



The Decline of the Communists

By Leon Aron

Overlooked in the victory of the pro-Kremlin party, United Russia, in the Duma election last December and President Vladimir Putin's overwhelming victory in the presidential election three months later was a milestone in Russia's post-Soviet political history: the precipitous decline of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF). The single largest faction in the Duma between 1995 and 2003, the KPRF was reduced to 12 percent of the party-list vote in the Duma poll while the Communist candidate for the presidency, who received 40 percent in the 1996 election and 24 percent in 2000, ended up with 14 percent.

Apart from its immediate resonance in Russian politics, the decline of the KPRF signals the waning appeal of a set of beliefs and aspirations which at their peak commanded the loyalties of over one-third of the Russian electorate. At the same time, however, the KPRF's electoral defeats are themselves due in large measure to the appropriation of some of the most popular elements of the Communist platform by newer, more charismatic electoral alternatives. Consequently, while the KPRF appears to be heading toward the ashbin of history, the statist, nationalist mindset endures—most menacingly, in the form of Vladimir Putin's lurch toward authoritarianism and the success of the new Motherland (Rodina) party—thus posing an enduring obstacle in Russia's transition toward liberal, democratic capitalism.

The Rise of the KPRF

The forerunner of the KPRF, the Russian Communist Party (RCP), was founded in 1990 by the

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members of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) opposed to General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev's reforms.¹ After the failed August 1991 coup by Communist hardliners, the president of Russia, Boris Yeltsin, banned the CPSU and the RCP. The latter appealed the ban to the Constitutional Court of the Russian Federation. Its lawyers argued that it was not responsible for the Communist Party's conduct during the previous seventy-five years and that, in any case, it was illegal to hold a vast political organization responsible for actions of "individuals." After a year of litigation, which anti-Communists and human-rights activists tried and failed to turn into a public trial of the CPSU, the court sided with the Communists and invalidated Yeltsin's decree. Renamed the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, the party held its first post-Soviet congress in February 1993.

Although the KPRF lost 95 percent of the RCP's membership to resignations and non-renewals, the Communists still claimed between 450,000 and 530,000 dues-paying members for the next ten years—making it far and away the largest body of any political organization in Russia and quite possibly larger than the membership of the other parties and blocs combined.

In the next six years the KPRF went from one victory to another. It placed third with 12 percent of the party-list vote in the first post-Soviet election in 1993. Two years later, the Communists received 22 percent: by far the largest share of the party-list vote. As over 50 percent of the vote was cast for parties and blocs that failed to overcome the 5-percent threshold for representation (including 9.6 million votes, or 14 percent of the total, cast for the badly fragmented pro-reform parties

and blocs), only four of the forty-three parties competing in the election entered the parliament. The proportionate allocation of the deputy mandates resulted in the Communists and their allies controlling nearly half of the Duma seats.

Between 1995 and 1999, the KPRF, together with independent leftist deputies and left-nationalist “people’s patriots” from other factions, would dominate the parliament and pursue the pre-1917 Bolshevik strategy of “the worse, the better.” Very much hoping that an economic crisis would lead to another “red October,” the Communist-led plurality opposed each and every liberal structural reform, including land privatization, and in 1998 derailed the efforts to trim the deficit-ridden budget. The Duma failed to pass the emergency measures that the Kremlin negotiated with the IMF in the summer of 1998. The flight of foreign investors, the financial crisis, and the ruble devaluation followed.

In the first round of the 1996 presidential election, the chairman of the KPRF, Gennady Zyuganov, placed second in a field of ten candidates with 32 percent and received 40 percent in the runoff against Boris Yeltsin, who garnered 54 percent.

The KPRF again finished first in the 1999 Duma election with 25 percent of the party-list vote, although this time it lost its plurality to an informal alliance of pro-regime centrist and right-of-center parties. In 2000, Zyuganov again scored second in the first round of the presidential election: 24 percent to Vladimir Putin’s 71 percent.

The Left-to-Right Paradigm of Post-Communism

The rise of the KPRF conformed to the norm of post-Communist transitions. In the typical scenario, painful short-term effects of structural liberalization, known as “shock therapy,” included unemployment and a drop in real wages following the end of state subsidies and of below-inflation interest rates for loss-making enterprises. The price and wage de-control and the enormous “overhang” in forced savings inherited from the socialist economy of shortages triggered inflation, an utterly new and frightening phenomenon. Tight fiscal policies aimed at reducing budget deficits and the end of state subsidies for consumer goods caused a temporary but sharp decline in the standard of living for millions. Privatization brought about open and sharp income inequality. The end of the state’s ownership

of culture, education, and science badly hurt the intelligentsia. As a result, right-liberal regimes—having “normalized” deficit-ridden planned socialist economies and started the market engine—were voted out of power and replaced by the Left in virtually every post-Communist transition.

