximity of general party Congresses and major protest events such as the 2018 pension reform and 2021 Navalny jailing protests also allowed to investigate the internal discussion on the political and ideological fronts. Events analysis has been then complemented and cross-referenced by

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<sup>3</sup> *Znak.com* suspended its operations in March 2022 in the aftermath of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The material can be still accessed through Web Archive.

the analysis of changes and continuities in the formal structures of the party – e.g., the central executive organs and regional branches – and official statements provided by the regional branches of the party, when available.

**Table 2.** Last place of employment of Regional First Secretaries before appointment.

	2004-2011		2011-2016		2016-present	
Federal legislature	2	11.1%	2	8%		
Regional legislature	6	33.3%	7	28%	8	29.6%
Regional administration	1	5.6%	1	4%	1	3.7%
Municipal legislature	1	5.6%			5	18.5%
Municipal administration	1	5.6%			2	7.4%
Legislature in a different region			1	4%	2	7.4%
Administration in a different region					1	3.7%
Public sector	1	5.6%	1	4%	1	3.7%
Private sector	2	11.1%	6	24%	4	14.8%
Law enforcement	1	5.6%			1	3.7%
Education	1	5.6%	4	16%		
Journalism			1	4%		
Intra-party organization	1	5.6%				
Advisor Federal legislature	1	5.6%	2	8%	1	3.7%
Advisor Regional legislature					1	3.7%
<b>Total</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>100%</b>

*Source:* Data collected by the author

### **Organizational strength, centralization and cohesion: the case of the KPRF**

In Russia, although the three parties of the loyal opposition are generally considered to

be effectively controlled by the Kremlin, the KPRF is the only party that falls in the category of programmatic parties, even if not completely devoid of charismatic and clientelistic elements, while the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR) and Just Russia (JR) are both examples of a charismatic and clientelistic linkage. This makes the voters' perception of these parties different (Panov and Ross, 2021) and affects the position of the parties within the system. Some recent studies show how the KPRF is not only the most likely to engage in street activism and protests but is also the party with the most autonomous network of activists at the sub-national level (Dollbaum, 2017). Indeed, when the systemic opposition risks to lose electoral ground alienating its core electorate, the limits of co-optation may emerge, as demonstrated by the role of the KPRF in organizing mass protests in the aftermath of the 2018 pension reform and the party's position against compulsory vaccination and the introduction of QR-codes during the pandemic.

The fluctuation in the relationship between the KPRF and the regime is further exacerbated by the fact that among the systemic parties the Communist are those more likely to undermine dominant United Russia's monopoly of the political landscape, even by co-operating with representatives of the non-systemic opposition (Armstrong, Reuter and Robertson, 2020). The growing tension between the KPRF and the Kremlin clearly emerged in the campaign leading to 2021 legislative elections when the KPRF attracted mostly negative media coverage on federal TV channels (Golos Media Monitoring, 2021).

The specific party's role on the political landscape is not surprising considering the KPRF's trajectory after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Although studies of party organizations development in Eastern Europe argues that the post-communist party systems were more likely to be characterized by weak party organizations, small membership, ideological flexibility and clientelistic and charismatic linkage (Kopecký, 1995; Kitschelt and Singer, 2018), the KPRF represents a deviant case in this general trend. Not only the transformation of the Russian regime and party system took a different path from the post-communist counterparts in Eastern Europe as soon as in early 1990s, but the KPRF was also one of few successor parties that managed to gather electoral

successes over time despite remaining rather unchanged in terms of ideological and organizational features.<sup>4</sup>

As a successor of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), the party and its leadership had a significant advantage. The KPRF inherited resources, well organized structures, cadres and networks at the sub-national level. Under the leadership of Zyuganov since 1993, the party relied on the ideological legacy with the CPSU establishing a distinctive identity - nationalist socialism – a blend of Marxism-Leninism with nationalist and conservative elements (March, 2002). This distinctive organizational strength fueled by grass-roots activism allowed the party to survive first elections and gain support in both leftist and the nationalist camps. The KPRF performed surprisingly well in 1993 elections (12.4%) and became the first party in 1995 and 1999 elections (with 22.3% and 24.3% respectively).

