Sergei Udaltsov and Levyi Front: a Plethora of Potential

BA Thesis

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Introduction
The Russian political left is often, and not unjustly, seen as a heavily fragmented
tangle of niche parties and micro organizations, adept at occasionally making
(international) headlines, but not so much at implementing the change they so fiercely
propagate. This is mostly due to the fact that they are forced to function in a
proverbial minefield of restricting, authoritarian legislation and are often subject to
arbitrary prosecution and slander. Additionally, they seem to be greatly divided
amongst themselves, and thus unable to create the union between parties, civil society
movements and civilians that is so crucial when trying to overthrow an authoritarian
regime.

However, there is one organization currently active in Russia that seems to be
transcending from the trenches of impotent opposition towards a position of greater
power and possibilities of effectuating actual change. This organization is Levyi Front
(Left Front), under leadership of the illustrious Sergei Udaltsov. Hence, our main
question in this thesis is whether Levyi Front might be the savior of the Russian left.
Is Levyi Front the organization that will finally be able to bring the opposition in
Russia to such a level of influence that true democracy for Russia will no longer be
seen as a contradictio in terminis, but as a realistic option?

We will argue that although there are a great many obstacles for Levyi Front
to overcome, they are currently the only organization on the Russian left that at least
has the potential to become the creator of the change for which so many Russians
long desperately.

In this thesis, we will first give a rough outline of the political arena in which
Levyi Front is forced to operate, followed by a short summary of their history and
organizational structure. The main body of our argument will consist of the six key
traits any oppositional movement needs to possess, as defined by Alfred B. Stepan in
his 1990 and 1997 standards “On the Tasks of a Democratic Opposition” and
“Democratic Opposition and Democratization”. These traits are (i) staying in, or
coming into existence, (ii) resisting integration into the regime, (iii) guarding zones of
autonomy against it (iv) disrupting its legitimacy, (v) raising the costs of non-
democratic rule and finally, (vi) creating a credible democratic alternative.¹

¹ Alfred C. Stepan (1990), “On the Tasks of a Democratic Opposition”, Journal of
Democracy, 1:2, 41-49; Alfred C. Stepan (1997), “Democratic Opposition and
Why ask ourselves this question? Of course there is plenty of literature on the Russian opposition, but such is not the case when we look at Levyi Front. However, when we do look at the information available (mostly from journalist sources), we see that Levyi Front is actually one of the most important players on the Russian left if not the most important. However, there are simply no articles in existence on the potential of Levyi Front. Yes, mention of the organization is made in a couple of analyses of the current Russian opposition, such as for instance in David White’s article “Taking it to the Streets: Raising the Costs of Electoral Authoritarianism in Russia” (which also uses Stepan’s framework of traits), but there is no academic work yet available on Levyi Front as an independent entity, hence this article.

Additionally, it is extremely meaningful that Levyi Front is a potential unifying force in the Russian opposition, considering its history. As Luke March illustrates in his article “The Contemporary Russian Left after Communism: Into the Dustbin of History?”, the situation has been anything but bright for the Russian opposition since the fall of the Soviet Union, and might even be called dire, mostly due to its fragmentation.\(^2\) Even if Levyi Front might not become the desired bringer of political change, they have already defied the status quo in this respect at least, making it worth it to look at the organization in depth.

The Political Arena

Political opposition in Russia is subject to a myriad of rules. Some of these are conventional laws, targeted at organizing the democratic structure of the system. However, much of the legislation has seemingly been put into place only to control and limit the scope of the opposition. In this chapter, we will analyze the legislation oppositional parties and movements are subject to.

To do so, it is important to make a distinction between *intrasystem* opposition and *antisystem* opposition.³ *Intrasystem* entails being acknowledged as a political entity and often being represented in the Duma, such as for instance the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF), A Just Russia and the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia.⁴ *Antisystem* movements have their playing field outside of the official discourse and are generally more radical and anti-establishment. Levyi Front is part of the *antisystem* opposition, as are radical Eduard Limonov’s The Other Russia, the (since dissolved) liberal democratic party ParNas which was led by, among others, Boris Nemtsov and Mikhail Kasyanov, and the Solidarity movement, which is leaderless.

For political opposition, being able and allowed to compete in elections is the most valuable asset. In Russia, to compete in any election (regional or federal) a party must be registered federally. This used to be an extremely restrictive measure, because it was near to impossible for smaller parties to register federally. Namely, a party needed to have at least 50,000 members and regional groupings of at least 500 members in more than half of the regions of the Russian Federation.⁵ When a party was able to meet both of these demands, there was still a 7% threshold to enter the Duma.⁶ This ensured a very limited amount of contenders and was a near fail-safe mechanism against the rise of more radical, anti-establishment parties.

However, the Russian electoral system saw an overhaul in 2012, when then

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outgoing president Medvedev signed into working a law that greatly relaxed the above mentioned requirements. Since its implementation, the membership requirement has been lowered to 10,000, with regional groupings in over half of the regions of the Russian Federation needing a mere 100 members as opposed to 500. However, the formation of party-blocs or linkages in an election (to overcome the unchanged 7% threshold) is prohibited, thus still keeping smaller parties out of the Duma, despite this new legislation.

The relaxation of this law has seemingly lessened the divide between antisystem and intrasystem opposition; it appears to have made evolvement from the former to the latter easier. However, that is not to say that many antisystem movements will now be able to achieve anything in the elections: the relaxation has namely also fragmented the opposition. Many smaller parties can now register, leaving them lost in a sort of political limbo where they cannot muster enough support by themselves in the elections to pass the threshold and can also no longer work together with other antisystem partners. Thus, although the overhaul of the electoral legislation appeared to be a loosening of the regime’s grip on the opposition, its mandate still seems to be ‘divide and rule’.

Additionally, it is important to note that apart from the above mentioned institutionalized ways of the regime to control the opposition, there are also less transparent methods it uses to remain in control of the political arena. For one, it is important to note that all intrasystem parties are linked to the ruling regime to a certain extent. For instance, A Just Russia, although more oppositional in its actions nowadays, was created by the Kremlin and the LPDR headed by Vladimir Zhirinovsky also receives Kremlin funding and its fraction is nearly completely compliant to Putin’s United Russia in the Duma. State-funds are being allocated to support these parties that are in United Russia’s control, thus ensuring their dominance in oppositional politics and frustrating any chance of true opposition through political debate.

