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The communist movement in Russia today

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The Communist Movement in Russia Today

Summary
The Russian communist movement today consists of the large Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF), which holds 10% of the seats in the State Duma and claims over 500,000 members, and a handful of smaller extra-parliamentary communist parties which have harshly denounced the CPRF for its emphasis on legality and Russian nationalism. Attacks by these extremist CPs as well as mounting popular opposition to unremitting stagflation and the Chechen War may account for the CPRF's recent turn to the left. In the political program approved at its Third Congress in January 1995, party chairman Gennadii Ziuganov's ethnocentric Russian nationalism took a back seat to a more traditionalist, if updated, version of Marxism-Leninism. Overall, if compared to non-ruling CPs in Western Europe before the Soviet collapse, the CPRF most resembles the French Communist "red Gaullists".

The Communist Movement on the Eve of the Forthcoming December Elections

The *Communist Party of the Russian Federation* (CPRF), far and away the largest of the half dozen or so post-Soviet communist parties operating in Russia today, is the only one represented in the State Duma, or lower house of the Russian parliament. As of mid-1995, indications from public opinion polls and on-the-scene analysts suggest that in the forthcoming parliamentary elections, scheduled for December 1995, the CPRF will win substantially more than its December 1993 share of some 13% of the party list vote. Its May 1995 victory in a by-election for a vacant Duma seat in the Moscow Region points in

the same direction. An assessment of the CPRF's political profile is therefore of more than academic interest.

One of the most important questions to ask is the extent to which the CPRF has moved beyond the Leninist character of the old Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) toward a West European form of social democracy. Bluntly stated, is its present accommodation to the "democratic rules of the game" a political maneuver or a lasting commitment in principle? Any attempt to address this question is complicated by the fact that the CPRF's rhetoric may be influenced by its adversarial relationship with the more radical, extra-parliamentary Russian CPs. Indeed, there is a kind of dialectical interaction between these more extremist communist groups and the parliamentary CPRF as all of them vie for the allegiance of a growing constituency of Russian citizens alienated from the Yeltsin government and increasingly receptive to welfare state programs. The competition among the neo-communists has led the extra-parliamentary parties, for example, to reverse their 1993 policy of boycotting elections, while the CPRF may voice a more radical line than it would otherwise espouse.

The Extra-parliamentary CPs versus the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF)

Relations between the CPRF and the more leftist CPs were not always so hostile. At the CPRF's founding in mid-February 1993, when it declared itself the successor to the Communist Party of the Russian Socialist Federation (Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic) at a so-called Second Extraordinary Congress, almost all the leaders of the other neo-communist formations were present. Indeed, each was competing for the political soul of the still undefined, malleable CPRF. Any number of divergent views were expressed, ranging from the assertions by Valentin Kuptsov (who headed the RSFSR Communist Party just prior to the August 1991 coup) that "only fools or adventurers" would support the immediate reconstitution of the USSR and that the party must fight against "dogmatism, in particular against the absolutization of force", to Richard Kosolapov's view that "the party, having purged itself of opportunists, ought to also purge itself of semi-opportunists."[1] Furthermore, representatives of many outlooks found their way on to the 89-member Central Executive Committee of the new party under a proviso that permitted dual party membership for one year. Until the autumn of 1993, therefore, the rivalry among the post-Soviet CPs was confined to behind-the-scenes squabbling as the new CPRF chairman, Gennadii Ziuganov, sought to mold his party into a distinct political-ideological formation.

This would all change with Boris Yeltsin's late September 1993 dissolution of the Soviet-era Russian parliament and call for elections to a new Federal Assembly and a simultaneous constitutional referendum in December. Ziuganov directed CPRF members to shun the use of force in defense of the old parliament and to participate in the elections for the new one. The more radical CPs, in contrast, backed the armed clashes launched on October 3, 1993, by the diehard defenders of the old parliament and subsequently boycotted the constitutional referendum and parliamentary elections held on December 12, 1993. Two weeks after the CPRF garnered 10% (45 out of 450) seats in the new State Duma, moreover, the extra-parliamentary CPs moved to create a Union of Russian Communists, known as the *Roskomsoiuz*, which was resolutely opposed to any kind of accommodation with the evolving constitutional order. Ziuganov declined to attend the meeting. And in early March 1994 the *Roskomsoiuz* leadership council declared that "the tomorrow of the Russian communist movement is not tied to the Ziuganov line."[2] Thenceforth relations between the CPRF and the *Roskomsoiuz* group sharply deteriorated.