Notwithstanding the marginalization of the opposition within the State Duma since the beginning of the 2000s, the KPRF maintained the intra-party status quo through its organizational strength and a dense network of regional and local branches. Official figures suggest the party has today 162 thousand members and a grassroots structure including 13945 primary and 2384 local branches (Zyuganov, 2021b). Golosov (2014a) shows that due to this the KPRF suffered the smallest number of direct defections to United Russia at the sub-national level. The KPRF was able to maintain the image of the main alternative to United Russia and to avoid a further collapse of support, remaining the second party on party list through 2003 (12.61%), 2011 (19.2%), 2016 (13.3%) and 2021 (18.9%) parliamentary elections and consolidating its position in regional legislative assemblies across the country.<sup>5</sup>

Organizationally, according to the party's Statute, the KPRF remains based on a hierarchical integration of local, regional and federal party organizations all of which preserve some degree of autonomy. At the federal level, the primary intra-party decision making power lies with the party Conference, organized 'at least once every four years' (Ustav KPRF, 1993). The Central Committee (CC) represents the permanent executive body of the party, headed by the General Secretary. The everyday decision-making

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<sup>4</sup> Other examples of unreformed communist parties that played an important role over the three decades after the collapse of the USSR are the Communist Parties in Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine.

<sup>5</sup> Despite UR's overwhelming control of regional parliaments, the KPRF remains the second party, with 12.6% of all the regional deputies.

process is coordinated by a smaller group of party members, the Presidium.<sup>6</sup> This structure is replicated at the regional level where each party branch is organized around the General Secretary of the Regional Committee and the regional party Conference. Theoretically each regional Committee has an autonomous decision-making power concerning issues regarding the regional political activity of the party.

Opportunities for political career for cadres within these organizational structures remains primarily based on a mechanism of step-by-step advancement entailing a meritocratic movement from lower to higher levels within the party. As emphasized by Kynev (2021), this ‘democratic’ decision-making and career advancement process is by and large consolidated at the regional and local levels, but dynamics at the federal level appear different. The ossification of the party leadership, the power centralization and several intra-party ideological and political cleavages have characterized the federal structure of the KPRF since the 2000s.

Control over the party, indeed, is preserved through a complex process of political maneuvering. A major internal split occurred in the summer 2004 when an internal faction led by Gennadii Semigin organized an alternative party Congress supporting a vote of non-confidence in Zyuganov. The uncertainty lasted weeks, until Russia’s Ministry of Justice ruled in favor of Zyuganov, recognizing his leadership over the party. Intra-party cohesion continued to be preserved by a series of ‘purges’ of the most influential regional and federal leaders. Between 2008 and 2010 the influential party branches of Saint Petersburg and Moscow were dissolved for their ‘failure to comply with the charter of the Communist Party and program requirements’ - in other words, for displaying too much autonomy (Kostenko and Kornya, 2010). More recently in April 2021 two of the most influential members of the KPRF - the former governor of Irkutsk, Sergei Levchenko, and the leader of the Moscow branch of the party, Valerii Rashkin - were excluded from the party Presidium due to their partial support of the grassroots activities of the non-systemic opposition, namely Alexei Navalny’s movement.

Centralizing tendencies are further emphasized by the overlap between the party’s bureaucratic and political leadership, hence the decreasing inclusiveness of the narrow executive office (Katz and Mair, 1994). While after 2004 the composition of the Presidium experienced a period of greater diversification (Chaisty, 2012), since the early 2010s, on average, 93% of the membership of the Presidium served in public offices,

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<sup>6</sup> The Presidium comprises 19 members.

mainly as members of the parliament, thus reducing intra-party inclusiveness and organizational tools of conflict resolution. Whereas 29% of the Presidium was made by leaders of regional branches of the party, less than half of them actually served as public officials in their regions. Overall, only 20% of public office holders within the Presidium served in a regional institution.