The situation created through this system of ‘controlled subordinate parties’

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8 Idem.

(i.e. parties that feed the electorate’s need for an alternative party whilst adhering to United Russia’s wishes) is perhaps best described by the former Speaker of the State Duma, Boris Gryzlov, who once stated that ‘parliament is no place for political discussions’.  

Secondly, even when a non-Kremlin, antisystem party has gathered enough funding and members to register as an official contender in federal or regional politics for instance, this might still not happen. This is illustrated by the anti-Putin coalition ParNas, which registered legally in 2011 but was denied registration, citing ‘falsification of signatures and shortcomings in its charter’. Moreover, there is a system of ‘veto points’ in place that the state can also use to veto a party’s registration or the registration of individual candidates. Although the use of these points have to be approved by a electoral committee or court, the judicial situation in Russia (i.e. the lack of rule of law and the strong arm of the regime in the courts) ensures that this can be used arbitrarily anytime the regime wishes to keep a party out of the system. Additionally, there is a law in place that prohibits extremist parties from participating in Russian politics, which, in theory, is a noble concept perhaps, but again: this law can easily be abused to keep antisystem parties out of the political arena if the regime would wish to do so.

In conclusion, we see that the regime uses a variety of techniques to control both the anti- and intrasystem opposition, making it very difficult for truly oppositional movements to effectuate political change. Firstly, it is difficult to register and the 7% threshold is nearly impossible to overcome for smaller parties, especially since linkages are prohibited. This, especially in combination with the veto points system and the anti-extremism law, ensures limited intrasystem opposition, leaving many movements to function outside of the official arena. Secondly, there are several non-institutionalized ways in which the regime curtails any real resistance to its rule, for instance by sheer corrupt dealings (as was the case with the ParNas registration) or by arbitrarily prosecuting organizations on the basis of for instance the above mentioned extremism law. Additionally, their impressive (and again non-

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12 Robertson, 160.
13 Robertson, 160-161.
institutionalized) control over the current intrasystem opposition in the Duma, mostly through funding, ensures no true opposition will take form there.

**Levi Front, an organization**

*Establishment and hard-line radicalism*

Now that we have established in what sort of political and legislative climate Levyi Front is forced to operate, our next objective is to look at Levyi Front as an organization in itself. What is its organizational structure and who is its leader? What is its political leaning and how has this evolved over time? In this chapter we will focus on these and other questions, clarifying both the organizational structure and history of Levyi Front as well as giving a rough outline of its actions since its establishment.

In essence Levyi Front has been founded twice, with a hiatus of 3 years in between. Firstly, it was founded in 2005 in Moscow as a regional organization, and at this time it consisted of more than 30 individual left-wing groups. Some of the more notable organizations that became part of Levyi Front were the Russian Communist Party (RKRP-KPSS, not to be confused with the KPRF), the Vanguard of Red Youth (AKM), the since abolished ‘Vperyod’ (Forwards!) and the Union of Soviet Youth.\(^\text{14}\)

A salient detail from this period is that Levyi Front employed strong anti-National Bolshevik (a radical patriotic-communist party) and anti-Rodina (a national-patriotic leftist party)\(^\text{15}\) rhetoric, thus renouncing part of the Russian left although they claimed to embody it in its entirety.\(^\text{16}\)

Its initiators and main dignitaries at the time were, among others: Boris Kagarlitskii, head of the leftist Institute for Global Research and Social Movements and editor in chief of the quarterly ‘Levaya Politika’, Ilya Ponomarev, a telecommunications tycoon and then member of the KPRF, and Geidar Dzhemal, head of the Islamist Committee of Russia.\(^\text{17}\)

It is important to note that the organizations that joined Levyi Front, were not


\(^{16}\) Lenta.ru, “Marsh, marsh levo!”

\(^{17}\) Idem.
dissolved; they were still autonomous political groupings, simply united by Levyi Front, but not necessarily incorporated by it. This structure is still in place nowadays. For individuals, membership of Levyi Front also does not demand waiving any other political membership, so one person might be a member of AKM, or even an organization that is not officially affiliated with it (e.g. A Just Russia), and Levyi Front.¹⁸

Initially, Levyi Front’s political objectives were opaque. It was clear that they were radical left and anti-regime, but little more was defined than vague phrases such as: “We want a revolutionary transition to a socialist society!”, and many doubted their ability to draw one line together.¹⁹ Their revolutionary ideas were based on a strong believe in Marxist-Leninst ideology, and this has not changed until now; in Western eyes they could be categorized as hard-line communists.²⁰ The idea of Levyi Front being an extremely radical organization was strengthened by the fact that they did not believe in operating within the official system. As Ponamarev stated at the movement’s founding conference in 2005: “We do not believe in the possibility of coming to power through elections under the [current] false legislation. We are ready to hold meetings, partake in acts of disobedience and other serious actions.”²¹

It was this same Ponomarev who was convinced Levyi Front would not die the slow death that most unifying initiatives on the left side of the political spectrum in Russia had experienced. “We already have the experience of [such] struggles, we have recognized leaders, therefore we will not suffer the same fate.”²²

The refounding and coming of age

He was partly right; Levyi Front did eventually not suffer the same fate, but it did temporarily. Between its creation and 2007, there is little information on Levyi Front and its actions. United solely by a common enemy, namely the regime, the organization seemingly quickly deteriorated in disagreements amongst themselves and it was not until late 2008 that the organization saw new life and ‘refounded’ itself.

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²⁰ Levyi Front, “O Nas”.
²¹ Lenta.ru, “Marsh, Marsh levoi!”
²² Idem.
this time under different leadership.\textsuperscript{23}

Since 2008 the leadership of Levyi Front has been in the hands of Sergei Udaltsov, who is also the leader of AKM. At the ‘refounding’ conference in October 2008, Levyi Front was presented as a federal movement (as opposed to the regional movement it was when initiated in 2005) and former anti-Rodina and anti-National Bolshevik rhetoric gave way to a more all-encompassing attitude, with Udaltsov stating that: “Representatives from all parties are able to take part in Levyi Front and they need not denounce their other memberships. The way to Levyi Front is open to all left activists.”\textsuperscript{24}

At the time of this re-founding, it was reported that there were already over thirty regional branches of Levyi Front newly or still active.\textsuperscript{25} Moreover, it was at this same conference that Udaltsov put forward the possibility of transcending the trenches of antisytem opposition by stating that Levyi Front would ‘seek to maximize cohesion, to eventually become a fairly centralized organization’, and that he ‘did not rule out the left could start a new party’.\textsuperscript{26}

Here we see a clear deviation from the path chosen by Levyi Front’s earlier leaders; not only does Udaltsov mean to truly unify the entire Russian left, but he also does not rule out the official political legitimization of the organization.