Among the *Roskomsoiuz* members was a "*Leninist Platform*" faction within the CPRF itself, led by Richard I. Kosolapov (a pre-*perestroika* establishment scholar and Marxist theorist), as well as four separate neo-communist parties. All formed in late 1991 or early 1992, they included: the intransigently

1 Glasnost', No. 7 (133), 18-24 February 1993, pp. 2-3.
2 Golos kommunista, No. 3(7), March 1994; quoted in Raznogolositsa (INION RAN), No. 11, 21-27 March 1994, p. 3.

Stalinist *All-Union Communist Party of Bolsheviks*, led by former Leningrad school teacher Nina Andreeva; the orthodox Brezhnevite *Union of Communists* (later to become the *Russian Communist Party - CPSU*) led by Aleksei Prigarin; the militant street-wise *Russian Communist Workers' Party* led by Victor Anpilov in Moscow and V. Tiul'kin in St. Petersburg; and the "new left" *Russian Party of Communists*, which had its origins in the CPSU's 1990-1991 Marxist Platform faction and was led by Anatolii Kriuchkov.

Initially joined together by a common animus toward the Yeltsin Constitution, the *Roskomsoiuz* members soon focused their wrath on the CPRF, bitterly denouncing the constructive role its deputies played during the State Duma's first session (January-July 1994) as well as Ziuganov's ever more outspoken "Great Russian" nationalism. What was at stake in this growing conflict, in addition to strategic differences, was competition for the allegiance of the 450,000 active rank-and-file communists said to have been represented at the February 1993 CPRF Congress. At that time this putative membership "pool" was not locked into any one specific neo-communist orientation. By 1994, however, the CPRF's electoral success was beginning to have a bandwagoning effect, with its bona fide dues-paying members increasing and the ranks of the *Roskomsoiuz* parties thinning out.[1]

The radical CPs thus launched a polemical and organizational attack against Ziuganov and the CPRF in the spring of 1994. In an "Open Letter to G.A. Ziuganov" published in the journals of the Prigarin and Kriuchkov parties, one Boris F. Slavin questioned Ziuganov's rejection of the core Marxist tenets of proletarian internationalism and class struggle and his support instead for state patriotism and the nineteenth-century Russian Slavophile notion of *sobornost'* (best translated as "populist collectivism"). While his arguments were reasoned rather than polemical, his basic point was unequivocal: Ziuganov's views amounted to right-wing opportunism.[2] Slavin was a key player in the developing intra-communist feud. A co-founder of Kriuchkov's Russian Party of Communists, Slavin had led two-thirds of that party's followers into the CPRF in February 1993 and had himself become a member of its Central Executive Committee. He had hoped thereby to influence the evolution of the CPRF's policies from within.[3] His decision to attack Ziuganov publicly in May 1994 thus pointed to considerable tension and disagreement within the ranks of the CPRF itself.

Meanwhile, Prigarin's *Union of Communists*, which had ordered its members to renounce their joint membership in the CPRF back in December 1993, sought to split the CPRF's local Moscow organization by creating a rival "Moscow City Organization of the CPSU" in early April 1994.[4] This organizational challenge, while numerically insignificant (the new city unit siphoned off fewer than 5% of the CPRF's Moscow members)[5], underscored the depth of the escalating rivalry between the CPRF and its ultra-leftist opponents. This, in turn, was reflected in the composition and leadership of yet another neo-communist formation, the *Union of Communist Parties - CPSU* (UCP-CPSU). As if the Russian communist playing field were not already crowded enough, in late March 1993 Oleg Shenin, last organizational secretary of