### **Two dimensions of intra-party cleavage**

Whereas organizational centralization was a crucial factor allowing the federal leadership to preserve control over the party apparatus, organizational strength and the programmatic nature of the party contributed to deepen several fault lines within the KPRF, undermining party cohesion and ideological coherence. In the context of dual commitment, internal conflicts are escalated by the fact that the benefits of cooperation with the regime are usually the prerogative of the higher echelon of the party leadership, resulting in pressure from the bottom of the party elite as well as grassroots activists who remain excluded from the distribution of the benefits and public offices. Thus, the KPRF appears increasingly torn by two vectors of internal cleavage. One is the fragmentation of party's organizational cohesion along the center-region axis. Although since the Semigin split there were no major attempts to officially undermine the party leadership, coordination and cooperation problems amongst the federal leadership, regional branches, and activists persisted over time. While this is not a unique feature of the KPRF, it assumes a particularly prominent role due to the party's extensiveness and its programmatic nature.

While the tension between regional and federal leadership characterized the party development throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, the problem persisted in the aftermath of the 2011 rather successful legislative elections. During 2011-12 protest cycle, the KPRF leadership first joined the anti-regime street actions in early December just to perform a volte-face few weeks later (Zyuganov, 2012). Seeing the party turning its back on the protest movement escalated the growing tension within many of the party branches at the regional level and between the federal and regional leadership. The issue re-surfaced in the aftermath of the Maidan revolution in Ukraine in 2014. The situation in Ukraine opened a discussion on the viability of protests as a political tool within Russia in a period of growing economic instability and social tension (Bekbulatova, 2014).

The growing cleavage became public in 2015 when a letter from some of the regional first secretaries addressed to the Central Committee of the party emphasized the

‘anxiety [of some regional leaders] about the situation within the party, absence of a clear perspective and lack of dialogue’ (Zelenskaya, 2015). This ‘anxiety’ characterized intra-party relations up to the new strategic conundrum: how does the party should respond to the new wave of protests associated with the poisoning and arrest of Navalny? While the leadership of the party denied any room for cooperation (Zyuganov, 2021a), many regional members expressed a different position - among them influential figures such as the first secretary of the Moscow Gorkom Rashkin, the former governor of Irkutsk Levchenko and the first party secretary of Buryatia Vyacheslav Markhaev (Danilov, 2021). Support for the emerging protest movement is even more widespread among file-and-rank members and deputies of regional legislative bodies, such as the Moscow City Council’s Evgenii Stupin and Saratov’s Nikolai Bondarenko who both dare to openly support Navalny (Bakin, 2021).

The growing intra-party divide is further evidenced by the participation of KPRF members in the protests supporting Navalny after his arrest<sup>7</sup> and the growing popularity of younger, energetic regional activists. A poll conducted by Levada Centre in November 2021 found that Bondarenko is the second most popular figure within the KPRF, while Zyuganov, the most recognizable member, has the highest anti-rating as an increasing number of respondents pointed to his willingness to negotiate with the Kremlin as undermining the party’s electoral potential (Volkov, 2021).

The second vector of the internal divide is ideological. Although a degree of ideological rigidity characterized the normative dimension of the KPRF since early 1990s, the transformation of Russian society and the emergence of new electoral niches forced the party to adapt its own rhetoric without rejecting the key principles expressed in the party’s Program. First adopted in 1995 and slightly amended over the years, the Program places capitalism’s development and the alternative Soviet path at its core drawing from this an action plan for contemporary Russian communists. Beyond repudiating capitalism, it incorporates revolutionary-socialist views on the development of Russian society coupled with pronounced nationalist, patriotic and anti-western references. ‘The construction of socialism in one country’ remains at the center of the Program, but blended with references to the ‘Russian question’ - interpreted as the

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<sup>7</sup> For instance, the KPRF joined the non-systemic opposition, among others, in Khabarovsk, Novosibirsk, Irkutsk, Volgograd and Ulan-Ude.