Since 2008 Levyi Front’s organizational structure has also seen change. Its highest governing body is now the 47-member ‘Left Font Council’, the members of which are elected from regional fractions from across Russia and currently also includes one member from Stockholm and one from Ukraine. Day to day operations are led by a 19-member Executive Committee, many members of which also have a seat on the Council, including Udaltsov.\textsuperscript{27}

\begin{thebibliography}{99}

\bibitem{24} News.ru.com, “Levye organizatsii Rossii obedinyayutsya v novoe dvizhenie”.
\bibitem{26} News.ru.com, “Levye organizatsii Rossii obedinyayutsya v novoe dvizhenie”\textsuperscript{26}
\bibitem{27} Levyi Front, “Sovet i Ispolkom”, \url{http://leftfront.ru/about/board/} [Accessed: June 13, 2014].
\end{thebibliography}
Mostly unchanged are the organizations that are part of Levyj Front, apart from those that have been dissolved since, for instance ‘Vperyod!’ Additionally, some of the original leadership was also still part of Levyj Front, with such as Ilya Ponomarev (although he is no longer active in Levyj Front) and Geidar Dzhamal.

From its resurrection in 2008 onwards, Levyi Front has consequently been widening their scope. Although the organization participated in an array of actions, it was not until the protests surrounding the 2011 parliamentary elections and the following presidential elections in 2012, that Levyi Front and Udaltsov himself gained political prestige (and notoriety).

Remarkably enough, Udaltsov was not even present at the rallies that were held directly around the elections. He was arrested a few days before each election, presumably to demotivate his followers and to prevent him from mobilizing too many people. As a matter of fact, Udaltsov is regularly arrested when rallies or demonstrations are due; he spends around half of each year behind bars and has been arrested over 100 times. However, being arrested has, until now, only enlarged his stature and scope. For example, it was the hunger strike he announced whilst incarcerated in 2011 that landed him in the major newspapers and thus led to countrywide recognition and many new followers.

This recognition of Levyj Front as a serious force on the left and Udaltsov as a formidable leader grew during the bigger protests in 2011, and he was one of the main figures during the February 2012 ‘For Fair Elections’-rallies and has organized many ‘Days of Wrath’-rallies against the government. This role on center stage is one he kept fulfilling all through the protests in 2012. His radical antics, that include hunger strikes, extreme rhetoric, not shying away from violence and getting married in a t-

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28 Levyi Front, “Sovet i Ispolkom”.
31 Ilya Azar, “Sergei Udaltsov: Has the Russian Left Found Its New Leader?”
32 Idem.
shirt that depicts Stalin (we will elaborate on a few of these later) and intense charisma has charmed many, and his followers include both seasoned activists and old communist as well as young hipsters and more moderate protesters.\(^{35}\)

Since then, Levyi Front has remained one of the bigger players on the left, and has matured in several ways. Apart from having moved away from more revolutionary rhetoric and entertaining the idea of registering legally (as was illustrated by Udaltsov’s remarks on the subject), there is also a clear trend visible of Levyi Front moving closer towards other oppositional movements. A good example of the attitude of the ‘new’ Levyi Front is the ‘Opposition Coordination Council’.

The OCC is an initiative of several opposition leaders (including Udaltsov), whose goal is to unify and legitimize the opposition in Russia. At the end of 2012 OCC elections were held –hailed as the ‘first fair elections in Russia’- and everyone that had registered with the OCC (which was open to all) could vote on who was to become part of the 45 member council. This council then used this mandate to organize and unify the opposition, with large protests and actions being initiated by the OCC from then on out.\(^{36}\)

Additionally, they have also joined the ‘Other Russia’ platform (not to be confused with the ‘Other Russia’ party), which was an initiated by, among others, former chess-champion Garry Kasparov, National Bolshevik leader Eduard Limonov and ParNas initiator Mikhail Kasyanov.\(^{37}\) Apart from Limonov, who is considered very radical, this was quite a liberal, centrist coalition. This, again, illustrates the evolution Levyi Front has experienced since its initial establishment in 2005.

Overall, we have seen that Levyi Front is not an easy organization to categorize: they are not an official party, but they do seem to cherish a certain desire to become one since their ‘refounding’. Their political affiliation does not seem to be extremely democratic (at least, in Western eyes), but they are ruled by an elected council and have been very active in trying to democratize the Russian opposition by way of the OCC. In conclusion, we could state that the only thing that is definite is

\(^{35}\) Schwirtz, “A Russian Protest Leader Takes Center Stage”; Azar.


that Udaltsov and ‘his’ Levyi Front are adamantly anti-regime and are prepared to undertake all that is necessary to overthrow it, both by being pragmatic and cooperating with for instance liberals as well as by taking more radical measures such as using violence during demonstrations and launching hunger strikes.

However, many questions do remain. For instance, does this new incarnation of Levyi Front have the strength to unify the Russian left? And how do they resist campaigns against them by the regime? In the following chapters we will analyze the possible answers to both these and other questions on the basis of Stepan’s six conditions for successful opposition, with the goal of assessing whether Levyi Front might be the ‘savior’ of the Russian left.

I. Staying in, or coming into, existence
The first trait of a successful oppositional movement we will discuss here is staying in, or coming into, existence. Although this trait might seem superfluous to mention, considering it is of course impossible to carry out any kind of opposition without an existing organization, it is still important to keep in mind that this trait is not as self-evident for organizations in Russia as it would be in, for instance, Western Europe.

As we have already established, there are many ways in which the regime deters Russian oppositional movements from exercising their right to conduct politics. The severe registration laws and other ways in which the regime controls and limits the opposition as described in chapter one are only a part of the wide array of methods to prevent oppositional movements from gaining any real power.

