

# Communists, Democracy, and Reform in Post-Communist Russia

IAN MCALLISTER  
STEPHEN WHITE

Communists were clearly dominant in Brezhnev's and even Gorbachev's Russia. The Constitution until 1977 gave no particular place to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU); but from that year on, in Article 6, it was the "guiding and directing force of Soviet society, the core of its political system and of all state and public organizations." The party already accounted for the great majority of deputies to the USSR Supreme Soviet and for substantial minorities at the local level. It controlled the electoral process, approving the results in advance as late as the 1970s.<sup>1</sup> The party apparatus at all levels reflected the decisive influence in appointments to positions of importance through the *nomenklatura* system. Party control extended to the courts, the armed forces, and virtually all forms of employment. And a more diffuse influence was exercised over the media, culture, and all forms of organized public life.

In the late 1980s, all this began to change. The monopoly of political initiative incorporated in Article 6 disappeared in March 1990. Already a wide range of "informal" organizations had begun to challenge the party for influence, and political parties of a non-socialist character were forming on a republican or USSR-wide basis (they were explicitly legalized in October 1990). The CPSU itself suffered a loss of moral authority as *glasnost*' made clear its complicity in the mistakes and sometimes the crimes of the past, and the first competitive elections of March 1989—described by Yegor Ligachev as "political shock therapy"<sup>2</sup>—led to a series of shock defeats for leading officials. The party began to split, its press collapsed, members began to leave, and income began to fall far short of expenditure. The attempted coup of August 1991, in which several senior party members were implicated, was the final blow: the party was suspended, and then in November 1991 banned entirely.<sup>3</sup>

But if the party has disappeared, its political influence has not. For a start, there were several successor parties, from hard-line Stalinist to gradual and reformist.<sup>4</sup> The ban on the party was declared illegal in late 1992, allowing members to reconstitute a Communist Party of the Russian Federation in early 1993; formally, it continued the Russian Party organization that had been established in 1990.<sup>5</sup> Nearly all members of the Russian government were former party members; the president, a thirty-year member, had also been in the Politburo; the prime minister, Viktor Chernomyrdin, had been in the Central Committee. And at local levels throughout post-Communist Russia, the party officials of old were overwhelmingly running the show.<sup>6</sup> The Communists had the largest party membership, and (in some opinion polls at least) the largest popular following. The refounded Communist Party, once again, was one of the largest groupings in the Russian Parliament that was elected in December 1993.<sup>7</sup>

---

Ian McAllister is a professor of politics at the University of New South Wales, Australia. Stephen White is a professor of politics at the University of Glasgow, Scotland.

In this paper, drawing on a Russia-wide survey that was conducted in January-February 1992, and taking account of developments up to the start of 1995, we address some of the complex issues that arise from the continuing contribution of Communists to what is now a post-communist system.<sup>8</sup> Who, first of all, thought they were Communists at this time, and what did membership mean to them? In particular, how active were they within the party to which they had formerly belonged? Secondly, what were the political values of these various groups? How did present and former party members differ from other members of society in their attitudes to *glasnost*, to socialism, or to a "one and indivisible Russia"? And thirdly, how did they evaluate the policies of the Yeltsin administration, in terms of the political principles on which it was based or the economic reforms that it was conducting? Given that over 10 percent of adults, in our survey, had at some time been members of the CPSU and that many more had been in the Komsomol, the answers to these questions are likely in turn to have a very direct bearing on the shape of politics in a post-communist Russia.