‘genocide of a great nation’ – and overall geared toward the ‘re-unification of the fraternal Union of Soviet people’ (Programma KPRF, 1995).

The Program remains a largely incoherent document, a by-product of a discussion among three factions, the Orthodox Marxist-Leninists, the left-wing nationalist and social-democrats (Sakwa, 2002). Although the rhetoric of the First Secretary and his close associates hardly changed, after the protest movement of 2011-12 and especially after the electoral defeat in 2016, at the regional level the KPRF engaged a broader spectrum of salient issues: deteriorating standards of living, growing inequality, corruption, high prices, and the increasingly coercive nature of the regime (Semenov, 2020). Each of these issues is amongst the most prominent problems for the Russian population (Levada Centre, 2021b) and each of them is closer to the traditional grievances mobilized by Western social-democratic parties.

The incoherent incorporation of new issues emerged in the 2021 legislative elections campaign when a series of young, energetic party members broke from the old central party narrative. Increasingly, politically successful members of the party at the regional level appear less attracted to Marxism-Leninism and left-wing nationalism than to material problems and grievances and radical opposition to the regime. This process is far from unambiguous, overlapping with the center-regions cleavage. The incoherent party ideology and the consolidation of dissenting regional groups within the party feed off each other. While some regional leaders and activists appear willing to incorporate strong anti-regime tendencies without rejecting the official party ideology, like long-standing personalities such as Levchenko and Rashkin and young activists like Bondarenko, others see the adaptation of the party’s ideological position as a necessary precondition to coherent oppositional politics. This latter group encompasses relatively young members and activists such as Evgenii Stupin, Dmitrii Loktev and Mikhail Lobanov in Moscow, but also more experienced politicians like Elena Shuvalova, representing the social-democratic wing of the party. Perhaps unsurprisingly, only 40% of KPRF voters in the 2021 elections said that they share ‘leftist and socialist views’ (Levada Centre, 2021a).

### **Demographic trends, political ‘environment’ and party cohesion in the late Putin regime**

These two vectors shaping the internal integration of the party are not new or unique to

the KPRF (Grzymala-Busse, 2018). However, as outlined above, despite the fact that the party has established its own comfortable niche within the system, in the context of dual commitment the degree of stability of its organizational features determines party leadership's flexibility and potential costs of co-optation. While party's centralization is preserved through constant informal maneuvering of its leadership, its organizational cohesion and ideological coherence is affected by long-lasting demographic trends and the general political and institutional 'environment' in which the party operates and bargains with the regime. These factors deepen the center-region and ideological cleavage, further undermining intra-party organizational cohesion and coherence.

### ***Growing generation gap***

In terms of organizational cohesion and ideological coherence, generational change has certainly played an important role. Scholars traditionally emphasize the role of age in the electoral support, with aged (pensioners) and traditional electorate representing the core constituency for the KPRF (March, 2002). Although a poll conducted in April 2021 suggests that 52% of KPRF supporters are 55 or older and only 5% are younger than 24, the party has recently made inroads in younger cohorts with a quarter of its electoral base now made up of people aged between 25-39 years (Levada Centre, 2021b).<sup>8</sup> Overall, while in 2011 86% of its electorate was over-40, today this group makes up 70% (Levada Centre, 2012). Recent studies also demonstrate how the influence of age has declined over time, while other parties (above all United Russia) made inroads in the traditionally Communist electorate. As Allison White (2020, 397) argues, the electorate of the KPRF has changed over time while 'erosion in the countryside has been coupled with, and perhaps superseded by, expanding support in urban areas' and those with a higher degree of education. Although 26% of KPRF supporters today are from the countryside, the core is composed of the urban population and Moscow (74%) (Levada Centre, 2021b).

