

## The Communist Party of the Russian Federation: “Paper Tiger” of the Opposition

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### Abstract

If you were to rank Russia's political parties by their most visible attributes, the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF) would definitely be Russia's most boring. The party, which is an indispensable actor within Russia's political scene, does not distinguish itself with ideological innovation, new slogans, charismatic political leaders, or prominent activism in parliament or beyond. To the contrary, the Communists sadly and boringly repeat in various forums official Soviet-style propaganda clichés; second-tier Soviet era bureaucrats have led the party for nearly two decades; and all criticism directed against the “criminal regime in Russia” remains primitive and ineffective. Accordingly, the KPRF cannot present an alternative to the existing authorities that would be attractive to the Russian elite or society at large. Nevertheless, the Levada Center public opinion polls regularly show that the party's public support is stable at 15–20 percent and no one doubts that the party will preserve its seats in the new State Duma to be elected in December 2011. But, of course, these figures do not compare with the party's “golden age” in 1996, when the KPRF and its allies controlled nearly half the seats in parliament and party leader Gennady Zyuganov was the front-runner in that year's presidential elections. What explains the KPRF's current situation and what can be expected from it in the future?

### Heading toward a Dead End

After the crash of the Soviet regime, the Communists suffered through a difficult time. In 1991 Boris Yeltsin issued a decree that officially banned Communist Party activities in Russia, while public opinion and the media blamed the Communists for the numerous problems of Russia's past and present. The Communists' defeat in the 1992–3 conflict between the president and the Russian Supreme Soviet (where the Communists played a major role) also weakened their position. Not surprisingly, the politicians who sought to revive the party faced a difficult choice of political strategy. Initially, caution brought them several benefits. In 1992 the group led by Zyuganov succeeded in winning the Constitutional Court's trial about the party's right to exist and in February 1993 this group served as the core of the newly-created and officially-recognized Communist Party of the Russian Federation. Following the letter of the law, KPRF leaders carefully distanced themselves from the October 1993 street fighting. Working with a country-wide network of party cells and numerous local activists in nearly every region, they performed reasonably well in the 1993 State Duma elections (winning 11.6% of the votes and 45 out of the 450 seats) and even better in the 1995 round (22.2% of the vote and 157 seats), establishing their monopoly as the main opposition party in the country. Other communist parties and movements either became satellites of the KPRF or were marginalized. The mass disappointment among Russians with the government's policy during the deep and protracted economic recession of the 1990s seemed to open the road for the Communists to return to power through the legal electoral process.

However, the Communists were unable to score a victory in the 1996 presidential elections due to the fierce resistance of then President Boris Yeltsin's team (including the threat of a coup) and the radicalism of the KPRF itself, which frightened a significant part of the Russian electorate. Ideologically, the party, which contains a mixture of different political streams, has not been very consistent in its choice of programmatic positions. However, its basic slogan could be summed up as “Back in the USSR.” The Communists ably used the nostalgia of a large number of Russians for the “good old days” of the Soviet era, but were not able to propose any sort of positive program. Moreover, in the 1990s, the party had maximally mobilized its core activists and supporters with the goal of preserving its status as the only “real” opposition (in contrast to the LDPR or Yabloko) and as a coherent organization. Several high-profile anti-system public performances served this goal, including the March 1996 resolution on denouncing the Belovezhsky Accords, which dissolved the USSR, or the unsuccessful attempt to impeach the president in May 1999. Although this approach helped the Communists preserve a core of ideologically-driven followers, it did not allow them to win the support of a majority of voters, to say nothing of the new ruling class—politicians, businessmen, bureaucrats. They viewed the party as one whose time had passed.

It is not surprising that in August 1996, the KPRF leaders changed strategy and officially announced a new approach: “infusion into power.” Some of the party activists joined the government and regional administrations and the Communists in the State Duma success-

fully began to bargain with the Kremlin across a number of second-order policy issues, but systematically refused to adopt any decisions which would change the political status quo. Such was the case with the aborted effort to instigate a Duma vote of no confidence in Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin's cabinet (Fall 1997), the parliamentary acceptance (under Kremlin pressure) of Prime Minister Sergei Kirienko (April 1998), and the failure of the impeachment of Yeltsin (May 1999), when some of the Communists refused to vote to unseat the president. The Communists 1999 parliamentary campaign took place in the same spirit: the main goal was to preserve the gains that the party had made and ensure a continuation of the status quo. Most likely, the Communists counted on the likelihood that given the numerous political and economic crises in the country, power would fall into their hands. However, skeptical observers in that period noted that the party leaders did not try very hard to engage in a real battle to grab the key levers for running the country and were more or less satisfied with their party's status as the major opposition force.

While tactically these steps (or, more precisely, the lack of them) brought the KPRF significant dividends, strategically they led to failure. After the 1999 elections, when the Communists, although slightly increasing their share of the vote (24.3%, 88 seats in the Duma), lost their position as the leading parliamentary party, their former inactivity turned out to be untenable. At first, the KPRF sought a role as a junior partner of the ruling group, making an implicit agreement with the pro-Kremlin Unity faction about dividing up several Duma posts and preserving the post of speaker. However, as a result, the KPRF's potential was weakened and the benefits of the deal turned out to be symbolic. Beginning in 2000, the non-Communist parties in the parliament had a constitutional majority, with the "party of power" and its allies controlling more than half of the mandates. Since all important decisions in the Duma could be adopted without the participation of the Communists, they no longer played the important role of "veto actor". When the Communists sought to return to active protest, speaking out against a series of government bills, they did not have to wait long for their punishment: in the Spring of 2002, United Russia initiated a redistribution of the committee chairmen posts, removing the Communists from all of them. Several KPRF activists, including then Duma Chair Gennady Seleznev, chose to retain their parliamentary posts in exchange for loyalty to the Kremlin, and were expelled from the party. At the same time, the level of electoral support for the KPRF after 2000 began to decline at both the federal and regional levels. The poor showing of the Communists in the 2003 Duma elections was the logical con-