### **Party Members and Political Principles**

Who, for a start, were party members, and how meaningful was their membership? In January 1990, there were over 19 million members altogether, of whom over 300,000 were candidates without voting rights. Women were still under-represented, with 30.2 percent of the total, but they were an increasing proportion of all candidates and of the membership as a whole. Workers, again, were under-represented, although this was still supposed to be a party in which their interests were given the highest priority. Membership figures used to be quoted in terms of social origin, showing workers in industry or agriculture at (for instance) 45.3 percent of all members in 1987, with collective farmers and white collar staff accounting for the remainder.<sup>9</sup> The figures that were published in 1990 classified members by current occupation; in these terms, "workers" were 27.6 percent of the total, collective farmers were just 7.6 percent, and white collar professionals were the largest single group of members at 40.5 percent of the total. There were also students, pensioners, housewives, and others not gainfully employed (17.9 percent). It was a predominantly Russian Party (58.2 percent), well educated (35.4 percent had a degree), and an increasingly elderly one (20.9 percent were over sixty or of pensionable age).<sup>10</sup>

What, however, did this mean? Members, under the rules, were obliged "raise their political and cultural level," to "propagate the idea of the Party," to "struggle to realize its programmatic aims and to secure its vanguard position in society," as well as to "strengthen friendship among nations," "observe moral norms," and (not least) to carry out Party decisions.<sup>11</sup> But given that many members had joined for career reasons, without any real commitment, there was also some basis for a wholly formal, dues-paying relationship. Our evidence (see Table 1) suggests that membership was in fact a fairly serious commitment for many members. About half of our interviewees were involved in Party work for at least a few hours every week, and nearly a quarter were activists, devoting a day or more every week to their party duties. A substantial minority (24 percent) were wholly uninvolved in Party activities; but most of these were former members, and Party activity was in any case illegal at the time of the survey (interviewees are likely to have recalled their "historic" association with the Party, but these circumstances will almost certainly have depressed reported levels of activity). Compared with parties of the organized left in other countries, these are relatively high levels of involvement and suggest that the CPSU, even in the late communist period, could draw upon a substantial pool of member activists.

**Table 1**  
**CPSU Membership Activism, 1992**  
 Level of Activism<sup>a</sup>

	Membership	Activist	Partial Activist	Mainly Inactive	Inactive	Total	(N)
Member	12	22	26	28	24	100	(248)
(Current)	(2)	(25)	(39)	(20)	(15)	99	(47)
(Past)	(10)	(21)	(22)	(30)	(27)	100	(201)
Never a member	88						
Total	100						
(N)	(2,106)						

<sup>a</sup>Defined as follows: activist, one day or more per week; partial activist, a few hours per week; mainly inactive, one hour per week or less; inactive, no participation in Party activity.

Source: 1992, *Russians Between State and Market Survey* (n = 2,106)

Did members, involved or otherwise, share any important common principles? We considered this issue in a further series of questions designed to explore responses to a series of broadly philosophical positions and to more particular issues of political reform. There were, in fact, substantial differences in terms of underlying values between members and non-members, and in the direction that might have been hypothesized. Members, for a start, were much more positively oriented towards "socialism" and even towards Marxism-Leninism than were non-members. Members, by the same token, were more hostile towards "capitalism" than their counterparts. There was much less divergence, however, on matters of current and medium-term policy, with strong and consistent support for "freedom," *glasnost* and a "one and indivisible Russia" (clearly a live issue in the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the USSR and the "parade of sovereignties").

At least as striking were the strong and consistent differences that emerged, not between members and non-members, but between "current" and "former" members. Those who defined themselves as "current members" in early 1992 were clearly in an unusual position. Their Party had been suppressed, and the state within which it had been the dominant influence had disappeared. In these circumstances, those who defined themselves as Party members were likely to be those whose commitment to its purposes was unusually strong; they were likely, in turn, to be those who were most likely to continue their membership within the Communist parties that were eventually allowed to form. They are accordingly

**Table 2**  
**Attitudes Toward Political Symbols**

	(Percent Positive)				Total
	CPSU Membership				
	Still member	Former activist	Former inactive	Never member	
<u>Political principles</u>					
Socialism	69*	27	37*	23	25
Marxism-Leninism	64*	26*	24	14	17
Capitalism	8*	22	25	26	26
<u>Political reform</u>					
Glasnost	61	67	69	63	63
Freedom	73	80	87*	78	78
Perestroika	28	20	23	21	21
Indivisible Russia	61	67*	69	63	75
(N)	(47)	(87)	(114)	(1,858)	(2,106)

\*statistically different from those who have never been members at  $p < .05$ .