This trend is further emphasized by the slow transformation in other characteristics of the Communist electorate. Even if KPRF supporters on average are those from the most disadvantaged economic background, since 2011 the party has attracted an increasing number of professionals and employees (21% of the current

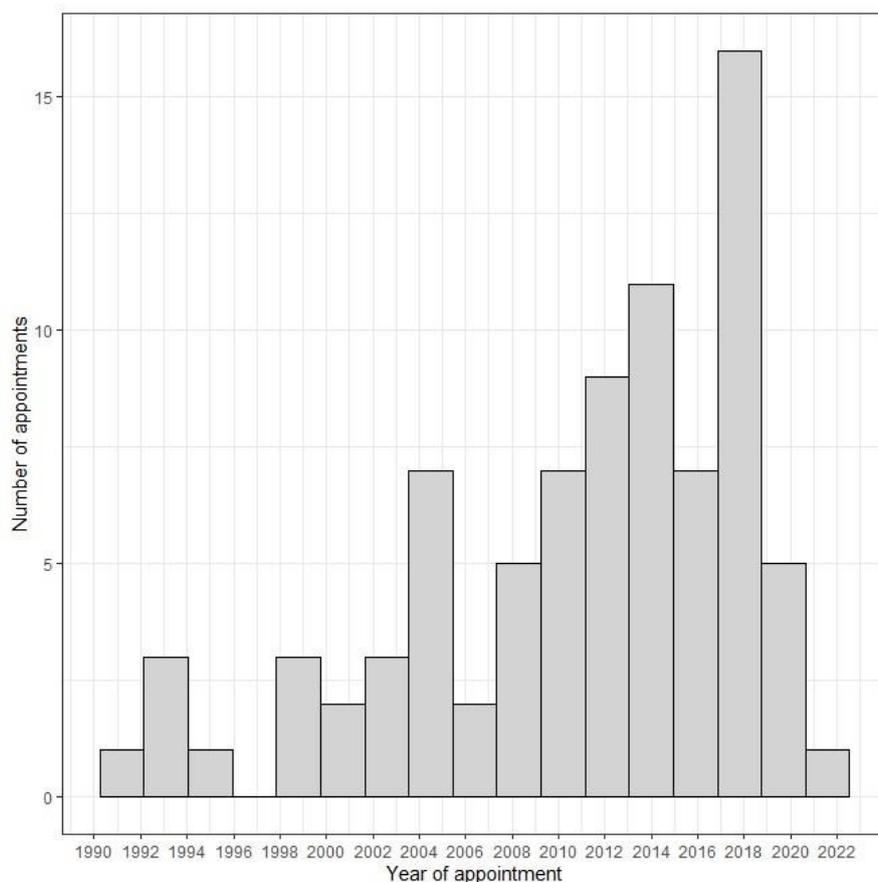
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<sup>8</sup> It should be noted that in terms of age the KPRF electorate mirrors that of UR. The party with the youngest electoral base is LDPR with 46% of its electorate below 39 years, while 62% of JR supporters are above 55 years.

supporters), closer to the traditional middle-class. Finally, in terms of gender the KPRF remains a structure dominated by men. While only 54% of its electorate is made by men, the role of women within the executive bodies is marginal. Out of 188 members of the CC only 27 are women (14%) and only 1 within the Presidium (5%). The situation is similar at the regional level where only 11 out of 85 First Secretaries (13%) are women.

Until recently, the transformation of the electorate was not always matched by dynamics within the party. The process of party rejuvenation, however, entered a new stage in 2016, after the party dispersed much of the political and electoral potential accumulated during the protest wave of 2011-12. This process appears more prominent at the regional level, with local branches experiencing a high degree of change.

