

# **Waiting for a Democratic Left**

## **A Dangerous Gap in Russia's Political Spectrum**

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A decade ago, the politically entrepreneurial vanguard of Moscow's ruling elite—the so-called reformers—came to power under a slogan that was attractive by virtue of its simplicity: transforming Russia into a “normal country.” “Normal” meant a Western-oriented market democracy with higher living standards than existed under the Soviet Union. Since then, Russia has survived multiple crises and the transition to another presidency, but the record of advancement toward the conventional standard of normalcy has been mixed, even according to the most favorable accounts. For the overwhelming majority of Russians and most of the country's industries, the costs of transition to normalcy still clearly outweigh the benefits from economic, political, cultural, and psychological viewpoints. Under these circumstances, external certification of Russia as a normal country by Western partners has become a cornerstone of the system's legitimacy, given that such certification from the majority of Russians themselves has not been forthcoming. Critics point to the inherent elasticity of criteria for such recognition that is ultimately seen as politically motivated.

One of the empirical criteria of normalcy—that is, of being a Western-type market democracy—as defined by Russia's westernizers, is the existence of a left-of-center but non-Communist political force that stands up for the interests of wage earners vis-à-vis capital owners and would be a realistic contender for government offices. In other words, a social democratic or socialist party—something Russia is sorely lacking today. The presence and considerable weight of such parties in parliaments and government formation is a distinctive feature of European politics and an important practical manifestation of European values, which have been embraced in declarations by the post-Soviet elite, including President Putin himself. The only Western nation that does not have a left-of-center party up for election is the United States.

However, the absence of such a party in the United States can be explained convincingly from a historical and political-culture point of view. A similar explanation would not work for Russia because before 1917, Russia had a powerful and one of the oldest socialist/social-democratic traditions in the world, quite distinct from Bolshevik totalitarianism and, most of the time, irreconcilably opposed to the latter. The leading non-Bolshevik party on the left—the Socialist Revolutionaries—won a resounding victory in Russia's first democratic elections of November 1917 (the outcome of which was soon discarded with the establishment of Bolshevik one-party rule).

This undeniable historical evidence has led a number of analysts to conclude that the present void on the democratic left is the result of the Soviet period, when all left-of-center alternatives were discredited by association with the Communist Party. This claim, however, is difficult to sustain from a comparative perspective—in virtually all other Central and Eastern European countries that had suffered from Communist one-party rule, transition to democracy witnessed the emergence of parties on the democratic left, some of which assumed the responsibilities of governance. This also applies to former Soviet republics located in Europe, such as Lithuania, Moldova, and Armenia, where European-style social democrats were elected president. In Ukraine, a Socialist Party leader similarly ran as a realistic candidate for the presidency, while the party itself has had a sizable caucus in the current and previous parliaments. Such a comparison also undermines the hypothesis that the lack of a democratic left in Russia is due to the overall decay of left-of-center politics worldwide. The absence of such a party in Russia puts the state in the same category as the former Soviet republics of Central Asia that, unlike Russia, did not have an indigenous tradition of a European-style democratic left and, unlike most of the Western rim of the former Soviet empire, hardly conform to even the most lenient criteria of transition to democracy.

It is therefore only natural to conclude that the heavily right-of-center tilt of the Russian political spectrum and the void on the democratic left are due neither to Russia's pre-Soviet ideological development nor to its Soviet-era legacy of oppression and discrediting of progressive ideologies, but rather to distinctive features of Russia's late-Soviet and post-Soviet politics that set the country apart from its Western neighbors. The explanation can be found first, in the deficit of internationalism caused in part by in Russia's rapid descent from global superpower to dependency, and the national humiliation felt by its citizens; second, in the lack of democratization, particularly evident in Russia's asymmetrical domestic power structure; third, the negative attitude in the West, and particularly the United States, toward the possibility of a leftward shift in Russian politics; and, finally, in the staying power and structural rigidity of the Communist Party.

## **National Humiliation and the Peripheralization of Russia**

It is generally assumed that consistent internationalism is an indispensable ingredient in any left-of-center ideology (and, vice versa, that every nationalism is by definition conservative). The criterion of internationalism is stringently applied to newcomers by Westerners who, for understandable historical reasons, dominate the Socialist International and similar supranational avenues for left-of-center politics—never mind the fact that European socialist and social democratic parties themselves often deviate from this criterion under pressures from their own support base and domestic conservative rivals as well as from the realities of international balance-of-power politics (the recent elections in Germany are the latest case in point).