clusion of this process. In the course of the campaign, the Communists became the main target of the Kremlin, which used a variety of techniques against them, including nominating alternative electoral lists, seeking to split the party's electorate, running a negative campaign in the media, and pressuring sympathetic governors and businesspeople. The KPRF again followed its previous strategy of preserving the status quo, leaving its ideological positions and organizational structures essentially unchanged. The results of the vote (12.6% support and 52 seats) severely deprived the KPRF of its role as an influential opposition party.

### Life After Death?

During the 2000s, the KPRF faced several serious challenges simultaneously. First, the Kremlin did not give up its attempts, if not to eliminate the Communists, then to squeeze them toward the political periphery. The KPRF pushed back several efforts to organize an internal split in the party, eliminating dissidents from its ranks (such as by excluding from the party former Deputy Duma Chair Gennady Semigin, while his supporters lost their party posts). In 2007, the presidential administration supported the creation of a "manageable" left-center party, Just Russia, designed to siphon votes away from the Communists. Although the Communists did not in fact suffer major losses at the hands of their competitors, the risk of pressure from the Kremlin remained serious.

Second, the profile of the party's electorate changed. While in the 1990s, the average KPRF voter was an elderly impoverished and poorly educated female resident of a small town or village; in the 2000s younger and better educated urban residents were more frequently supporting the Communists. At the same time the slogan "Back in the USSR" became associated less with the Communists and more with the party of power, United Russia. Despite this shift, the Communists could not (and did not want to) offer their voters anything different in exchange.

Third, there was a growing understanding among Communist activists and supporters themselves that preserving the status quo within the milieu of the Communists would lead the party nowhere. Rejecting any changes (which would ultimately raise the question of replacing the party leadership), Zyuganov and his allies among the party's upper echelons sought to preserve their leadership in the organization at any cost. They cruelly blocked challenges from the promising young politicians and experienced leaders of regional organizations, accusing them of rejecting the party line and often even expelling them from the KPRF. Even the number of party members shrank during this time. Demonstrat-

ing its political and ideological immobilism, the party essentially fell into hibernation during the period of the long political winter. Due to the fact that the party leadership systematically cut off attempts to modernize the KPRF in terms of its organization, ideology, style and methods of everyday party activism, the party hurt its political prospects: closing itself into a narrow “ghetto” of its supporters, the KPRF became a harmless sparring partner for the Kremlin in the Russian electoral arena.

However, with only seven officially registered parties in the country, the KPRF turned out to be the only representative of the opposition in parliament. It therefore became a natural “center of gravity” for politicians and voters who opposed the political regime in the country and the government’s policies. Although this situation did not bring the KPRF great dividends (in the Duma elections of 2007, the party received only 11.6% of the vote and 57 seats while the average share of votes for the KPRF in the regional elections of 2008–11 was 16.8%), it did prevent a further shrinking of Communist support. Moreover, in municipal elections, Communist-backed candidates more frequently defeated United Russia-backed candidates (e.g. in the recent Irkutsk and Bratsk mayoral elections and in the Tver City Duma), although several of the victorious candidates later joined the party of power after their election.

On the eve of the December 4, 2011, State Duma elections, the calls of several public activists to vote for any party except for United Russia also objectively work in favor of the KPRF. Thus, the Communists are today becoming the major beneficiaries of the growing opposition mood not because of their own ability to attract voters, but due to the fact that the other parties, either obviously or more subtly, are Kremlin tools while the KPRF at least partially preserves its organizational and ideological autonomy from the presidential administration. The current position of the Communists as a “niche” opposition party at least in part satisfies the Kremlin (since it does not present a serious challenge to the government and serves as a channel to calm the rising popular dis-

content about political and economic developments in the country) as do the leaders of the party. Accordingly, they have no problem allowing them to maintain their monopoly in the narrow legal opposition segment of the Russian political market.

Overall, during the 2000s, when Russia established a system of electoral authoritarianism, the KPRF succeeded in surviving as a legitimate small, but not marginal, party merely because the Communists did not make any efforts to achieve their political goals beyond just preserving their current status.

Do the Communists have a future and, if so, what is it? If the electoral authoritarianism in Russia remains unchanged after the 2011–12 election cycle, then the level of public support for the party among Russians will remain approximately the same and perhaps even grow due to the lack of other competitors. In this case, there is no reason to expect the KPRF to change its political strategy, perhaps until there is a change of generations among the leadership of the party. It is more difficult to predict what will happen with the KPRF if and when a democratization of the country’s political system takes place. Although voter support for the Communist slogans of social justice, equality and state regulation of the economy in Russia is relatively high, it is rather unlikely that the current leadership of the KPRF could meet such interests. Probably, one can expect that the Russian Communists will share the fate of their Ukrainian comrades: they will continue to survive in the political arena, but play a secondary role. The experience of several East European countries shows that former ruling Communist parties can successfully turn into major actors in post-Communist democracies only if they transform themselves in a timely manner and adjust to the new rules of the game. The Russian Communists, who missed their chance in the 1990s and refused to change in the 2000s, now find themselves in a dead end of political development, exploiting the myths of the past while not offering the country an adequate agenda for the future.

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