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1 By January 1995 the CPRF claimed 530,000 members representing all 88 regions of Russia and 20,000 primary party organizations. By late 1994 the Russian Communist Workers' Party's membership had fallen from 80,000 to 40,000 representing 51 regions (Pravda, December 21, 1994), that of the Union of Communists from 10,000 to some five to seven thousand (author's interview with Aleksei Prigarin, November 3, 1994); the other CPs had even fewer members than Prigarin's group. More concrete data are unavailable. With regard to party size, however, the distinction between dues-paying members and unaffiliated sympathizers is important to bear in mind since the latter outnumber the former. For example, on Victory Day, May 9, 1995, in Moscow alone some 300,000 people paraded under one or another communist party banner in the so-called "alternative" march (author's first-hand assessment and consultations with informed observers.) Western news services, preoccupied with the official celebration on Red Square and the military parade on Poklonnaia Gora, reported an opposition turnout of only some 30,000.

2 Golos kommunista, No. 6, May 1994; see also Mysl', No. 10, 1994.

3 Author's interview with Slavin, May 16, 1995.

4 Golos kommunista, No. 5 (9), April-May 1994.

5 Author's interview with Prigarin's close associate, Sergei Cherniakhovskii, November 3, 1994. In autumn 1994 the CPRF's Moscow organization had about 19,000 members, the new city unit of the Prigarin-Cherniakhovskii group some 1,500, many of whom had never belonged to the CPRF.

the CPSU and one of the August 1991 putchists, had spearheaded the creation of the UCP-CPSU as an umbrella organization for all the reemergent communist parties throughout the post-Soviet successor states.[1] In July 1994 the CPRF became a full member of this group (all the while retaining its policy autonomy), while a UCP-CPSU plenum denounced Prigarin's "schismatic activities" and Shenin invited him to withdraw from the party's Political Executive Committee.[2]

The CPRF's Political Profile: From Great Russian Nationalism to Updated Marxism-Leninism

The CPRF's response to the ultra-leftists' attack took several forms. First of all, rather than engaging in explicit, personalized counter-polemics, the CPRF leaders publicly dismissed their leftist challengers as inconsequential sectarians. As Ziuganov put it in his concluding speech to the party's Third Congress in January 1995, the other CPs, except for the Russian Communist Workers' Party, were "simply *kruzhki*" - or small isolated circles of like-minded thinkers.[3] At the same time, the CPRF tightened up its organization by directing all supporters to re-register as members of this new post-Soviet formation and to pay their party dues accordingly. Only those who did so would be eligible for election as delegates to the party's Third Congress in January 1995.[4] But most important, the process of formulating a party program for approval at the Third Congress was opened up in October 1994 to broad rank-and-file participation, with 26 different drafts eventually being collated by the program commission. The end result was a program that differed substantially from earlier drafts, including the one designated at the October 1994 plenum for critical review by the entire party.

Before analyzing the final CPRF program, it should be noted that on certain basic points the parliamentary and extra-parliamentary CPs have always been in agreement. For example, all neo-communists saw capitalist development in Russia, with its vast income disparities between rich and poor and its destruction of the welfare safety net, as a vindication of Marx's writings on the evils of capitalism and the need for socialism. There was likewise agreement that the imperialist West, above all the United States, was turning Russia into a neo-colonial outpost, a source of raw materials and an export market for manufactured goods. Furthermore, communist moderates as well as extremists attributed the collapse of both the old communist order and the Soviet Union to the bourgeoisification and betrayal of the CPSU elite, with Gorbachev and Yeltsin the arch villains. These shared views, finally, led to a common set of ultimate goals: the return to socialism, the elimination of Western and American influence, and the reconstitution of the Soviet Union.

Where the CPRF first diverged from the radicals was in its insistence on the "peaceful" and "voluntary" realization of those goals and its willingness to participate in the democratic process to achieve them. Secondly, from mid-1993 onward party documents were increasingly suffused with Russian nationalist thinking. Yet a third distinctive feature of the evolving CPRF program was its commitment to what one might call "ecologically correct" Marxism-Leninism, that is, socialist economic development that would strike a balance between environmental protection and human needs. At the same time, however, the importance - or weight - of each of these particular aspects of the CPRF's political profile varied over time. Pragmatic moderation characterized the party's initial February 1993 documents. Unabashed ethnocentric Russian nationalism was the hallmark of the October 1994 version. And a modernized variant of traditional Marxism-Leninism took precedence over pragmatism and nationalism in the program officially approved at the January 1995 Congress.