The average age of the 188 member CC is 55 years, while the average age of the Presidium is 57, with Zyuganov being the oldest member (77). The composition of the Presidium changed several times over the years and Zyuganov remains the only member that has been elected during the founding Congress in 1993. Since early 2000s the youngest Presidium was elected in 2004, with an average age of 55.6. However, since then the average age of the executive organ increased again up to 58.8 until before the XVIII Congress in 2021, when three new young members joined the Presidium.



**Figure 1.** Number of appointed first secretaries by year.

*Source:* Data collected by the author.

Regionally, however, since 2011 a total number of 52 first secretaries (63% of the total) have been replaced, 27 of whom after the 2016 elections (33%) (Figure 1). A larger group of regional leaders are now representatives of the younger generation, 32 of whom were born after 1970 (38%), including 13 First Secretaries (15% of the total) born after 1980. Although the average age of the heads of the regional branches of the party remains above 50 years (53), this is mostly due to the members of the old nomenklatura remaining at the helm of their local fiefdoms, with 12 regional First Secretaries (14%) born before 1950. Despite the persistence of old Communist bosses in some regions, local branches are becoming more heterogeneous in terms of age and political and ideological background, attracting a broader spectrum of local supporters and activists. A prominent example is the unexpected victory in the gubernatorial race of Valentin Konovalov in Khakassia - one of the youngest governors in Russia (33) - and the surprising surge in support among the young cohorts of the population in the 2021 Duma elections (Volkov, 2021).

### *Consequences of the party system reform*

Beyond demographic trends affecting the intra-party dynamics, the process of institutional transformation, considered to be a tool of co-optation, has also produced several paradoxes at the regional level. For instance, the law ‘on political parties’, promoting a top-down party building process, had several long-term effects on the organizational cohesion: by essentially outlawing regional political parties, party branches became the most attractive venues for both, grassroots activists and political entrepreneurs (Kynev, 2010).

This meant the KPRF became the best option for local activists in the regions. The party, indeed, remains the most developed institutional structure able to provide rank-and-files members with reputational, organizational and material resources, an integrated structure of local branches and offices and experience of active oppositional politics at the grassroots level. Unsurprisingly, in the 2021 electoral campaign several young progressive activists ran on the KPRF’s ticket without even sharing party’s strict ideological guidelines. Lobanov, for example, a young lecturer and activist close to the social-democrat tradition, was the main opponent of the UR candidate in the Kuntsevo single member district in Moscow. His victory was overthrown only by the results of the online vote in the capital.

However, regional structures of the party also provided an alternative to members of the regional and local elite who found themselves excluded from the system of clienteles dominated by UR. These are the so-called party ‘sponsors’ at the regional level, pragmatically interested in utilizing a well-developed party machinery for their own interests. Furthermore, some regional political entrepreneurs affiliated with United Russia managed to develop a dense network of clientelist relations with regional branches of the Communist party, diversifying their own political options and influence at the regional level.

These dynamics, shaped by institutional incentives consolidating the limited space for party politics at the regional level contributed to the growing ideological incoherence and increasing intra-party conflicts. Evidence from an increasing number of regions demonstrate that the process of nomination of candidates and leaders of regional branches of the KPRF turns out in an open conflict between different interest groups and activists. In Perm the crisis within the KPRF, ongoing since 2016, was triggered when a local businessman and UR member, Dmitrii Skrivanov, relying on his financial resources

managed to establish informal control over part of the regional branch of the party (Savelli, 2016).<sup>9</sup> Recently, similar dynamics have afflicted other regional party organizations, from Chuvashia to Udmurtia, from Sverdlovsk to Krasnoyarsk and in Khabarovsk. Overall, the stability of the regional organizations varies, depending on the specific constellation of actors within the consolidated local patronage system and intra-party dynamics in each region.