So what are these other methods used to avert oppositional movements not only from achieving their desired goals, but even to keep them from coming into or staying in existence in the first place? In this chapter we will look at the ways the Russian regime has tried to undo the founding of Levyi Front and what Levyi Front, in turn, has done to resist the attempts to negate their establishment.

Information on the process of how Levyi Front came into existence in 2005 is scarce, so it is hard to say whether the regime actively tried to frustrate their establishment or their ‘coming into existence’ so to say. However, since then, the regime has undertaken numerous actions in trying to dismantle Levyi Front.

The most striking example of how Levyi Front is being frustrated in their ‘staying in existence’ by other ways than laws regarding official political parties, would be the numerous arrests of Udaltsov. As mentioned, he spends an around half
of each year behind bars and has been arrested over 100 times. Although Levyi Front is not led solely by Udaltsov (the democratic council structure of the organization prohibits that), this is a clear sign of the regime’s annoyance with Levyi Front. Putin and consorts have a clear habit of arresting Udaltsov as a preventive measure nearly every time a protest action or demonstration is planned, which is undoubtedly part of a strategy aimed at neutralizing Levyi Front’s influence and scope.

The device of the government seems to be that by taking out Levyi Front’s main and most charismatic leader, less people might support them and thus their existence would be threatened. The fact that these arrests are foremost a preventive measure is not only underlined by their timing (for instance, he was arrested the morning of and the day before the parliamentary elections in 2011 and the presidential elections in 2012 respectively), but also by the reasons of the arrests; jaywalking and insulting a police officer are among the many reasons Udaltsov has gotten arrested, mostly for four or five days per incident.

Currently, Udaltsov is under house arrest awaiting a verdict on charges of ‘leading mass protests’ in 2012. If convicted, he faces ten years of imprisonment. Although he was indeed one of the main figures of these protests (in spite of being imprisoned during many actions), and the trial could thus be deemed legitimate to a certain extent, there are many reasons to actually deem it politically motivated, aimed at neutralizing the threat he and Levyi Front pose for the regime.

This motivation is underlined by numerous incidents surrounding the still ongoing trial (he was originally indicted in October 2012) such as the waiving by judge Alexander Zamashnyuk of a doctor’s note stating that Udaltsov was too sick to participate in the trial in April and the complete absence of witnesses confirming Udaltsov’s leading role in the protests. Additionally, only three people were

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38 Azar, “Sergei Udaltsov”
39 Idem.
40 Idem.
43 Idem.
arrested, who were incidentally all affiliated with Levyi Front, namely Udaltsov himself, his close aide Konstantin Lebedev and Leonid Razvozzhayev, an aide to former Levyi Front leader and current A Just Russia MP Ponomarev. This strengthens the suspicion that the trial is directed against Levyi Front more than against civil disobedience or the protest leaders in general.  

Another telling example of the regime’s steadfast determination to discredit Udaltsov and Levyi and thus to undermine their existence, and also strongly related to his current court case, is the case of the television film/documentary ‘Anatomy of a Protest 2’. This film was created by the Russian TV channel NTV, which is owned by Gazprom Media and can thus be seen as a state-owned channel.

Although officially a documentary, sufficient evidence has emerged to deem this a fictional film. In it, Udaltsov, Lebedev and Razvozzhayev are ‘shown’ (in hidden camera footage) discussing Levyi Front funding by the Georgian government, the overturning of the Russian government with the help of neo-nazi troops and Chechen terrorists and organizing a seizure of power in Kaliningrad. However, a journalist that was involved in the creation of the film later stated that audio and video footage were separated and later layered together differently. Additionally, the video footage is extremely indistinct and there is much evidence that suggests Udaltsov does not even appear in the film; the person shown in the film as Udaltsov for instance smokes, a habit Udaltsov is not known for. Udaltsov himself and other oppositional figures spoke of ‘defamation’, and many urged Levyi Front to sue NTV.

However, the opposite happened; it was this film that motivated the regime to sue the three aforementioned activists the grounds of illegal activities as shown in the

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44 Idem; BBC News Europe, “Russia activist Sergei Udaltsov under house arrest”.  
47 The entire film is available on Youtube: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9HSOXk-AgqI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9HSOXk-AgqI); Roman Vorobyov, “‘Anatomy of Protest’ stirs trouble”, Russia Beyond the Headlines, October 12, 2012. [Accessed: June 24, 2014]; Khvostunova, “Russia’s Political Prisoners”.  
48 Idem.  
49 Vorobyov, “‘Anatomy of Protest’ stirs trouble”.  
50 Idem.
film, and the charges about the ‘leading of mass-protests’ in 2011-12 were only added later.51

Although the above mentioned actions against Udaltsov and Levyi Front are just a small selection of how the regime tries to frustrate them, they are telling because they again show the far-reaching ways in which the regime tries to frustrate oppositional movements. Apart from just going after organizations in themselves, personal prosecutions and propaganda-like media-techniques are quite common and impede oppositional groupings strongly.

However, in spite of the regime’s best efforts, Levyi Front still exists and thus meets this criterion for good opposition. So how do they resist these techniques aimed at destroying them?

First and foremost, they keep going no matter what and are not willing to give up or compromise their views, regardless of the (often quite serious) consequences. For instance, when Udaltsov, Lebedev and Razvozzhayev were arrested, Udaltsov and Razvozzhayev refused to cooperate. Lebedev however did work together with the regime and thus got a minor sentence and was released early; instead of five years, he only got sentenced to two and a half of which he served merely one.52

If Udaltsov and other Levyi Front dignitaries would take this same position, Levyi Front would soon be no more. Udaltsov and Razvozzhayev however refused to admit guilt and are still being prosecuted because of it. Regarding Lebedev, Udaltsov stated that ‘[his] behavior shows banal cowardice and a lack of principle, leading to grave consequences [and] betrayal’.53 This again underlines the hard-line position Levyi Front takes towards conducting opposition; they do not shy away from extreme consequences and they keep fighting for their beliefs.