The right-left electoral pattern was first established in Poland, the leader of post-Communist transformation and initially by far the most anti-Communist country of the former Warsaw bloc. After launching a “shock therapy” program of liberal structural reforms on January 1, 1990, Prime Minister Tadeusz Mazowiecki resigned in November of the same year and, a year later, the architect of the reforms, Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Leszek Balcerowicz, and the rest of the reform-oriented cabinet followed Mazowiecki. In September 1993, after a deep economic recession and national strikes of miners, teachers, and medical personnel, the ex-Communist-led Democratic Left Alliance captured roughly two-thirds of the seats in the Sejm. In 1995 Alexander Kwasniewski, a former member of the Politburo of the Polish United Workers’ Party (the Communists), was elected president. He was reelected in 2000 to another five-year term.

Ideology and the Platforms

By contrast, the Communists have yet to recapture executive power in Russia. The main reason appears to be weariness with the KPRF’s steadfast refusal to jettison Communist orthodoxy. Unlike the post-Soviet Left in Eastern Europe, the KPRF has never repudiated Stalinism, state socialism, the Soviet empire, or anti-Western ideology and has never credibly accepted the market economy and democracy. The majority of Russian voters did not trust the KPRF not to reverse the key achievements of the 1991 revolution: civil liberties, multi-party elections, and private property. In this, they had ample reason for concern.

Socialism, Stalin, the Soviet Union. More than anything, the KPRF is a reactionary party in a classic sense: suffused with nostalgia for the *ancien régime*, its policies, and its institutions. As the KPRF’s deputy chairman, Alexander Shabanov, declared during the 1996 presidential campaign: “The death of communism never happened . . . the Soviet Union never collapsed, [and] the people still think of themselves as Soviets.”² The social-democratic transformation, undergone by the Communist parties in most Eastern and Central

European countries, was anathema to the KPRF. In the words of Gennady Zyuganov, "In Russia, social democracy of the Western European type has no chance."³

Accordingly the party's electoral platforms have invariably advocated state ownership of the "commanding heights" of the Russian economy, including key industries, natural resources, energy, transportation, and communication. Price control was a frequently repeated slogan. A state monopoly on foreign trade, introduced by Lenin within weeks of the October Revolution, was another major plank. In a KPRF-led Russia "some" private property would be allowed, provided the party established in each individual case that it was "legitimately acquired."⁴

For seven years the Communists and their allies in the Duma prevented the passage into law of a land code and the amendments to the civil code that would allow the privatization of farm and urban land. As the laws headed to adoption by the parliament in the spring and early summer of 2001, Zyuganov threatened a civil war and called on party members to "wage an all-out offensive" against the "anti-people regime of President Putin."⁵

In KPRF rhetoric, Stalin was judged to be "decidedly positive." Indeed, to Zyuganov, Stalin was a "hero of his party."⁶ Stalin's crimes were described as "exaggerated," and the KPRF never even accepted Nikita Khrushchev's limited account of them, disclosed in 1956. In the party's history, Khrushchev and Gorbachev were traitors to the cause.

The KPRF deemed the Soviet Union a model state and its breakup, a tragedy and a "crime." The same assessment applied to the "destruction" of the Soviet military-industrial complex, whose funding was cut by Yeltsin by 90 percent.⁷ The "voluntary" recreation of the Soviet empire was a key objective. "What is Great Russia?" Zyuganov asked rhetorically in one of his books. "I don't think that its borders will differ essentially from the borders of the USSR."⁸

The party's 1995 Duma election platform called for the "annulment" of the December 1991 Belavezh accords, which gave legal imprimatur to the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and for the "voluntary" reconstitution of the latter. Half a year later, the Communist-led plurality in the Duma passed a resolution nullifying the accords.

Paranoid Nationalism. The writings of Gennady Zyuganov, who has led the KPRF since 1993 and whose chairmanship remained unchallenged until the dismal performance in the 2003 Duma election, are a peculiarly incongruous mix of Leninism and extreme, paranoid

nationalism, usually associated with fascist or even Nazi ideologies.