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1 By late 1994 the UCP-CPSU included communist organizations from almost all former Soviet Republics, among which the United CP of Georgia claimed 132,000 members, the CP of Kazakhstan 30,000, and the CP of Tadzhikistan 70,000; membership figures for the others were unavailable (Glasnost', No. 24-25 (175), 3-17 November 1994). Most Russian CPs were also affiliated with the UCP-CPSU.

2 Glasnost', No. 12-13 (169), 29 July - 11 August 1994, pp. 3-5; see also author's interview with Prigarin, November 3, 1994.

3 Text in CPRF Duma fraction's Informatsionnyi biulleten', No. 2(14), February 1, 1995, pp. 23-30.

4 Materialy IX plenuma Tsentral'nogo Ispolnitel'nogo Komiteta KPRF (Moscow, 1994), p. 41.

The contrast between the final CPRF program and the October 1994 draft was striking. On the one hand, the latter depicted Russia through the ages - including the Soviet era - as a "unique ethnic community" characterized by an innate collectivist ethos and bound together by "a single Slavic nucleus, the Russian people, including the greatrus, littlerus and whiterus" (sic). This view, which could hardly be expected to facilitate the goal of a "voluntary" reconstitution of the Soviet Union, appeared twice in the October 1994 version of the program and was an integral part of Ziuganov's worldview.[1] All such explicit expressions of Russian nationalism were eliminated, however, in the final party program.

On the other hand, the official January 1995 document went far beyond the October 1994 draft's declarative support for "Marxist-Leninist teaching" and "democratic centralism". While reiterating these formulations, the final program also used traditional Marxist categories to analyze at some length the nature of contemporary capitalist exploitation, the class structure of twenty-first century socialist society, and the reasons for the Soviet party-state's past errors. Among the latter, the program claimed that the effort to "catch up and overtake" the West had led to the faulty emulation of capitalist production norms rather than the conservation of natural resources and improvements in the quality of life.[2]

Allusions to pluralist politics and a mixed economy were also watered down in the final CPRF program. Support for multi-party democracy and a "planned-market", mixed economy in the foreseeable future had been notable in the CPRF's original February 1993 draft program.[3] Such pragmatic moderation was still apparent, if to a lesser degree, in the October 1994 draft's defense of "freedom of association in political parties and social organizations" and endorsement of a mixed economy even under conditions of communist participation in a coalition "government of people's trust". The January 1995 document, however, omitted the reference to a multi-party system and circumscribed the extent and duration of a mixed economy. It did, to be sure, emphasize the use of "legal methods" to establish a "government of people's trust". But the function of such a coalition government was to "change the economic course" and implement "emergency measures of government regulation". And democratic elections and "freedom of speech and political associations" were approved only in the context of explicit reference to Yurii V. Andropov's limited 1983 initiatives in these directions. Moreover, the "government of people's trust" was viewed as simply the first step in a three-stage transition to socialism, thus suggesting a parallel with the East European "people's democraties" of the mid-to-late 1940s.

Reasons for the CPRF's Turn to the Left

Plainly, the CPRF's programmatic profile had shifted to the left. Did this mean that the extra-parliamentary CPs' polemical and organizational campaign was having an impact? Or that the Chechen War, on the heels of five years of unremitting economic stagflation, was radicalizing popular opposition to the Yeltsin government? And could it be that support for Ziuganov's leadership of the party was waning?

Kosolapov - who, significantly, was editor-in-chief of the CPSU's flagship journal *Kommunist* from March 1976 until February 1986 - maintains that he did indeed influence the deliberations on the final version of the program.[4] The CPRF's new secretary for ideology, Vladimir G. Bindiukov, has corroborated his claim, adding that Kosolapov is too distinguished a scholar to remain in a party whose program he does not support.[5] The influence of the Kosolapov wing is further suggested by the *omission* in the January 1995 program of the October 1994 draft's ban on dual party membership (Kosolapov's "Leninist platform" group, it will be recalled, was a founding member of the *Roskomsoiuz*) as well as the final program's more conciliatory approach to inter-CP disputes.