Moreover, except for their headstrong perseverance, the organizational structure of Levyi Front also guarantees their survival to a certain extent. As opposed to many other oppositional movements, they have a wide regional network. For instance, even when the Moscow cell all but disappeared between 2005 and 2008, many regional branches were still active and were later tied together again when

51 Khvostunova, “Russia’s Political Prisoners”.
52 Idem.
53 Idem.
Udaltsov and his new incarnation of Levyi Front reappeared in Moscow.\footnote{News.ru.com, “Levye organizatsii Rossii obedinyayutsya v novoe dvizhenie”; Kollektivnoe Deistvie, “Levye aktivisty Kirova obedinilis v Levyi Front”; ZakS.ru, “V Karelii vnov poyavilsya ‘Levyi Front’”.} However, considering Udaltsov’s charismatic leadership and general celebrity, his ousting would be problematic for the organization, but not unsurmountable.

In conclusion, we can say that although ‘staying in existence’ is not easy for Levyi Front considering the wide array of actions undertaken against them by the regime, they do meet this criterion for good opposition. Their perseverance, combined with a well-rounded organizational structure that guarantees survival even when the main cells might be disbanded, guarantees that Levyi Front will survive, even when this might be in a different form and with a different leader than Udaltsov.

II. Resisting integration into the regime

This second criterion is strongly related to the first: apart from existing, an oppositional organization also has to exist independently from the ruling powers. This is specifically interesting in Russia, because the intrasystem opposition, although specified as opposition, is de facto part of the regime’s agenda, or in other words, integrated into the regime.

As we have already established, Levyi Front is an antisystem oppositional force, so integration at the level of the intrasystem opposition is not of our concern. However, there are other ways the regime might try to integrate the antisystem opposition. One way is to force them to cooperate, as they did successfully in the aforementioned case of Lebevedev; by convincing him to plea bargain, they integrated him into their system. However, he was merely an aide to Udaltsov and has since been revoked of his Levyi Front membership and thus the action had little success in way of integrating Levyi Front as a whole.

There are many more reasons why Levyi Front more than meets this criterion. For one, they still show very little desire to become part of the official intrasystem discourse. Although Udaltsov did make mention of a potential new official party on the political left sometime in the future, he only did so on one occasion and usually restricts himself to mentioning the formation of a new coalition and a united left
opposition, as opposed to an official party. Additionally, although he was involved in the formation of a new political party in 2010, namely the United Russian Labour Front (ROTFRONT), they never officially registered and they also state in their charter that they think ‘official registration would be a tactical mistake’.

There is one exception to this usual rhetoric of remaining in the antisystem opposition, namely the rumor that Udaltsov might become Gennady Zyuganov’s successor as leader of the KPRF. Since the KPRF is an intrasystem party, Udaltsovs leading it would make him part of that system and could then be perceived as ‘integrated’. Additionally, Udaltsov also openly supported Zyuganov’s bid for president in 2012, strengthening rumors about his affiliation with the KPRF.

Nonetheless, the likelihood of this happening and of Levyi Front being totally integrated into the KPRF and thus the intrasystem opposition is small. For one, none of these rumors have ever been confirmed by either Udaltsov or Zyuganov. On the contrary actually: Zyuganov has squarely denied it and Udaltsov has been cautious addressing the subject and has deemed it ‘simply technically impossible’. Additionally, in light of Udaltsov’s current court case it does not seem feasible for him to join the ranks of the intrasystem opposition anytime soon. Moreover, it is once again the organizational structure of Levyi Front that would theoretically prevent them from being totally integrated into the regime even if Udaltsov would be: there is indeed no reason why they would not be able to exist and function without Udaltsov.

To conclude, we can state that under current circumstances integration into the

57 Azar, “Sergei Udaltsov”.
regime is a highly unlikely scenario for Levyi Front. Not only do they not want to be integrated, but the regime does not seem to be very keen to incorporate either the organization or Udaltsov into the *intrasystem* opposition either. Even more than ‘staying in existence’, Levyi Front absolutely meets this criterion.

**III. Guarding zones of autonomy against the regime**

This criterion is more complex and abstract than the former. As David White states in his article “Taking it to the Streets: Raising the Costs of Electoral Authoritarianism in Russia”, it entails that opposition movements ‘need to maintain zones of autonomy within civil society in which non-regime organizations may operate’. He also states that in non-democratic regimes, it are usually organizations with extra-political legitimacy that are most successful in guarding this autonomy. Religious organizations are often apt at this, but considering the atheist rhetoric of the Russian left, trade unions and social pressure groups are of greater interest to us.

The links with non-political organizations such as for instance trade unions have always been a notoriously troublesome point for the Russian opposition. For example, the largest trade union organization in Russia, the Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Russia (FITUR), with an estimated 31.5 million members, is not only more of a manager’s organization than a one for working class people, but has also always affiliated itself politically with United Russia as opposed to the worker’s parties (in the opposition). The same is true of many other trade unions whereas newer, ‘alternative’ trade unions are often very small and without any political links whatsoever.

Nonetheless, Levyi Front could be called more successful in linking itself with non- or semi-political organizations than most, in spite of the troublesome history of the Russian left in this respect. Of course, this is partially thanks to the fact that they are not a political party, but a political platform. One of the strengths of Levyi Front is that it is comprised of all sorts of different organizations, including those more

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63 Luke March, “The Russian left has barely emerged from the shadows of Stalin, but there are significant signs of change”, *LSE Blogs*, July 2, 2013. [Accessed: June 25, 2014].
reminiscent of classic civil society groupings. For instance, the party Udaltsov was briefly associated with in 2010-11 and which is also part of Levyi Front, namely ROTFRONT, has its own labor movement as does the RKRKP, which is also part of Levyi Front. 64 Both of these organizations have around 50 thousand members, the great majority of which is also or only a member of the respective trade unions. 65 Additionally, ROTFRONT has been involved in the politicization of other smaller trade-unions. 66 This guarantees civil society affiliations for Levyi Front to a certain extent, considering these organizations are actual members of the platform.

Although one might call the politicization of these relatively tiny trade unions ‘baby-steps’, they are significant because they breach the status quo of trade unions having little to no political affiliation at all and it also creates a non-political arena for organizations like Levyi Front to gain support in.

Apart from trade unions, Levyi Front has been affiliated with several social pressure groups and other non-political notables as well, the most eye-catching of which was their collaboration during the 2011-12 protests with among others the environmentalists that campaigned against the Khimki forest motorway, the writers Boris Akunin and Vladimir Rhyzhkov and the politically engaged rapper Noize MC. 67 Although this was not a collaboration specifically with Levyi Front, but more generally with all the protesting organizations during the 2011-12 wave, it is significant because it shows that these groups and people were able to work together even when their main goals do not correspond. Also, it paved the way for future collaboration and potentially intensified links between the political groupings and the civil society figures present.