The question was: "We often hear the following words. What feelings do they evoke?"

Source: Irina Boeva and Viacheslav Shironin, *Russians Between State and Market* (Glasgow: Centre for the Study of Public Policy, University of Strathclyde, 1992) (n = 2,106)

a crucial group, in terms of future communist influence within post-Communist Russia; and as Table 2 makes clear, they share a distinctive political orientation. A little more favorable to *perestroika* and slightly less supportive of a "unitary and indivisible Russia," they were very much more committed to socialism and Marxism-Leninism than all other groups, and markedly more hostile towards capitalism. This suggests that there may be a consensus for many of the policies that have been promoted in post-Communist Russia; but those still actively associated with CPSU successor parties are likely to differ sharply in their political philosophies from the non-Communist majority, and are likely to interpret current policies within a rather different frame of reference.

### **Government, Policy Making and Reform**

A broadly similar impression emerges from the question in our survey that related to the role of government: both retrospectively, in terms of an assessment of past performance, and prospectively, in terms of an assessment of the place that government was expected to assume in the future. As Table 3 makes clear, there was little difference in these responses between current and former CPSU members and the non-party majority. All groups, it emerged, took a jaded view of the performance of the Communist governments of the past.

Very few thought they had assured a satisfactory level of economic growth, and fewer still thought they had provided an adequate level of social security. Not many more, with Communists the most skeptical, thought earlier forms of government had at least secured public order. If there was a positive feature, it was *glasnost*: people could speak freely. Very few, however, thought government had been responsive to these or any other expressions of public sentiment (Communists, again, were the more skeptical).

**Table 3**  
**Attitudes to Current and Future System of Government\***

	(Percent mention)				Total
	CPSU member				
	Still Member	Former activist	Former inactive	Never member	
<u>Current political system</u>					
Economic order	19	18	17	16	16
Provides good social benefits	20	9	9	15	13
Maintains order in society	16	24	26	25	25
Political efficacy					
Everyone free to speak	63	68	66	72	71
People influence gov't.	19	34	22	28	28
<u>Future political system</u>					
Economic order					
Good for economy	54	59	47*	60	59
Provides good social benefits	44	47	37*	49	48
Maintains order in society	58	61	54	66	65
Political efficacy					
Everyone free to speak	61	62	63	65	64
People influence gov't	23*	39	32	37	36
(N)	(47)	(87)	(114)	(1,858)	(2,106)

\*Statistically different from those who have never been members at  $p < .05$ .

\*The questions were: "I'd like to ask your opinion about how a country can be governed. Which statements do you think apply to our system of governing since the revolution?"; "I'd like to ask your opinion about how a country can be governed. Which statements do you think apply to our system of governing in five years' time?"

Source: 1992, *Russian Between State and Market Survey* (n=2,106)

Attitudes towards a future post-Communist government, as Table 3 also makes clear, were much more positive. In five years' time, most respondents believed, the economic situation would have improved. Social welfare would be better, and public order would be more securely founded. People would be almost, if not quite as free to speak their minds. And government would itself be somewhat more responsive to popular pressures, although only a minority thought there would be a close association. Current Party members, perhaps

not surprisingly, were more dubious than all other groups about the extent to which a post-Communist government would be open to popular influence.

Taken as a whole, however, it is the consistency of responses across all groups, rather than party non-party differences, that emerges most clearly from the evidence that is summarized in Tables 3 and 4. Current Party members were marginally more positive in their view of the government of the Communist past, but less likely to believe that it was open to popular influence; equally, they were more skeptical of the prospects that were held out by a future post-Communist administration. But only in a few cases were the differences statistically significant. Those who regarded themselves as current members of the CPSU were less likely to think a future government would be attentive to public opinion; equally, those who had been inactive members in the past were more doubtful of the social and economic benefits of post-Communist government than all other groups.