Zyuganov considers Russia a unique "civilization" and the embodiment of virtue and goodness, which it is her destiny to spread in the world. With its tripartite foundation in orthodoxy (whether Orthodox Christian or Marxist), autocracy (whether tsar or general secretary), and "folkishness" (whether pre-1917 peasants or the "new historic community of the Soviet people"), Russia is synonymous with socialism. Capitalism and private property are forever alien to her exalted *Weltanschauung*.⁹

While Russia is the center of all conceivable spiritual riches, the West is the embodiment of evil.¹⁰ Thus, the two are, and forever will remain, implacable enemies. And although outside its destiny-given empire Russia is peaceable, the West for centuries has schemed to do her in, with the United States currently the "epicenter" of this vast conspiracy. Should wiping Russia off the face of the earth prove too difficult, the West would settle for depopulating the country (down to fifty million, or one-third of its current size) and permanently turning it into a colony and a source of raw materials.

These nefarious machinations finally succeeded with Gorbachev's coming to power in the Soviet Union and Yeltsin's election to the presidency. Worse than just "traitors," both were "agents" and "puppets" of the West, which "pulled the strings." The Yeltsin regime, in particular, was far more than a promoter of the reforms which the KPRF abhorred. It was a willing engineer of "national catastrophe." Hence the leitmotif of Zyuganov's 1996 presidential platform—"The Fatherland Is in Danger!"—and the goal of "liberating" Russia from Yeltsin and preventing her "extinction."

Anti-Semitism As Ideology and Tactic. Spearheading the eternal anti-Russian conspiracy, in Zyuganov's view, are the Jews. From the nineteenth century on, Zyuganov claimed in one of his books, "the worldview, culture, and ideology of the West" were increasingly influenced by "the Judaic Diaspora," which eventually became "a sort of [principal] shareholder in the entire economic system of Western civilization."¹¹ With the "Western consciousness" molded by "Jewish religious beliefs (exclusivity and the divine mission to rule the world)," the "Slavic civilization embodied in the Russian empire became the last barrier to Western hegemony"¹²—and thus had to be destroyed.

In the 1996 campaign, the drawings in the pro-Zyuganov national press often portrayed Yeltsin

surrounded by hook-nosed, bearded, wide-lipped devil-like creatures: smirking, groveling, and howling. The anti-Semitic cartoons were particularly frequent and explicit in two national newspapers, *Sovetskaya Rossiya* and *Zavtra*. One such cartoon portrayed Yeltsin as a concert conductor, with all the leading democrats and liberals behind him as members of the orchestra. As Yeltsin was introducing the next musical number titled, “And now hand over the Russian land,” watching from the wings was a hook-nosed yarmulke-clad figure, obviously the mastermind and the concert’s producer.¹³

The editor of *Zavtra*, Alexandr Prokhanov, was one of Zyuganov’s closest friends as well as his mentor, whom Zyuganov promised to make minister of mass media in the Communist government. Another notorious anti-Semite, the leader of the radical leftist “Worker’s Moscow” party, Viktor Anpilov, was said to be slated for the directorship of Russia’s most popular state-owned network, ORT. Anpilov promptly announced that, if appointed, he would fire all the Jews from ORT.¹⁴

In October 1997 retired general Albert Makashov, a leading member of the Communist faction in the Duma who led the “defense” of the Supreme Soviet building during the armed standoff with the Kremlin in 1993, said into a television camera at a meeting of Communists and their “popular patriotic” allies: “Vsekh zhidov—v mogilu!” (“All Yids—into the grave!”) Not one of the Communists in the Duma voted for a resolution “censuring” Makashov. There was no need for a rebuke by the party either, since, as Zyuganov explained at the time, the KPRF was against all forms of national intolerance.

The Pro-KPRF Vote

As the KPRF, in essence, advocated a 180-degree alternative to the status quo, these systematic changes would have directly and immediately affected the lives of millions of Russians. But as advertisers and political consultants have known for decades, when people decide on issues that are truly central and personal to them, their opinions are extremely difficult to change—and the Russians proved in the 1990s to be no exception.

The anti-reform vote in Russia comprised 20 to 25 million people, or 30 to 35 percent of the turnout, and remained stable throughout the key referenda and elections of the 1990s: the April 1993 referendum on the social and economic policies of the Yeltsin government, the 1995 and 1999 Duma elections, and the 1996

presidential election. Similarly, the pro-reform, anti-Communist constituency in the same polls counted 35 to 40 million, approximately 50 and 60 percent of the vote.¹⁵

As a result, contrary to the widespread and resilient misconception, the generally pro-Yeltsin disposition of the Moscow-based media (and the self-advertised spending of the oligarchs) made little difference in the 1996 presidential election, by far the most important vote in Russia’s post-Soviet history. In the first round, Zyuganov’s result equaled precisely the total leftist vote in the Duma election six months before (32 percent). In the runoff, for the first and last time in Russia’s post-Soviet history, the Communist candidate received 40 percent of the vote.