More important within the context of ‘zones of autonomy’ is the aforementioned Opposition Coordination Council. More so than for instance the

66 March, “The Russian left has barely emerged from the shadows of Stalin”.
67 The Khimki Forest environmentalist movement protested the construction of a motorway through the Khimki forest near Moscow, for more information, see: Alfred B. Evans Jr. (2012), “Protests and Civil Society in Russia: The Struggle for the Khimki Forest”, *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 45:3-4, 233-242; White (2013), 588.
Other Russia platform, the OCC also included civil society movements (among others, all of the labour movements associated with Levyi Front and several environmentalist campaign groups, including the Khimki group\textsuperscript{68}) and their 2012 elections are a good example of establishing legitimacy and seeking support outside of the official political discourse, i.e. ‘creating zones of autonomy’. Over 100,000 people voted in their 2012 elections, and although the ideologies of the organizations that participated were extremely varied, they were able to organize a couple of big protests.\textsuperscript{69}

However, the OCC cannot per se be called a success; as early as October 2013, it was announced that the OCC had de facto ceased to exist and apart from a couple of actions directly after their election in 2012, nothing had come of it.\textsuperscript{70}

Between the OCC and the trade unions, Levyi Front might not be tremendously successful in creating or guarding zones of autonomy yet, but they seem to be very keen on the concept and their future certainly looks brighter than those of other organizations. For one, they are one of the few organizations that are already inherently linked to a couple of civil society movements through their trade union affiliations. Secondly, as stated earlier, Udaltsov was one of the main initiators of the OCC and although this specific initiative did not succeed, there is no reason to believe he might not try again. The fact that the opposition now knows, partly thanks to Udaltsov, that they can unify when the motivation is there, carries a lot of potential and might trigger other unifying initiatives that could create greater zones of autonomy, whether or not by Levyi Front.

IV. Disputing the legitimacy of the regime

In terms of being a good oppositional movement, Levyi Front might be the most successful when it comes to this criterion. Although not their only area of expertise (provincial regional branches are more known for their focus on local, ‘simpler’ politics\textsuperscript{71}), most of the larger actions by Levyi Front are all focused on disputing the legitimacy of Putin’s regime.

\textsuperscript{69} Idem.
\textsuperscript{71} Khvostunova, “Russia’s Political Prisoners”. 
The most potent example of this are the aforementioned ‘Days of Wrath’-rallies. These were monthly rallies that focused on both regional as federal issues, ranging from the building of new high-rise constructions in Moscow to the deteriorating social and economic situation in Russia. The common denominator between all of these subjects was the anti-regime sentiment involved. Now, of course organizing rallies does not necessarily make an opposition movement successful; before 2009, Levyi Front and Udaltsov were also very active in organizing such actions, but rallies would seldom attract more than 30 people. The ‘Days of Wrath’-rallies were of a different caliber though: it is reported that most rallies attracted around 1000 people, with multiple rallies being held throughout Russia usually, sometimes adding up to 10,000 mobilized protesters countrywide.

Considering the fact that Levyi Front’s own membership adds up to a couple of thousand at most (information on this is extremely scarce, but estimates are that they have between 4000 and 6000 members), this shows their competence in spreading their ideas about the (non-existent) legitimacy of the regime, i.e. their aptitude at ‘disputing the legitimacy of the regime’.

Of course, the 2011-12 protest cycle is another strong example of Levyi Front’s disproportional influence over tens of thousands of people when it comes to mobilizing people against the regime, thus disputing its legitimacy. Of course, the question of whether or not Udaltsov was just a or the leader of the protests is contested (as is shown by his current court case), but fact remains that his influence in mobilizing protesters was exceptionally large. As Ilya Azar states in his article ‘Sergei Udaltsov: Has the Russian Left Found its New Leader?’, certain rallies were actually moved to smaller venues because Udaltsov was imprisoned and the organizers were afraid that without him and his charismatic leadership, only marginal amounts of people would show up.

Another strong point in this context is again the organizational structure of the organization: whilst Udaltsov and the Moscow branch of Levyi Front mostly dispute

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72 Idem; White (2013), 590.
73 Azar, “Sergei Udaltsov”.
75 March, “The Russian left has barely emerged from the shadows of Stalin”.
76 Azar, “Sergei Udaltsov”.
the legitimacy of the federal government and other high-profile leaders, local branches of the organization might point out the illegitimacy of provincial, regional and municipal administrations.\textsuperscript{77} This makes the organization extremely apt at disputing the regime’s legitimacy on all fronts.

In conclusion, although these are only a very few examples of Levyi Front’s actions against the (illegitimacy of the) regime, they show that the organization is extremely skilled at mobilizing protesters, even if these do not directly support Levyi Front itself. In the following chapter, which is tightly linked with this one, we will look more closely at some specific actions, showing that Levyi Front is not only good at pointing out the defects of the government, but is also competent at making it more difficult for the regime to keep the status quo intact.

V. Raising the cost of authoritarian rule

As stated, this trait is closely linked with the last. Of course, disputing the legitimacy of the regime is an important trait for any oppositional movement, but this is not necessarily extremely important if they do not succeed in making it harder for the regime to keep functioning as is, i.e. without raising the cost of its illegitimate rule. Ultimately, opposition in authoritarian milieus is focused mainly on one thing: making the regime’s rule untenable to such a level that it cannot possibly retain it.

Of course, such a scenario is rare and often paired with extreme violence and difficult transitions (think of the French Revolution in 1789 for instance, but also the current war in Syria). So what does this ‘raising the cost of authoritarian rule’ look like in less definite and more moderate circumstances? For one, it entails showing passive supporters of the regime (i.e. those who are not truly politically engaged and can sway either way) the costs imposed on society by the regime’s rule. This is of course closely linked with disputing its legitimacy; showing and raising awareness among people that the regime’s policies are not legitimate nor beneficial for the nation.\textsuperscript{78} Secondly, it is about quite literally raising the cost for the regime to keep repressing the opposition. In this context, one might think of the regime being forced to either arrest dozens of people in violent manner or simply condone a protest.\textsuperscript{79} In such a case, the cost of its rule is not only heightened for the regime, but is also

\textsuperscript{77} Khvostunova, “Russia’s Political Prisoners”.
\textsuperscript{78} White (2013), 589.
\textsuperscript{79} Idem, 589-590.
reinforces the awareness of the cost such policies have on society: mass-arrests are rarely applauded by moderate civilians.  

