The Russian Left and the French Paradigm

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The resurgence of the post-Soviet Russian communists was almost as unexpected for many in the West as was Gorbachev's liberalization of the Soviet political order. Surprise was unwarranted, however. In the Russian Federation of the early 1990s, hyperinflation triggered by price liberalization and institutional breakdown, on top of general economic collapse, deprived a great majority of Russian citizens of their life savings and social safety net. It required little foresight to envision that alienated, militant members of the Soviet-era communist party *apparat* would have little difficulty rallying electoral support for their reconsituted, restorationist Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF). As it turned out, the CPRF's share of the State Duma's party-list vote rose from 12.4 percent in 1993, to 22.3 percent in 1995, to 24.3 percent in 1999, thereby giving the communists a near monopoly on the oppositionist voice in Russian politics.

In this essay, I will assess the CPRF's prospects a decade from now. But first it may be instructive to glance back at the failure of most Sovietologists to anticipate the likelihood of massive change in the Soviet Union after the passing of the Brezhnev-era generation of leaders. In the early 1980s, the radical reforms of the communist-led Prague Spring of 1968 were still fresh in our memories, even as Solidarity challenged the foundations of communist rule in Poland, the powerful Italian Communist Party was rapidly becoming social democratic and in China economic reforms were gaining momentum. A comparative analysis of developments in the world-wide communist movement should have enabled more analysts to have anticipated that the geriatric Brezhnev regime's successors would be a variegated group, including both political-economic reformers and conservative old-liners. Hence my underlying premise in this essay is that a comparative perspective may likewise be helpful in discerning the shape of both Russian political culture and the Russian left ten years hence. While prediction is highly conjectural in political science, the delineation of alternative scenarios is both possible and incumbent on its practitioners.

With the comparative approach in mind, my assumption is that over the next

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decade we will probably see the Europeanization, French-style, of Russian political culture. However perplexing it may first sound to posit the eventual Europeanization (even French-style) of Russian political culture, the following considerations suggest that it is likely. First, of course, the geopolitical situation has changed dramatically from what it was two or even one decade ago. The relative stability of the bipolar era has been replaced by fluidity as policy disputes cloud Euro-Atlantic ties, Chinese power grows, and Muslims everywhere seek their place in the sun. In this context Russia appears to have little choice but to align itself with Europe. But in addition to geopolitical *realpolitik*, Russia's dependence on carbohydrate exports to Europe points in the same direction, as do demographics, with Russia's population becoming more concentrated in the European part of the country relative to the vast empty stretches east of the Urals. Furthermore, the new Russian economic elites and younger educated professionals have already been drawn to Western Europe's postindustrial, individualistic way of life, with their attitudes toward Europe as a whole being unencumbered by the ambivalence they feel toward the United States.

Plainly, the ambivalence of even the younger generation of Russians to the United States relates directly to the above-mentioned notion of "Europeanization French-style." However, evolving Russian political culture includes not only suspicion of America but also nostalgia for lost grandeur, endemic statist propensities, and a weak tradition of grassroots nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)—all features commonly associated with post–World War II French political culture. Regarding the last point, many political sociologists attributed France's explosive rebelliousness in May–June 1968 precisely to the absence of intermediate associations between the centralized govenment bureaucracy and the populace. To the above reflections on Russian and French political culture must be added the evident similarities between the mixed presidential-parliamentary consitutional structures of the Russian Federation and the Fifth French Republic as well as the ongoing efforts by both countries' political establishments to find an effective balance between statist impulses and local autonomist pressures.

Turning to the CPRF, it has become commonplace to say that its electoral strength, which reached over 32 percent in the first round of the 1996 presidential race and 29 percent in the March 2000 contest (32 percent if the votes for Aman Tuleev, the leftist Kemerovo governor and ex-CPRF stalwart, are included), has contributed to the "blockage" of meaningful alternation of power in post-Soviet Russia. In the absence of a moderate center-left political force, voters have had little choice but to cast their ballots for the status quo, represented by Yelsin, Putin, and the various center-right and centrist parties, or for the Communists. French voters faced the same dilemma during the first two decades of Charles de Gaulle's Fifth Republic (1958–78), when the French Communist Party regularly garnered some 22 percent in the first round of parliamentary elections. The result was the seeming entrenchment of Gaullist hyperpresidentialism and the emasculation of the French National Assembly, which became during those years a debating club for the propresidential majority rather than a venue for deliberation over genuine public policy alternatives. In other words, in both post–Soviet Rus-

sia and Gaullist France, the communist parties were the beneficiaries of a classical protest vote.