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1 Text in ibid., pp. 46-63.

2 Text in III S"ezd Kommunisticheskoi partii Rossiiskoi Federatsii: Materialy i documenty (Moscow: "Informpechat'", 1995), pp. 96-118.

3 "Politicheskoe zaiavlenie", Sovietskaia Rossiia, March 2, 1993.

4 Author's interview with Kosolapov, May 22, 1995.

Some communist deputies in the State Duma have argued that the program's leftist, Leninist gloss was intended only to placate the party's "Stalinists", who were said to comprise some "15 percent" of the total membership.[6] According to this interpretation, the CPRF's real public policy agenda was set forth

5 Author's interview with Bindiukov, May 26, 1995. On January 22, 1995, the new CPRF Central Committee and Central Control Commission elected Ziuganov as party chairman, Kuptsov as first deputy chairman and Aleksandr Shabanov as deputy chairman. The plenum also elected a Secretariat of five and a 19-member Presidium that included six deputies of the State Duma. Of the Presidium members, only I.I. Mel'nikov, V.P. Peshkov, and S.A. Potapov were also members of the Secretariat; the fifth secretary was G.N. Seleznev, editor-in-chief of the new CPRF weekly newspaper, Pravda Rossii. Bindiukov and Seleznev were also Duma deputies.

6 Author's interviews at State Duma, May 1995.

in Ziuganov's keynote report to the January 1995 Congress. In the final program, to be sure, there was an ambiguous effort to whitewash Stalin's role in Soviet history by referring to the CPSU's "ceaseless struggle" against a petty bourgeois, bureaucratic wing within the party itself, a struggle that was said to have influenced the conduct of leaders from Stalin to Brezhnev. But Ziuganov's congress report was not particularly reassuring either. For after disclosing that the final CPRF program was "born amid stormy debates", Ziuganov reaffirmed his vision of the historically distinctive character of Russia, of her innate "socialist predisposition". He then hailed some thirty ardent Russian nationalist writers, intellectuals, and artists as representatives of his land's "authentic patriotic intelligentsia". His foreign policy views, moreover, went far beyond the official program's support for an "independent foreign policy serving the national-state interests". Indeed, Ziuganov expressed regret for the passing of the bipolar "balance of power", and he called for the "re-establishment of traditional alliance ties in all regions of the world".[1] It is difficult for the outside observer to see why such ideas would not appeal to older "Stalinists"!

In sum, it appears that the CPRF is heading into the campaign for the December 1995 parliamentary elections with an updated Marxist-Leninist program for the long haul and a traditional if double-faceted communist alliance strategy in the short run. While the official party program seeks allies among center-left political parties, Ziuganov also seeks them among "state-patriotic forces". This fundamental divergence reflects the existence of at least two substantial political currents within the CPRF, one more Russian chauvinistic and the other more orthodox Marxist-Leninist. Neither, however, evinces any real concern with constitutionalism, democratic pluralism, or civil liberties as enduring principles under socialism.

This is not to say that the CPRF will not observe democratic practices during the forthcoming electoral contests or even as a minority member in a future coalition government. The large postwar French Communist Party was rigidly Marxist-Leninist in its programmatic stance, and became ever more nationalistic as well, but it did not directly challenge the established democratic order. So, too, the CPRF is mobilizing its followers for the ward-level tasks of campaigning, poll-watching, and getting out the vote.[2] But at this point in its development, the CPRF's political profile is closer to that of the Andropov-era Marxist-Leninist modernizers and the French Communist "red Gaullists" than to the social-democratizing mentality of Gorbachev's *perestroika* or the Italian Communist Party in the heyday of Eurocommunism.

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1 Text in III S"ezd: Materialy i dokumenty, pp. 8-38.

2 Author's personal observation of a raikom meeting in Moscow, May 18, 1995.