So how apt is Levyi Front at raising these costs? In short, we can answer this with: extremely apt. An eye-catching example of this is the mass-arrests surrounding the larger ‘Days of Wrath’-rallies. For instance, a rally in March 2010 drew around 5000 protester countrywide, denouncing Putin’s economic policies and impediments on free-speech. This not only created awareness of the cost of their regime on society, but also led to over seventy arrests, thus increasing the cost for the regime to silence its opponents. The arrests in turn, reinforced the awareness that the rights to free assembly and free speech are under heavy pressure by the regime.

The same is true of for instance the March 5, 2012 ‘For Fair Elections’-rally. Not only did tens of thousands of people show up to this rally (thus disputing the regime’s legitimacy and raising awareness of the cost of its rule), but it was also paired with extremely violent arrests of over seventy people. This occurred nearly solely at the initiative of Udaltsov, who climbed the now infamous fountain on Moscow’s Pushkin square, announcing that he would not leave until all the protesters that were arrested earlier would be freed. Although this plan was of course destined to fail, around 1000 people remained in the square with him, underlining his influence and ability to impede and embarrass the regime, which was forced to use heavy means to subdue the protest.  

In what other ways do Levyi Front and Udaltsov raise the cost of the regime’s rule? Although not as clear-cut as the previous example, Udaltsov’s hunger strike can also be categorized under this trait. By raising awareness of his (and others’) unjustified imprisonment and by putting himself in danger only to reinforce his point, the regime risks making a martyr out of him. The same is true of his current court case: if acquitted, he can continue with his actions and thus keep obstructing the regime. If convicted however, this might pose an even greater risk for the regime: he could become a martyr of unprecedented size in Russia (Russia’s most notorious 

80 Idem.  
81 Titova, “Day of Wrath: Thousands Of Russian Protesters Demand Putin’s Resignation”.  
83 Idem.
political prisoner or ‘martyr’ was of course oil-tycoon Mikhail Khodorkovsky, but he did not have the popular support or broad network that Udaltsov enjoys).

This dilemma in which precipitating or condoning Udaltsov and Levyi Front would have nearly equally negative consequences for the regime, is thought to be one of the main reasons why the regime is so set on defaming the organization.\(^{84}\) The ‘Anatomy of Protest 2’ film is a good example of this: by undermining Udaltsov’s credibility they apparently hoped to stymie Levyi Front, without having to take extremely oppressive action.

However, this has been unsuccessful and even in custody, Udaltsov keeps rising the cost of their rule. Moreover, even if this action does turn out to be successful, and Udaltsov would be discredited and sent to a penal colony and disappear out of people’s minds, the organizational structure of Levyi Front would guarantee their survival yet again. As stated, it is not only the main cell in Moscow that is adept at raising the costs of Putin’s rule or disputing its legitimacy; many local branches have also organized ‘Days of Wrath’ and anti-fraud protests as well as protests concerning local issues.

Another important characteristic of Levyi Front specifically, and the main reason why they are more adept at raising the costs of authoritarian rule than for instance the liberal anti-regime blogger/politician Alexei Navalny, is that they communicate with the Russian people on a ‘simple’ level and can thus raise awareness in all ranks in society. As former Levyi Front dignitary Ponamarev states: “Liberals are not dangerous to regime, they are beneficial even. They are not popular in the provinces and only stir trouble in Moscow. This underlines the divide in Russia. Leftists [like Udaltsov] talk about things that are close to the people. When people ask Navalny about traffic jams and housing, he answers with talk of corruption. Left Front talks about housing first and politics second. That is dangerous to the regime.”\(^{85}\)

Additionally, he also states that Levyi Front is the only oppositional movement with a strong regional network, again underlining the strength of the organization itself, with or without Udaltsov.\(^{86}\)

In conclusion, we can state that in terms of disputing the regime’s legitimacy

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84 Khvostunova, “Russia Political Prisoners”,
86 Buribaev, “ Za chto stradaet ‘Levyi Front’?”.
and raising the cost of Putin’s authoritarian rule, Levyi Front is not only highly successful, but also has a lot of potential still. There is no sure fire way for the regime to suppress Levyi Front as condoning or precipitating them would both increase the cost of the regime’s rule. Moreover, the actions they have undertaken against Udaltsov and Levyi Front have more often than not backfired, increasing cost and awareness as opposed to nipping them in the bud. Additionally, even if they would be successful in neutralizing Udaltsov, Levyi Front as an organization could still continue raising the costs of Putin’s rule because of their strong regional network and non-hierarchical leadership structure.

VI. Creating a credible democratic alternative
The last trait Stepan identifies as being crucial to successful opposition in an authoritarian system is ‘creating a credible democratic alternative’. This is always an arduous point for oppositional movements, not only in Russia. Overcoming the old system and destroying links with the repressive past is not an easy task, but creating a new system is still harder, and takes much more know-how, perseverance and aptitude.

So, can Levyi Front offer this credible democratic alternative Stepan speaks of? The answer is ambiguous and not without contention. First and foremost, to answer this question we will have to establish whether Levyi Front can be perceived as ‘democratic’. In this thesis, we have shown that this is indeed the case, but many observers might disagree with that. Of course, their hard-line leftist ideology is not often associated with democracit tendencies, especially not in Western eyes, but its democratically elected council and executive committee and its determination to bring democratic and fair elections to Russia as well as the opposition itself (by way of the OCC), underline their democratic leaning.

However, their support of democracy does not necessarily make them able to offer a credible alternative. Nonetheless, there are positive signs that Levyi Front could offer this, albeit in collaboration with other oppositional movements.