Nevertheless, Russia's only force on the Left that is present in parliamentary and presidential politics—the Communist Party (KPRF), still the most numerous and popular party—fails even the declaratory test of internationalism that would qualify it as progressive by Western standards. In this regard, its record is tarnished by anti-Semitic statements made by a few of its prominent members in the past.

Yet, those Westerners who are justifiably repelled by these ugly excesses tend to neglect the larger underlying reality that connects the KPRF leaders with millions of voters, although anti-Semitism among the mass public has been generally low and the overwhelming majority of the KPRF supporters are preoccupied with economic problems rather than with the geopolitical ambitions of some of the party's ideologists. This underlying reality is the extent of national humiliation, dependency, and the loss of the basic characteristics of a developed industrial nation—a loss experienced in daily life, not nearly compensated by the elite's effort to secure a symbolic position for itself in such councils as the G-8 and G-7. This feeling of marginalization and subordination to external forces, unprecedented in modern times, is a major factor that sets the new Russia apart both from its pre-1917 conditions and from other post-communist and post-Soviet states that did not experience such a drastic downgrading of their international status. Regardless of whether the type of national sentiment currently prevailing in Russia is seen as a progressive or a retarding phenomenon, confusing it with xenophobia and fascism is evidence either of inadequate analysis or of a Western-centric bias. And although some elements of a Weimar Germany-type of resentment and imperial nostalgia is also present in Russian society, it is more marginal and analytically distinct from the former.

Under such circumstances, it is unavoidable that any left-of-center party in present-day Russia relying on grass-roots electoral support is bound to be more nationalist than its European counterparts and more similar to left-of-center parties of the developing world, or “global periphery,” that historically have combined a social and economic agenda with the spirit of national liberation and an emphasis on state sovereignty. (It also helps to explain why the tiny social democratic party, led by Mikhail Gorbachev, seems to be permanently incapacitated by his foreign policy record, which is viewed as one-sidedly pro-Western, and hardly has any electoral future to speak of.) But recurrent efforts to build a left-of-center organization allowing for an element of constructive nationalism have been very difficult to sustain, as they met with intense hostility on the part of Russia's ruling elite and elicited little sympathy on the part of Western social democrats and socialists.

## **Sham Democracy and Structural Asymmetries of Power**

The extent of democratization in post-Soviet Russia is bound to be a matter of controversy. It is clear that Russia, unlike Poland or the Czech Republic, did not go through a democratic revolution from below. Instead, it saw a wholesale shift in the broad layers of the ruling elite: from the official doublespeak of its late-Soviet era with its obligatory lip service to Marxism toward unabashedly embracing right-wing economic (free market) and right-wing political (authoritarian or elitist) ideologies. Given the extent of the economic and political monopoly and the weakness of civil society, the space for opposition activities remains limited. It has been progressively narrowed in the years since the adoption of the Yeltsin Constitution in 1993 and especially during Vladimir Putin's presidency, where the legislative basis for party formation and electoral participation has been made increasingly restrictive. Throughout the decade, government and its allies in the media, business, and Parliament have been particularly hostile to any potential challenge from the democratic left that could potentially jeopardize the ruling

group's domestic and international legitimacy as the indispensable guarantor of relatively peaceful transition and the fulfillment of obligations to Western powers, and allegedly, Russia's only bulwark against right- and left-wing radicalism.