The CPRF of the 1990s and the French Communist Party (PCF) of the 1960s–1970s shared another key similarity, one directly related to the issue of political blockage. From its reconstitution in early 1993, the CPRF has shown itself to be just as doctrinaire and nationalistic as the PCF was in its postwar heyday (it may be recalled that the French communists consistently endorsed the CPSU's "general laws for building socialism"—notwithstanding their rhetorical flirtation with Eurocommunism, while they opposed European economic integration and welcomed De Gaulle's nuclear deterrent and estrangement from NATO). Under the leadership of Gennady Zyuganov, the Russian communists have exhibited a virulent form of anti-Westernism and Great Russian ethno-cultural exceptionalism, a bizarre mix of Stalinist national Bolshevism and ultra-leftist neo-Slavophilism. At the same time, their party program exudes a dogmatic version of Marxism-Leninism, marginally modernized in that, for example, the post-industrial masses are said to be exploited by advertising hype and credit-card entrapment rather than subsistence wages and early machine-age working conditions. The CPRF is flexible and moderate only in its approach to electoral politics and parliamentary maneuvering.

The decline of the PCF after 1981 may therefore hold lessons for the future of the Russian communists. Because of the PCF's old thinking, as soon as the French electorate was offered the choice of Francois Mitterrand's new Socialist Party (PS) in the early 1970s, moderate left-wing voters threw it their support, enabling the PS to win both the presidency and a National Assembly majority in 1981. This occurred, moreover, in the wake of the turbulent spring 1968 "events" in France, when tens of thousands of students rioted against the outdated educational system (and dearth of jobs for which it prepared them) and some ten million blue collar workers went out on strike to protest the growing gap between rich and poor (despite the postwar rise in the French GDP). In a telling testimony, many of the French youth mobilized by the 1968 "events"—along with their teachers—later cast their ballots for the PS. This was in sharp contrast to the Italy where, after that country's "hot autumn" of 1969 and subsequent political turbulence in the 1970s, a new generation of activists aligned themselves with the Italian Communist Party, by then known for its innovative Eurocommunist policies and critical detachment from the Soviet Union. Meanwhile, unionized French workers continued to back the PCF until, by the 1990s, they began to desert it in ever larger numbers for the far right National Front of Jean-Marie Le Pen.

This thumbnail sketch of the correlation of forces between the old-line French communists and the Mitterrand socialists highlights a very significant difference between the CPRF and the PCF, despite their common doctrinaire propensities. Whereas the bedrock of the PCF's support was always to be found among unionized blue collar workers, with idiosyncratic allegiance from left-wing Parisian intellectuals, the CPRF has drawn many of its grassroots adherents from pensioners over sixty and underemployed technocrats and former agitprop workers in their forties and fifties, organized at the local level by ex-CPSU *apparatchiki*

(as distinct from the ex-Soviet nomenklatura, or managerial and governmental elites). Indeed, because of the passivity or cooptation of industrial workers in the post-Soviet economy of the 1990s, more underemployed researchers and technocrats than blue collar workers seemed to vote for the Russian communists. At the same time, the support of rural villagers in the economically depressed and unreformed black earth regions of central and southern Russia accounted for much of the CPRF's electoral success.

Thus Zyuganov's "national Bolshevik" rhetoric has been plainly geared to the elders' nostalgia for Soviet-era social security and the rural inhabitants traditionalist xenophobic patriotism. Indeed, dependence on rural votes explains the CPRF's recent delirium against the sale of farmland, in utter disregard of the fact that Soviet-style collectivization of agriculture was an unmitigated economic disaster. Yet the demographic implications of relying on the backing of pensioners and peasants are obvious. In ten years the fifty-five to sixty-year-olds and above who comprise the majority of CPRF members will no longer be active, while the sociological character of Russian agriculture will have been altered beyond recognition.