In the same election, Yeltsin, too, held on to his core base: the 40 million pro-reform votes (54 percent)—almost exactly the number of people who voted for him in the 1991 election for the presidency of Russia (then still part of the Soviet Union) and for his policies in the April 1993 referendum.

These outcomes highlighted broad divisions in the Russian electorate, largely along clearly identifiable demographic lines, which limited the KPRF’s successes. The Communists had an electoral “lock” on voters with low education, pensioners, workers in menial jobs, and those living in agricultural areas, small towns, and the industrially depressed “rust belt.”

By contrast, college education and urban residence correlated very highly with anti-KPRF and pro-reform sentiments. (In 1996 Yeltsin won in eighty-six out of Russia’s one hundred largest cities and led by over 50 percent in Moscow and St. Petersburg.)

The Communists never managed to expand beyond their base: although reliable and disciplined, the base comprised no more than a third of the electorate. The only exception, mentioned above, was the 1996 poll, when in a deeply polarized and ideologically fissured country Zyuganov attracted much of the nationalist and “Soviet-nostalgia” sentiment.

Young Voters and the Centrality of Turnout. Yet by far the most important single variable in Russian politics (and the KPRF’s Achilles heel) was, and remains, age. In every parliamentary or presidential election, the younger generation of Russia has firmly rejected communism.

Even in 1995, at the nadir of the post-Soviet economic transition, with monthly inflation in double digits, between one-half and two-thirds of Russians twenty-four years of age and younger preferred a market to a planned

economy.¹⁶ Asked in April and May 1996 if “it would have been better if everything in the country remained as before 1985,” twice as many respondents between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four disagreed as agreed (56 percent versus 28 percent). Among twenty-five to thirty-nine year olds, sentiment against the Soviet past was 54 to 39 percent, while respondents above fifty-five overwhelmingly agreed with the statement: 74 percent to 22 percent.

According to 1996 exit polls, 71 percent of men and women in the eighteen to twenty-nine age group voted for Yeltsin and only 23 percent for Zyuganov.¹⁷ The disparity was greater still in the eighteen to twenty-four age group: 58 percent for Yeltsin and 5 percent for Zyuganov.¹⁸

In all post-Soviet elections the decisive factor in the outcome has been turnout. Whenever the younger, pro-reform voters failed to turn out en masse (as was usually the case in the Duma elections), the KPRF’s highly motivated electorate ensured a party-list victory. Whenever, on the other hand, the center and center-right pro-reform base felt that the stakes were high enough (most conspicuously in the 1996 presidential elections, which amounted to a national referendum on reforms and communism), the defeat of the KPRF was predetermined.

Claiming the Communist Constituency

The KPRF’s decline is also due in large measure to the appearance of electoral alternatives, which have successfully appropriated the most popular components of the Communist platform. In doing so, they have cut into the KPRF’s once-sizable constituency, a bloc of Russian voters who are left-leaning, but accept private property and reject Soviet-style socialism; favor a strong state to protect the weak and the poor, but disallow totalitarianism; and crave greater strength, influence, and respect in the world, but do not wish to rebuild the Soviet empire or reignite the Cold War.

There is no better example of this phenomenon than the rise of Vladimir Putin, whose extraordinary popularity in Russia owes a great deal to his courting these left-of-center, moderately statist and nationalist voters. Along with his rhetorical emphasis on safeguarding democracy and private property, relentless tax cutting, and critique of the corruption and chaos of the 1990s, Putin has pressed for a stronger, more aggressive state that would curtail the influence of the oligarchs, secure public order, and reassert itself in international affairs, especially Russia’s near abroad. At the same time that he has deplored Russia’s

totalitarian past, Putin has adroitly exploited nostalgia for the Soviet Union by rehabilitating some of its symbols, including the old national anthem.

Additionally, in last December’s Duma election, the KPRF lost a considerable share of its most hardcore, left-wing constituency to the Motherland (Rodina) party, a new entity established by Sergei Glaziev, the former chief economic theoretician for the Communists (although himself not a party member), and Dmitry Rogozin, a flamboyant nationalist in the Duma. Reportedly blessed by the Kremlin as a means to split the KPRF vote, the new party’s leaders—running under the slogan, “Russians Must Take Back Russia for Themselves”—pledged a restoration of empire, state control over the country’s natural resources, a ban on the sale of agricultural land, and war on oligarchs. Far more dynamic, charismatic, and polished than the leaden KPRF, Motherland won 8 percent of the total vote. “It was a very well-planned electoral campaign, which created an acceptable alternative for voters who were leaving the Communists,” explained Gleb Pavlovsky, a Kremlin political consultant.¹⁹

A Lesson for Would-Be Authoritarians

Of course, it is possible (although not very probable) that an anti-Zyuganov rebellion by the KPRF moderates (like the one that he managed to survive last June) may still produce a party more palatable to voters and thus reclaim some of its own base.