## **Super-Stakes for Russia's Western Partners**

In Western and especially U.S. discourse about Russia, there has been palpably less tolerance of pink (i.e. social-democratic or socialist) politics and ideas emanating from Russia than is usually reserved for similar political currents in the United States and European countries to the west of Russia's borders. As a result, some incipient organizations on the democratic left were stifled by the lack of foreign media attention that is crucial for any opposition politics in Russia (except the Communists). The liberal Yabloko, which initially flirted with social democracy, was able to retain some marginal but vital attention from the West only by aligning itself with the Union of Right-Wing Forces and, implicitly, with the authorities as well on fundamental issues (foreign policy in particular). The reason is simple. Given the strategic super stakes the United States has in Russia's domestic development and the extent of U.S. direct and indirect involvement in that development on the side of a right-wing (and, occasionally, by Western standards, radical right-wing) economic, social, and political agenda, left-of-center activities in Russia—whether led by committed democrats or former Communists—were bound to collide with the short-term interests of powerful forces in the U.S. government. This, again, clearly set Russia apart from those Western European countries whose right-wing elites did not solicit U.S. advice and support in domestic matters, and that had institutionalized a relationship with the United States via NATO, independent of domestic political fluctuations. It was also different from most Eastern European countries that either were seen as not overly important from the post-Cold War perspective, or had consensual support across the spectrum for an alliance with the United States. This perceived U.S. intolerance of the prospect of a leftward shift in Russia puts Russia in a category with Third World, peripheral states, such as Pakistan or South Korea, where the United States used to support right-wing governments for strategic reasons, while tolerating otherwise from known allies like Italy or Poland. Thus, curiously, U.S. actions have been reinforcing the distinctly nationalist bent of Russia's left-of-center politics, originating from its acute sense of external dependency.

## **The Staying Power and Structural Rigidity of the Communist Party**

This last explanation is in part a by-product of the previously mentioned factors. The KPRF (whose top leadership rose from the most conservative and nationalist of the many factions of the former CPSU establishment) capitalized on the older generation's nostalgia as well on the population's feelings of humiliation and dependency. It managed to fill the void created by the destruction and silencing of less nationalist left-of-center forces that had dominated Russia's first democratically elected Parliament, destroyed by Yeltsin in the fall of 1993. The rise of the KPRF and its ability to win a relative majority of votes has been accepted by Russia's ruling elite precisely because the rigidity of this party's structure and image deprives it of the capacity for coalition building that would allow it to win an absolute majority of votes; because it occupies the space that might

otherwise be claimed by a more flexible and dynamic, and therefore more dangerous, force on the democratic left; and, not least, because the KPRF—unlike the democratic left—is virtually doomed to international isolation, and even some of its own leaders and supporters do not see it as capable of governing Russia in the era of globalization.

The absence of an electable, democratic, left-of-center opposition is a major factor blocking not only Russia's advancement toward some imaginary standard of normalcy, but also a long-term, fundamental rapprochement with the West on the basis of shared values rather than short-term military and commercial interests. This situation indefinitely postpones a crucial test of democratic transformation that Russia has yet to pass—namely, the peaceful transition of power to a distinctly different political camp within the democratic spectrum (and without simultaneous disintegration of the state, as happened in 1991). It denies representation and voice to many millions of Russians—wage earners in the public and private sector and small business owners—most of whom are deeply disillusioned with the present state of affairs but are not willing to vote a scary, backward-looking, and self-doubting KPRF into power.

By alienating some, this situation radicalizes many others, especially younger generations who have inherited no safety valve from the Soviet past and have no foreseeable economic future in the investment-lacking economy. This, in turn, leads to formation of an underground, violence-prone political counterculture and to the fermentation of what University of California's Kenneth Jowitt calls “movements of rage,” with pieces of ultra-nationalist and ultra-left ideologies brought together in an explosive and unpredictable mix. In 10 years, and possibly even earlier, these disjointed fragments might coalesce into a mass-based and decentralized extra-parliamentary entity—a Russian fundamentalist movement. A predictable response from the right-leaning ruling elite and its Western partners would be to tighten control over the country's domestic politics even further and to perpetuate the “electoral monarchy” (a term coined by political scientist Lilia Shevtsova) that has emerged under Yeltsin and Putin. Russians will see these developments as a fatalistically predetermined vindication of their present sentiments about a deliberate peripheralization and “Saudization” of their country, consigned to oil-based external dependency and coercive maintenance of a corrupt and undemocratic regime because of U.S. strategic security.

Genuine Western democrats of every political complexion ought to become aware of this extremely dangerous prospect. There is still room for non-governmental players in the West to redress some of the damage—namely, by adopting a less exclusionary and more open-minded attitude to a handful of opposition groupings and individual actors on Russia's democratic left, regardless of their distinctively national features, and by giving them not some material support but a respectful hearing that is vital to opening up the space for non-violent, left-of-center politics in Russia.