### *The crisis of the ‘party of power’*

The balance within the KPRF is also shaped by the political environment. The specific context emerging from different intra-system trends affects the dual commitment problem, increasing the likelihood of political instability (Logvinenko, 2020) and compelling the ruling party to share more offices with the opposition in regional legislatures (Turovsky, 2014). Prolonged economic stagnation and an unpopular pension reform, for instance, deeply affected United Russia’s electoral rating. Meanwhile, the KPRF became the first party in the proportional system in regional legislative elections in Khakassia, Irkutsk and Ulyanovsk. A minor victory, but nonetheless a fissure in a system dominated by UR, whose share of votes has continued to decline in comparison to previous regional elections.

The main electoral breakthrough for the KPRF was, however, achieved in the 2021 Duma elections, managing to increase its share of votes (18.9%) and seats (from 42 in 2016 to 57). This was particularly significant regionally, where the Communists became the first party (in the PR system) in four regions (Mari El, Sakha, Nenets Autonomous Okrug and Khabarovsk Krai) and came second place in 76 out of 85 regions, consolidating its position as the second party in Russia. The party performed better than in the 2016 elections in 78 out of 83 regions, the only exceptions being Bashkortostan, Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, North Ossetia, and Volgograd, where the KPRF experienced a significant drop over the last five years. Most importantly, compared to 2011 elections - the best KPRF performance since 1999 - the party performed better in 47 out of 83 regions remaining in line with previous results in almost all the other subjects

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<sup>9</sup> Although after being elected for the State Duma in 2016 Skrivanov’s control over the KPRF branch mostly decreased, 2021 nomination of the regional party leadership (Kseniya Aytakova) was nonetheless characterized by an open conflict between different factions and interest groups within the party.

of the federation,<sup>10</sup> showing its capacity of performing relatively well in periods of crisis within the regime (White, 2020) capitalizing on political realignment and the general socio-economic crisis further sharpened by the pandemic.

The changing fortunes of the party of power and the emergence of the KPRF as its main electoral rival has been accompanied by changes to the regime's strategy towards the opposition. At the macro level, the mounting pressure on the opposition is not only shown by the increasingly coercive nature of the Kremlin's policy towards political activism (Easter, 2021), but also by the transformation of the established strategy of co-optation. While the KPRF was rarely prevented from competing in gubernatorial elections, since 2018 the party encountered more problems in registering its candidates. Of 43 gubernatorial races between 2019 and 2021, ten Communist candidates (23%) were prevented from running by the 'municipal filter' and the few remaining 'red' governors faced increasing pressure. After his unexpected victory in Irkutsk in 2015 Levchenko came under duress from the authorities and was forced to resign in 2019 after his son was detained for embezzlement. Pavel Grudinin - the Communist candidate in the 2018 presidential elections and highly popular member of the party - was banned from running in the 2021 Duma elections and accused of embezzlement. Still, the most prominent examples of the increasingly coercive behavior of the Kremlin occur at the micro-level, concerning the lower echelon of party members. As documented by MediaZona (2021), on the eve of the 2021 Duma elections, from Moscow to Penza, to Khabarovsk the most radical local activists came under greater hassle from the authorities, being detained and fined for their oppositional activity.

The consequences of rising electoral support and increasing coercion from the regime are yet to be fully assessed. However, under increasing pressure from the Kremlin, co-optation can alienate rank-and-file members and lower cadres triggering internal dissent further radicalizing the existent vectors of center-region and ideological divide within the party (Buckles, 2019).

### ***The role of the non-systemic opposition***

Finally, another transformation in the political context for KPRF has been the new

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<sup>10</sup> An exception is represented by 6 regions where between 2011 and 2021 the KPRF lost more than 5% of its support. These are: North Ossetia, Bryansk, Volgograd, Kaliningrad, Nizhny Novgorod and Oryol.

dynamism of the non-systemic opposition. As the 2021 Duma elections show, the protest electorate is likely to gravitate towards the systemic opposition and specifically the Communists. This is also the main calculation of the movement led by Navalny and its ‘Smart Voting’ strategy.