**Table 4**  
**Changes in Current and Future Evaluations of Government <sup>a</sup>**

(Mean scores, to 10 scales)

	Economic Order			Political Efficacy			(N)
	Current	Future	Change	Current	Future	Change	
Still Member	1.9	5.2	+3.3*	4.1	4.3	+0.2	(47)
Former member							
Activist	1.7	5.5	+3.8*	5.1	5.0	-0.1	(87)
Former member							
Inactive	2.0	4.6	+2.6*	4.4	4.7	+0.3	(114)
Never member	1.8	5.8	+4.0*	5.0	5.1	+0.1	(1,858)
Total	1.8	5.7	+3.9*	4.9	5.0	+0.1	(2,106)

\*Change statistically significant at  $p < .05$ .

<sup>a</sup> Mean scores, based on zero to 10 scales constructed from the items listed in Table 3.

Source: 1992, *Russians Between State and Market Survey* (n=2,106)

The same responses are presented in a different form in Table 4, which is based upon the mean values of responses to the questions considered in Table 3. Again, there are very minor differences between the responses of current Party members, active former Party members, inactive former members, and those who had never been a part of the CPSU. Much more striking are the differences in the assessment by all groups of the improvement that would be made by a future non-communist government in terms of social and economic performance, and in terms of political efficacy. In every case, a future government was expected to bring about a significant improvement in economic growth and social benefits. A non-communist government, at the same time, was expected to make virtually no difference in terms of the extent to which it would reflect public opinion; for former activists it would be less responsive than the Communist administration had been, for others hardly more responsive.

## Conclusion

Reflecting its Leninist origins, the CPSU had always prided itself on its "monolithic unity." Factions had been banned since 1921. Members joined a party of "ideological and organizational unity." Party organizations at all levels were supervised by those above them, and had no choice (under the provisions of "democratic centralism") than to accept their advice. Members had a wide range of formal rights, including the ability to criticize all other members and to address any proposal they might have to the Central Committee, "and receive an answer." If Party members were repeatedly guilty of violations of

discipline, they could be expelled. But this was rarely necessary, up to the 1980s, given the control that the Party's central leadership exercised over the courts, the media, and all forms of employment.

---

***"The future of a Russian democracy, . . . depends less upon inherited party loyalties and rather more upon current performance of government as evaluated by the voting population as a whole."***

---

By the later Gorbachev years nearly all of this had changed. In particular, the unity of earlier years had collapsed into a variety of competing tendencies outside as well as within the Party's ranks. Some members were leading strikes, and others were trying to

suppress them. Others still were leading nationalist movements against continued Soviet rule, opposed just as vigorously by local hard-liners. There were grass-roots revolts against local Party leadership throughout the winter of 1989 and early 1990: in Volgograd and Tyumen, in Voroshilovgrad and Donetsk, in Kostroma and Cheboksary, in Ufa and Sverdlovsk. For the jurist Boris Kurashvili, in 1989, there were two parties within the CPSU, one of "democratic socialism" and one of "communist construction."<sup>12</sup> For the playwright Mikhail Shatrov, in early 1990, there were three, four or five parties within the CPSU; for the director of the Higher Party School, Viacheslav Shostakovsky, there were as many as eight distinct tendencies, including a "silent majority."<sup>13</sup> The months leading up to the 28th Party Congress in 1990 had seen these and other differences crystallize into organized and competing "platforms," of which the Democratic and the Marxist platforms became the best known.<sup>14</sup>

Party members, as our survey has shown, did differ in their underlying political philosophies from the non-party majority. These differences, however, were almost entirely confined to the small minority who in early 1992 regarded themselves as current members. Former activists, and other former members, generally diverged very little in their responses from those that had never been members. In terms of more specific policies there were few if any significant differences, even among those that regarded themselves as current members. In terms of their evaluation of the Communist past, current members were almost as negative as other groups of respondents; and they shared the generally more optimistic view that was taken of the prospects for a post-Communist administration, at least in terms of its social and economic performance.

