

Between a Rock and a Hard Place: The Communist Party of the Russian Federation

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AT THE BEGINNING of 2022, the Russian Federation finds itself in a position where the same leaders have ruled the country for over twenty years. Events before, during and after the national elections to the State Duma in late September 2021 demonstrated how repression and election fraud were used as instruments to maintain political stagnation. Traditionally, non-systemic opposition parties and movements are the ones who have been pressed to submission by Russia's political leadership and its authorities. Before the 2021 elections, however, the focus of repression turned increasingly towards specific parts of the systemic opposition, usually loyal to Russia's political power, namely members of the systemic Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF) who were particularly affected by the repressive tools of power. Thirty years after the fall of the Soviet Union, the CPRF still retains some influence, both in the Kremlin and in Russian civil society. The question is whether the dynamics mentioned above will generate a new springtime for Russia's Communist Party, or lead to increased fragmentation.

Russia's political opposition parties and movements organise as either systemic or non-systemic. The systemic opposition has played an important supporting role in Russian politics for decades, upholding the illusion of choice and democratic principles. During the past twenty years under Vladimir Putin, members of the systemic opposition have remained loyal to Russia's political leadership. By offering little or next to no political friction, they have largely been spared from repression. This also explains why they have not constituted, for the broader Russian public, a genuine political alternative. The systemic opposition has traditionally been ideologically erratic, but with one important constant, the CPRF.

The Communist Party of the Russian Federation inherited its organisation and party structure from the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (forbidden in 1991), which in the early 1990's enabled it to mobilise all over the new Russian Federation. The persisting relevance of the CPRF was shown during the prelude to the 1996 presidential elections, when the approval ratings of CPRF leader Gennady Zyuganov were above those of the

then sitting President Boris Yeltsin (who won the election thanks to support from the oligarchy and mass media dominance). Since then, the CPRF has not posed a threat to the rulers in the Kremlin. However, before the 2021 State Duma elections, it became clear that the Kremlin's political threat perception is changing.

The Kremlin-supported party of power, United Russia, has gradually lost the traction and brand of "stability" it once had. It is increasingly unclear to the Russian public what kind of future United Russia has to offer them, except the status quo. The CPRF, however, has a clear ideological message. Social and economic injustice are parts of everyday life in Russia; thus, the CPRF at least constitutes a familiar political alternative. Accordingly, as the pre-election ratings of United Russia fell, in favour of CPRF opposition candidates, repression against these politicians increased. Notably, the same tactics used to prevent Alexei Navalny's opposition movement from gaining support were also used against several candidates of the CPRF before the 2021 elections to the State Duma. One example is the nationwide smear campaign against the CPRF, launched just before the election. Another example is how the former CPRF presidential candidate, Pavel Grudinin (a warm supporter of Stalin and a private kolkhoz owner), was removed by the Central Election Commission from the list of federal candidates, and accused of being a "foreign agent" with offshore accounts. This framing is strongly associated with Soviet repression, and is stigmatising for the organisation or person subjected to it. The barring of Grudinin, one of the CPRF's leading figures, from running for the State Duma caused an uproar both inside and outside of the party structures. Party colleagues such as Yekaterina Engalycheva and Nikolay Bondarenko, member of the Saratov Oblast Duma and fierce critic of United Russia, have accompanied Grudinin on this public walk of shame both before and after the elections.

The CPRF has struggled to handle a series of fundamental questions that will affect its role in Russian society in future. The party is split between a younger and more open-minded generation, on the one hand, and an aging upper leadership loyal to Vladimir Putin on the

other. Although generally hostile towards the West, the attitude towards Russia's political leadership is no longer as streamlined, because of repression, as it once was. These issues were highlighted throughout the election year. One symptom of frustration among the new generation of communists is the party's increased cooperation with the radical leftist movement, the Left Front.

The Left Front was founded in October 2008; using direct action as their main political instrument in order to turn Russian society towards a modern version of Soviet socialism, the movement has gained some support among the Russian public in recent years. They were particularly active during the 2011 – 2012 Bolotnaya protests, in Moscow, where they briefly cooperated with opposition leaders such as Boris Nemtsov and Alexei Navalny, despite their ideological differences. Their common denominator was that they were all “against Putin”. Although the Left Front lacks both the financial means and organisational structure of the CPRF, it has a “unique selling point” as a non-systemic alternative left, which attracts young and eager followers all over Russia.

An organised cooperation between the CPRF and the Left Front has traditionally not been an option for any of the parties. The anti-Western narrative of the Left Front has been less of a problem to the CPRF, whereas the former's strong anti-Putin sentiments definitively have. However, it seems as though Russia's increasing political repression has made the Left Front and the younger members of the CPRF think twice about their relationship, as they at least briefly “buried the hatchet” before the 2021 elections to the State Duma. In order to maximize the electoral outcome, prominent members of the Left Front (such as Anastasia Udaltsova, wife of Left Front leader Sergey Udaltsov, who ran for the CPRF in the 201st constituency in Moscow), either became candidates of the CPRF, or urged their supporters to vote for the CPRF in the election to the State Duma. This creative move, however, seems to creating even more problems.

The official election result was as expected: United Russia claimed 49.82 per cent and the CPRF, 18.93 per cent. This improved the CPRF's position in the State Duma by 15 seats, in comparison to the 2016 elections, when it won 42. The increased mandate of the CPRF largely

depended on protest votes; it is reasonable, however, to believe that the support for the CPRF is larger than the official election results admit to. As post-election analysis has shown, the relative success of United Russia was gained, at the expense of the CPRF, through manipulation. Aleksei Navalny's campaign, “smart voting” (claiming that a system designed to concentrate votes to the specific party or candidate is most likely to out-compete the local candidate from United Russia), favoured candidates from the CPRF, locally, but did not contribute to any extensive degree to the national election result.

The pull factor of “smart voting” has emphasised another discussion that has been underway within the Russian left for many years: whether to support Navalny's political movement or not. The systemic CPRF and the non-systemic Left Front are equally divided. The old leaders of the CPRF are openly reluctant (as this would further damage the Kremlin's trust in the CPRF as a passive supporter), whereas the young generation of the party seems to be more open to taking advantage of the momentum that protest may offer. The non-systemic Left Front, however, regards Navalny as a sell-out to Western interests, and for ideological reasons has not been open to supporting his cause, but many of its members have been seen at rallies in support of Navalny, allegedly to show their disapproval of the increased political repression which many of them have become victims of, in Russia.

After the election results became official, Moscow representatives of the CPRF called out for protests and gathered in the hundreds in the capital to show their dissatisfaction with the results, chanting “freedom to the political prisoners”, “shame” and “Navalny”. The leader of the CPRF, Gennady Zyuganov, was invited to speak at the rally – instead, he chose to attend a meeting with Vladimir Putin to negotiate for influence, and the party has not officially disputed the election outcome. Despite their extra fifteen seats in the State Duma, the CPRF are currently inhibited by inner dispute as well as their doubly unfavourable relationship with Russia's political leadership. The outlook for the CPRF to become something more than a passive supporter of the Kremlin appear limited for now. At the same time, a change-of-generation within the party is inevitable – and as is typical for Russia, this change may come quick. ■

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This brief was written before the Russian invasion of Ukraine.