Looking ahead, demographics and Russia's projected Europeanization French-style would seem to leave Russian leftists with only two plausible options if they want to replenish their ranks and remain politically relevant. The first would be renewed militancy, but along the lines of the West's quasi-Marxist New Left of the 1960s–1970s or the incipient, eclectic anti-globalization movements of today (which may be expected to gather strength if the Euro-Atlantic economies remain sluggish). The second option would be social democratization. Russia's brand of nascent capitalism, with its glaring income inequality, tattered social safety net, and pervasive corruption among businessmen and government bureaucrats, would appear to offer fertile soil for a growth in militancy. On the other hand, the ex-communists turned social democrats who now govern NATO's new allies, Poland and Hungary, provide a workable example of the second option. Meanwhile, the inward-looking ethno-cultural traditionalism and Great Russian hubris associated with Zyuganov's leadership of the CPRF seem poised to lose their drawing power in the face of generational change and deepening societal interaction with the European continent.

Under these circumstances, what are the prospects for evolution of the CPRF from within, into either a militant quasi-Marxist New Left or a moderate social democratic formation on the pattern of the ex-communist parties of East-Central Europe? In order to explore this question it is helpful to recall that, from the time of the CPRF's founding in early 1993, it embraced three major tendencies: Zyuganov's Great Russian anti-Western chauvinism; doctrinaire Marxist-Leninist revivalism; and left-wing social democracy in the form of pragmatic Marxism. The CPRF's January 1995 congress, after a year of intense debate, approved a party program that was heavily tilted toward the Marxist-Leninist revivalists. At the same time, it was left to Zyuganov to formulate the party's public electoral platform in interviews and books stressing his Great Russian ethno-centric patriotism. This campaign strategy proved eminently successful in the December 1995

Duma elections in which the CPRF won more than 22 percent of the vote (twice as much as its nearest competitor) and one-third of the seats (157 out of 450). In that parliamentary sweep a key figure from the party's pragmatic Marxist tendency, Gennady Seleznev, was elected Duma speaker while CPRF deputies were awarded one-third of the committee chairmanships. The party's moderate, incipiently social democratic Marxists benefited during the Duma's subsequent four-year term from practical legislative experience, public visibility, and heightened leverage among other communist deputies (half of whom were also members of the CPRF Central Committee). In short, from 1996 through the end of 1999, a tenuous equilibrium existed among the three key tendencies in the CPRF's upper echelons.

"What is the likelihood over the next decade of a European-style center-left party emerging as a viable alternative to the CPRF?"

Vladimir Putin's victory in the presidential election of March 2000 had a far-reaching impact on the CPRF's internal balance, however. By appealing to the patriotism and deep sense of wounded national pride felt by many Russians, Putin preempted issues that Zyuganov had highlighted for years, thereby pulling the rug from under him within his own party. Compared to mid-1996, in March 2000 the CPRF's presidential tally dropped by 5 percent in the rural "red belt" of southern and central European Russia as a number of more traditionalist, xenophobic voters threw their support to Putin. On the other hand, the communist vote markedly increased in some urban industrial centers, especially in southern Siberia and the Far East, which helped compensate for the "red belt" losses. In the wake of the election, therefore, the Marxist-Leninist revivalists took the offensive against the Zyuganov line at a May 2000 plenum of the party central committee. Their leading spokesmen attacked Zyuganov and the entire CPRF Presidium for neglect of ideological principles and faulty emphasis on "state patriotism," with one of them going so far as to assert that the Presidium members should be the first to study the Marxist-Leninist basics. Meanwhile, plans by the moderate Duma speaker Seleznev (then in his second term) to form a new "center left" movement named "Rossiya" that would be independent from but supportive of the CPRF went forward—despite bitter opposition from the ideological revivalists. On 15 July 2000, the Rossiya movement was formally launched, with an estimated membership of 100,000.

This internecine strife signaled the growing polarization of upper-echelon CPRF views between doctrinaire ideologues and moderate pragmatists, with Zyuganov's Great Russian ethno-culturalism clearly on the wane. With internal-party cohesion thus threatened, a major CPRF Congress the following December exhibited startling immobilism, eschewing both doctrinal revision or leadership change. Zyuganov himself retained all important posts—party chairman, Duma

caucus leader, and head of the party's electoral front, the People's Patriotic Union of Russia.