What does seem clear at this point is that the 12-percent party-list vote cast for the KPRF in the 2003 Duma election and the 14 percent it earned in the presidential contest four months later evince a rejection of the radical leftist agenda by the overwhelming majority of Russians. The economic, political, and social systems for which they stood and which they so consistently and often successfully advocated now appear to be past.

Of course, with the 8 percent of the party-list vote cast for the left-nationalist Motherland, and, more important still, with President Putin’s recent unabashed authoritarian lurch disguised as anti-terrorist policy, the decline of the KPRF by no means should be equated with the final and permanent healing of Russian body politic of the illness that has afflicted and often paralyzed it. That malady—which can be traced back to the first suicide bombers of the People’s Will terrorist group in the 1870s—presumes to find quick and simple solutions to Russia’s many and deep problems by submitting to an all-knowing state armed with a “correct” ideology;

by equating unity with uniformity and obedience; and by seeking to justify yet another march toward a dead end by Russia's allegedly incomparable national "soul," "glory," and "mission," which require a special, peculiarly "Russian" road to happiness.

Still, as they vie for voters among the former Communist constituency, Russian politicians—including and especially the country's president—would do well to recall a key lesson of the KPRF's electoral history. In elections that they do not consider important enough to vote in or that they use in protest against the many and varied instances of government malfeasance and incompetence, Russian voters are capable of giving a plurality (although never a majority) to nationalists, leftists, and would-be authoritarians.

Yet such politicians should have no illusion about the depth or permanency of those successes. There is a stable and resilient pro-democracy and pro-reform majority, virtually dominant among the young. It takes time for this constituency to realize that their choices are critical enough for them to go out and vote. Yet turn out they do, and they could do so again.

Notes

1. Until then, the Russian Soviet Socialist Republic—unlike every one of the other fourteen Soviet republics—had not had its "own" Communist Party. This oversight might have been due to the fact that top echelons of the CPSU were always composed overwhelmingly of ethnic Russians or Russified members of ethnic elites. The Soviet Union was thus the Russian empire, writ large.

2. Michael McFaul, *Russia's 1996 Presidential Election* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1997), 4.

3. *Ibid.*, 39.

4. Joan Barth Urban and Valerii D. Solovei, *Russia's Communists at the Crossroads* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1997), 103.

5. As quoted in Leon Aron, "Land Privatization: The End of the Beginning," *Russian Outlook*, Summer 2001, 6.

6. McFaul, *Russia's 1996 Presidential Election*, 43.

7. *Ibid.*, 40.

8. Gennady Zyuganov, *Derzhava (Great Power)* (Moscow: Informpechat', 1994), 43.

9. In addition to *Derzhava*, this and the following paragraphs in this section are based on Gennady's Zyuganov's *Za gorizontom (Beyond the Horizon)* (Moscow: Informpechat', 1995) and *Rossiya i sovremenniy mir (Russia and the Contemporary World)* (Moscow: Informpechat', 1994). For more detailed summaries, see Leon Aron, *Yeltsin: A Revolutionary Life* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 596–598; and Urban and Solovei, *Russia's Communists*, 98–105.

10. Urban and Solovei, *Russia's Communists*, 100.

11. Zyuganov, *Za gorizontom*, 17–18.

12. *Ibid.*

13. See *Sovetskaya Rossiya*, May 5, 1996.

14. Ellen Mickiewicz, *Changing Channels* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 216.

15. McFaul, *Russia's 1996 Presidential Election*, 8.

16. B. V. Dubin, "Molodyozh i ideologiya segodnya," ("The Youth and Ideology Today") in Tatiana Zaslavskaya, ed., *Kuda idiot Rossiya? (Whither Russia?)* (Moscow: The Highest School for Social and Economic Studies, 1997), 292.

17. *New York Times*, "How Russians Voted in the Runoff," July 4, 1996, A8.

18. McFaul, *Russia's 1996 Presidential Election*, 72, Table 8.

19. Susan Glasser and Peter Baker, "How Nationalist Party Became a Powerhouse," *Washington Post*, January 16, 2004.