As some empirical studies conducted by Turchenko and Golosov (2021; 2022) demonstrate, in specific circumstances ‘Smart Voting’ may effectively boost the electoral results of its supported candidates. Given its organizational strength and active membership the KPRF appears to be a major beneficiary of the tactic. In the 2019 Moscow City Council elections where the strategy was tested for the first time, 33 out of 45 candidates (73%) supported by ‘Smart Voting’ were members of the Communist party. Among them some of the members of the so-called ‘new generation’ like Stupin and Loktev and representatives of the social-democratic wing of the party like Shuvalova were elected. In the 2020 regional elections some estimates suggest that out of the 239 candidates supported by Team Navalny in the race for 11 legislative assemblies 136 were Communists (57%) (Otkrytye Media, 2020). In the 2021 Duma elections the KPRF’s share of support through ‘Smart Voting’ reached 61% with 137 candidates out of 225 single member districts. A possible consequence of ‘Smart Voting’ is a surge in electoral support for the KPRF among the youngest cohort of the population (18-24 years old). Post-electoral data shows that 27% of the votes for KPRF came from this group – a group that has traditionally been the least mobilized by the party (Volkov, 2021).

While support through ‘Smart Voting’ does not imply further coordination between the KPRF and non-systemic opposition at the federal level, both camps have recently moved closer to each other at the regional level. While Team Navalny’s mostly liberal agenda incorporated some of concerns over social inequality and material grievances, increasingly vocal young and regional Communist activists have departed from the old party rhetoric and moved towards more radical opposition to the status quo. Further, over the last few years, the network of Navalny-affiliated regional organizations has penetrated the subnational level, establishing branches in 37 out of 83 regions. These networks are deeply embedded in regional realities and activism and ‘routinely cross political alignments’ (Dollbaum, Lallouet and Noble, 2021, 122). Indirect support and sporadic cooperation with non-systemic opposition provides new incentives to regional and local activists, building bottom-up pressure within the Communist party threatening

to amplify pre-existing cleavages and exacerbate the dual commitment problem for the party leadership.

## **Conclusion**

Judging by the results of the 2021 Duma elections the KPRF has confirmed its status as the most important party of the opposition and only credible alternative to the executive-controlled United Russia. Despite contestation over the official results in the aftermath of the September elections the leadership of the party seems keen to capitalize on the electoral results by bargaining for influential offices within the new State Duma which remains tightly controlled by the Kremlin.

However, the main problem for co-opted parties is preserving the balance between loyalty and opposition – a harder task for programmatic parties. The dual commitment problem plays a significant role in structuring intra-party dynamics, overlapping with pre-existing cleavages. The divide between the central leadership and regional activists and the growing ideological variety within the Communist Party is shaped by sometimes contrasting incentives. Factors such as long-lasting demographic trend, institutional design, variation in the electoral performance of the party of power and the strategies of the non-systemic opposition, affects the stability of intra-party organization and its internal cohesion and coherence over time. As argued throughout the article, these factors do not affect only the party's electoral performance, but, more importantly, shape the general position of the KPRF within the party system and regime-opposition relations more broadly. The tension between the KPRF and the Kremlin thus may be explained by the incoherence of the centralized party structures and its programmatic nature in the context of growing intra-party divide that emphasize the dual commitment problem for the party leadership.

Overall, while studies of the systemic opposition in Russia typically focus on the regime's strategies in shaping the role and fortunes of these parties, focus must be also placed on intra-party organizational features influencing the integration of the opposition in the system at different levels of governance. While organizational centralization makes the bargaining with the regime more likely, organizational strength and declining cohesion along ideological and center-region lines limit the leadership's room for maneuvering building bottom-up pressure. Although potentially the KPRF appears well positioned to capitalize on United Russia's decline, whether the fault lines within the

party can be translated into a more independent and oppositional politics or fuel intra-party conflicts leading to erosion and final marginalization remains to be seen. This calls for further research that can generate qualitative and quantitative evidence to validate or disprove the main arguments of this work.

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