Only in spring 2002 did those internal conflicts begin to come to a head, triggered by the pro-establishment Duma parties' decision to reduce the communists' committee chairmanships by seven (from nine)—with the alleged backing of the Putin administration. The CPRF Central Committee thereupon ordered its two remaining committee chairpersons and speaker Seleznev to resign their posts as well. When they refused, the Central Committee, reportedly by a majority of 60 percent, voted to expel them from the party. Significantly, all three were known to be supporters of a moderate center-left movement, either inside or outside the CPRF. Indeed, several years ago one of them, in a conversation with the me, flatly stated that the Russian Communist Party must either transform itself into a European type of social democratic party or fade into oblivion. Not surprisingly, in mid-summer 2002 Seleznev announced his intention to create a new socialist party based on the Rossiya movement the following autumn.

The CPRF's internal political dynamics since spring 2000 suggest that the party is quite unlikely to evolve into a social democratic force on the pattern of the ex-communist parties of East-Central Europe or Italy. At the same time, it is almost unimaginable that the dogmatic, backward-looking slant of the CPRF's Marxist-Leninist revivalists could attract the genuine support (as distinct from a protest ballot) of Russian voters now in their twenties and thirties, no matter how alienated the latter might conceivably become down the road. Another unexpected economic crisis might well jolt many younger Russians into political activism, notwithstanding their apathetic response to the 1998 ruble devaluation and banking fiasco. But the gradual dissemination of information-age technology combined with an unremitting quest for post-industrial European life-styles would seem to preclude allegiance to a blatantly restorationist Marxist-Leninist organization.

What, then, is the likelihood over the next decade of a European-style center-left party emerging as a viable alternative to the CPRF? It may be recalled that Mitterrand's Socialist Party took shape as the result of the coalescence of the remnants of the old SFIO (French Section of the Socialist International) with smaller formations of non-Marxist leftists (including Mitterrand himself) and various Marxist intellectual circles. What welded these disparate components into a cohesive party was, first, their shared opposition to both the Gaullist establishment and the PCF and, second, their determination to fill the void on the center-left of the French political spectrum.

Russia today resembles France of the early 1970s insofar as there are a number of heterogeneous formations whose chief common denominator is their rejection of both the CPRF's Marxist-Leninist restorationists and the political economy created by the current Russian business and governmental elites. These forces include, among others, the social democratic wing of Yabloko; the Social Democratic Party of Russia (created in November 2001 by the merger of two smaller center-left parties, headed by Samara governor Konstantin Titov and Mikhail Gorbachev respectively); powerful regional governors such as Aman

Tuleev in Kemerovo and Gennady Khodyrev in Nizhny Novogorod who have quit the CPRF (the latter in protest against the spring 2002 expulsions); Seleznev's projected Rossiya Socialist Party; smaller circles of Marxist intellectuals such as the "Alternativy" group associated with Alexander Buzgalin; and the Marxist pragmatists still within the ranks of the CPRF. Needless to say, potential supporters of a consolidated social democratic organization also include the untold numbers of center-left oriented Russians whose existence is indicated by endless sociological surveys but who during the past decade have had no viable standard-bearer around whom to unite politically.

In mid-2002 our priority lies in anticipating the coalescence of these diverse forces rather than guessing which specific group or leader might emerge as their standard-bearer. Moreover, whether the organizational void on the center left of the Russian political spectrum will be filled by a relatively militant albeit noncommunist "new left" or a social reformist but market-oriented grouping matters less than their fundamental affinity with mainstream European trends. The ascendance to power of center-right European forces in the past has galvanized the center-left to move toward the center on free market principles. On the other hand, there is no reason to suppose that a wide-ranging victory of rightist and center-right forces in West Europe in the next year or so might not precipitate greater center-left militancy in defense of social fairness and ethnic equality, first in West Europe and then further eastward. Whatever the case, the delayed receptivity to European developments in the changing Russian landscape should not obscure the fact that the political prerequisites there for the emergence of a noncommunist "new left" or center left are maturing.