This need for collaboration is easily explained: it is not Levyi Front’s goal to simply replace the current dominant party system with another one, in which Levyi Front would fulfill the role United Russia does now. On the contrary, it is of the essence that the democratic alternative is indeed truly democratic, which means that
the current ruling elite needs to be replaced by a broad array of parties.\footnote{White (2013), 592-593; Stepan (1990), “On the Tasks of a Democratic Opposition”, Journal of Democracy, 47.}

As Stepan states, the most important thing is that the alternative coalition of parties (and other forces, such as civil society groupings) do not try to develop policies in manner of a ‘shadow government’. Because of the need for wide support, it is better to agree on a couple of bigger issues regarding for instance institutional structures and democratic contestation as a whole. By forgoing specific policy-making, they prevent internal division and stand stronger as an alternative. This is specifically crucial because a divided opposition reinforces the rule of the current regime.\footnote{Stepan (1990), 47-49.}

As we have established, Levyi Front’s main goal is exactly this. Udaltsov’s repeated remarks on creating a united front of leftist opposition and Levyi Front’s own efforts regarding this (by way of the OCC, but also within the organization itself) are a good example of their potential power to be the unifying force. During the 2011-12 protest wave, they were able to work together not only with civil society groupings not directly linked to them, but also with ideological rivals such as the aforementioned liberal Navalny and the leaders of ParNas.\footnote{White (2013), 587.}

Moreover, as Stepan states, inclusion of nonpolitical organizations in the alternative for the current ruling elite is imperative for the successful construction of a new system. As we have already seen, Levyi Front is one of the most promising organizations in Russian oppositional politics in this respect.

However, although Udaltsov is a strong advocate of unifying the Russian left, the most hopeful initiative yet, namely the OCC, has since been disbanded and no new alliances seem to be pending currently. Moreover, it is important to keep in mind that even if the OCC had succeeded, it still would have been a marginal force compared with United Russia or even the KPRF. Moreover, if Udaltsov were to be convicted (which seems very likely\footnote{Khvostunova, “Russia’s Political Prisoners”.}), who is to lead Levyi Front and the potential new coalition? Although the organization is perfectly capable to survive without Udaltsov, a charismatic leader is needed if new alliances are to be made.

Additionally, even if Udaltsov is acquitted, he is generally not perceived as a
capable politician by Russian voters. Although Levyi Front is not the lawless rebel-organization the regime often makes it out to be, Udaltsov is more known for his *enfant terrible* antics than balanced politics, which does not make him the most desirably candidate to lead the democratization of Russia.\(^9^1\) Of course, this is an issue of image building, and could be overcome, but that would take considerable effort on Udaltsov’s side.

In conclusion we can say that although Levyi Front is one of the more capable oppositional movements in terms of being able to create a credible alternative to Putin, much is still too be done. Specifically essential is the reunification of the opposition, a process in which a major role is reserved for Levyi Front either way, but which is all but easy. Secondly is the question of Udaltsov. If convicted, the opposition will need to find another charismatic leader that resonates with the whole of the Russian opposition (including the groupings in the backlands) as well as Udaltsov does. If acquitted, Levyi Front and Udaltsov might have to seriously reconsider his image and the public perception of what kind of politician he has the potential of being.

**Conclusion**

Over the course of this thesis, we have established that Levyi Front does indeed meet all the criteria for successful opposition in authoritarian regimes. Although our question can of course not be answered with a yes or no answer, we can state that for better or for worse, Levyi Front at least has the potential to be the savior of the Russian left.

Firstly, they exist and have shown in numerous ways that they are not an easy organization to eliminate. Udaltsov’s and other’s uncompromising position towards the regime guarantees that. Additionally, the broad regional network of the organization guarantees that Levyi Front will continue to exist, even if its main (Muscovite) were to be wiped out.

Secondly, there is little to no direct danger of being integrated into the regime. Levyi Front has no desire to become part of the *intrasystem* opposition, and in light of Udaltsov’s court case and his and Zhyuganov’s denial of Udaltsov being his successor, it is highly unlikely that Udaltsov might become part of the KPRF or any

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\(^9^1\) Balmforth, “The Paradox of Russia’s Left”
other *intrasystem* party. Additionally, even if this were to happen, it is again the organizational structure of the organization that ensures it will not be integrated in its entirety anytime soon.

Thirdly, of all the opposition organizations in Russia, Levyi Front has the most promising ties to civil society. Additionally, since its platform structure already guarantees civil society links (specifically with smaller trade unions), they stand relatively strong in this respect.

As for disputing the legitimacy of the current regime and raising the costs of authoritarian rule for Putin and consorts, we have seen that they are disproportionally apt at this. Udaltsov’s ability to mobilize protesters, thus raising awareness of the regime’s illegitimacy and the cost of its rule for society, resonates throughout the whole of the 2011-12 protest cycle. Moreover, the width of rallies organized by Levyi Front branches across Russia show the capabilities of the organization as a whole. Additionally, their links with ‘normal people’ and ability to appeal to Russians in the backlands as well as the liberals in the cities, give them a great comparative advantage over other oppositionists.

Lastly, although this is undoubtedly the hardest trait for any oppositional movement, Levyi Front also shows potential in ways of offering a credible democratic alternative to the current system. They are more than prepared to work together with other groups and parties in such a way that is in accordance with Stepan’s view on the matter.

However, why is it that Levyi Front merely has the potential to save the Russian left as opposed to being its savior, considering they meet all the demands made of successful opposition?

This is mostly due to the failure of the OCC, Udaltsov’s current court case and his public persona. For one, without the OCC, there is little to no unity to be found between the Russian oppositional left. To succeed, Levyi Front would have to launch new initiatives, as it launched the OCC. Additionally, it is difficult to say what will happen if Udaltsov is convicted. Although the organization can function independently from him, a charismatic leader is crucial in the evolvement of the the Russian left from its current state to a force that can actually overthrow Putin’s regime. Lastly, even if Udaltsov were to be acquitted, his image of a hard-line fundamentalist only capable of *enfant terrible* antics and not of serious politics, might still prove to be a struggle for himself and Levyi Front.
In conclusion, we can state that the potential is definitely there and that, if one of the currently existing organizations in the leftist opposition were to implement actual change, this role would most likely be reserved for Levyi Front. However, that does not compensate for the fact that there are still a great many hurdles to take for Levyi Front and Udaltsov and that in the end, it might be a different organization entirely that will make the difference in Russian oppositional politics. Whether this be Levyi Front in a different form and as part of a new alliance, or a yet unestablished organization remains to be seen.
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