By the late Communist period, it has been suggested, membership of the CPSU had become something like "membership of the Anglican church for an Englishman":<sup>15</sup> an affiliation that was close to a requirement at many levels of society, but one that had conveyed relatively little in terms of the beliefs and values of the individuals concerned. Party members were a cross-section of their society in the late Communist period; in the

post-Communist period, as our survey has indicated, they reflect the diversity of opinion that is characteristic of their fellow citizens and their responses to the issues of the day are likely to differ very little from those of the non-Communist majority. The future of a Russian democracy, uncertain in the wake of the suppression of the Supreme Soviet and the Chechen campaign, depends less on inherited party loyalties and rather more on current performance of government as evaluated by the voting population as a whole.

### Notes

The New Russian Barometer is part of an ongoing program of survey research in fifteen post-Communist societies between state and market directed by Professor Richard Rose, Centre for the Study of Public Policy, University of Strathclyde, Scotland. Irina Boeva and Viacheslav Shironin are the Russian collaborators; the survey itself was supported by the National Science Foundation, Washington, D.C. and the Centre for Research into Communist Economies, London.

1. *Izvestiya*, 13 July 1992, 3.
2. Yegor Ligachev, *Zagadka Gorbacheva* (Novosibirsk: Interbuk, 1992), 75.
3. On the Party's final stages see for instance Ronald J. Hill, "The CPSU: Decline and Collapse," *Irish Slavonic Studies*, 12 (1991), 97-120; Hill, "The CPSU: From Monolith to Pluralist?" *Soviet Studies*, 2 (1991), 217-35; Stephen White, "Rethinking the CPSU," *Soviet Studies*, 3 (1991), 405-28; E. A. Rees, ed., *The Soviet Communist Party in Disarray* (London: Macmillan, 1992); and Stephen White, "Communists and Their Party in the Late Soviet Period," *Slavonic and East European Review*, 4 (October 1994), 644-63.
4. On these developments see Ya. G. Emakov et al., "Kommunisticheskoe dvizhenie: ot KPSS k KP REF," *Kentavr*, 3 (1993), 65-80.
5. *Pravda*, 16 February 1993, 1-2.
6. An estimated 80-90 percent of executive positions were held by former party officials: *Rossiiskaia Gazeta*, 4 March 1992, 2.
7. According to an unpublished Russia-wide survey of December 1992, for instance, the Democratic Party had the most widespread popular support (17.8 percent viewed it "positively"), but the two main successor parties to the CPSU enjoyed 23.1 percent support between them. See Institut prikladnoi politiki, "Politicheskie partii Rossii," Moscow, 1993, typescript. The survey was based upon interviews with 1,500 respondents in four Russian regions; a short report appeared in *Moskovskie novosti*, 12 (1993), 9A. We are grateful to Olga Kryshantovskaia for making this data available to us.
8. The data used for this study is from the 1992 New Russian Barometer survey, collected by the All-Russian Centre for the Study of Public Opinion between 26 January and 25 February 1992. The sample was based on the urban population aged sixteen years and over resident in the Russian Federation. The survey was conducted by means of personal interviews; the effect response rate was 82.9 percent. The total sample size was 2,106, weighted by education to reflect the national population. For a fuller account see Irina Boeva and Viacheslav Shironin, *Russians Between State and Market* (Glasgow: Centre for the Study of Public Policy, University of Strathclyde, 1992).
9. *Partiinaia zhizn'*, 2 (1987), 9 (workers in 1957 accounted for just 32 percent of membership).
10. *Izvestiia Tsk KPSS*, 4 (1990), 113-15.
11. For the 1990 Rules see *Materialy XXVIII sezda KPSS* (Moscow: Politizdat, 1990), 108-24.
12. See Yu. Burtin, *Puls reform* (Moscow: Progress, 1989), 71.
13. *Pravda*, 1 February 1990, 2 (Shatrov); *Politicheskoe Obrazovanie*, 18 (1990), 6, (Shostakovsky).
14. On these developments see Hill, "The CPSU: From Monolith to Pluralist?" and Rees, ed., *The Soviet Communist Party*, 20-24.
15. *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 29 February 1991, 1, 3.