The Russian left has barely emerged from the shadow of Stalin, but there are significant signs of change.

blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2013/07/02/the-russian-left-has-barely-emerged-from-the-shadow-of-stalin-but-there-are-significant-signs-of-change/

02/07/2013

How do left-wing parties and movements fare in Russian politics? **Luke March** *provides an overview of Russia's left and its role in the Russian party system. He argues that despite the Russian Communist Party (KPRF) still remaining the second largest political party in the Russian parliament, the Russian left still remains remarkably weak and fragmented. Nevertheless there is some evidence of 'Europeanisation' in terms of the Russian left becoming closer to contemporary European patterns, with a stronger social-democratic movement and less reliance on the KPRF.*

Over two decades after communism's collapse, commentators rarely tire of pointing out the obdurate survival of the Russian Communist Party (KPRF), which remains Russia's second-largest party. But it is not the strength of the Russian left that is most remarkable – rather its weakness. After all, sociologically, Russia remains rather a left-wing country, with opinion polls showing high support for social equality and a paternalist welfare state. Even former plutocrat-cum-dissident Mikhail Khodorkovsky has repeatedly called for a 'left turn' in social policy. Arguably then, the Russian left should be much stronger than the still-large but now much denuded KPRF. So what is the current situation of the left and why?

The parliamentary 'opposition'

Symptomatically, the dominance of the KPRF is a major sign of the left's weakness. This party has long been regarded by left-wing activists as a 'Frankenstein's monster', essentially unable to evolve but blocking newer left-wing trends, because of its intrinsic Stalinism, loyalty to the state and 'right-wing' nationalist/religious rhetoric. Although in the 1990s this view was somewhat caricatured, the party has signally failed to evolve in the Putin era. After 2003 it was reduced to its core vote and it has gradually lost all of its interesting and/or reformist figures (who were either purged or left). It is bereft of any political influence (even losing its last governor in 2013).

Under the 20-year leadership of Gennadii Zyuganov, the party now barely pretends to contest for power. Indeed, whereas the KPRF used to advocate fighting the 'anti-national elite', it has latterly advocated a 'popular front' with Putin at the helm and Zyuganov (who has never held executive office) as PM. The KPRF does remain the only Russian parliamentary party (occasionally) to criticise Putin, which accords it increased support from younger voters. But its endlessly recycled policies (of which ever-more overt Stalinism is just one example) means that political scientist Vladimir Gel'man's claim that it is Russia's 'most boring' party is apt. Nor is it in any sense a real opposition any longer. Despite griping about presidential dictatorship, the party distances itself completely from the street opposition, which it sees as 'orangists' (i.e. pro-Western forces behind 'coloured revolutions').

Some hope for the left might be provided by its other parliamentary representative, the quasi-social democratic Just Russia party (SR). Although originally created by the Kremlin in 2006 to siphon votes from the communists, this party has shown sufficient dynamism in regional elections to indicate that in a freer political system with different leaders it could gain over 20 per cent of the vote. After all, social democracy is an attractive brand now that it has lost Gorbachevian associations.

However, SR's problem is that it has never developed a stable position in the party system. Potentially, it is far more oppositionist than the Communists: it supports moderate democratisation, anti-elite populism, and is not instinctively anti-Western. The party has repeatedly found that the logic of its own positions pushes it towards far more radicalism than its pro-Kremlin leadership has ever found comfortable. Since the 2011 elections, a small radical wing emerged that broke the Kremlin's unwritten rule that the parliamentary parties and street opposition should not

coalesce. But this radicalisation caused multiple splits and financial problems until in late 2012 SR disowned the street protests and repressed the radicals. Now the party emphasises that it is a 'responsible political force'. This leaves it few options – it gains short-term survival after extreme regime pressure, but has lost any credibility as an opposition force. Although it may radicalise again in future if street protests regain momentum, the 5 per cent of the vote it gained in the Autumn 2012 elections may mark the limit of its electoral appeal.


Leader of the Communist Party Gennady Zyuganov and a participant of the Young Pioneer induction ceremony on Moscow's Red Square (RIA Novosti archive, image #910729 / Vladimir Fedorenko / CC-BY-SA 3.0)

Non-party movements

A long-term weakness of the Russian left has been weak links with non-party movements. The main trade unions have always been largely conformist, partly for cultural-historical reasons but also because they are co-opted by the pro-Kremlin United Russia party and curtailed through very strict anti-labour laws. Non-official 'alternative' trade unions are increasingly important (particularly in the regions), with a growing number capable of more radical actions. However, they are rarely linked to political parties. The KPRF never had strong trade union links and SR has failed to develop them. The ROTFRONT (United Labour Front) linked to Sergei Udaltsov's Left Front has increased the politicisation of (some) trade unions, but remains a small force.

The main Russian 'non-party' movement (albeit including many party activists) is now the Opposition Co-ordination Council. But the left has weak representation, with only Udaltsov and SR's Oleg Shein originally on the central list of 35 (now the former is under house arrest, the latter has left on the bidding of Just Russia's leadership). Perhaps the left is simply not as popular as the liberals. However, its reluctance to work with liberals or the 'nationalist' Alexei Navalny has hardly helped.

Emerging subcultures

Left-wing subcultures represent a more vibrant and changing scene. Although the Russian anti-globalisation movements were never large and have been overtaken by the anti-Putin opposition, groups such as the Left Front have been prominent in networking among this opposition. Yet although Udaltsov's profile has risen, the Left Front's supporters number at most several thousand, and it has entered a period of crisis following the 2012 'Anatomy of Protest 2' film. Contested allegations concerning the Left Front's preparation for mass insurrection have prompted a state crackdown that has hit the left opposition disproportionately, perhaps because of their perceived potential to exploit social discontent. Yet even before this repression, it was hard to see Udaltsov as a new Lenin. He is not noted for ideological or strategic innovation.

The main new development in the subcultures has been the emergence of (as yet tiny) post-Stalinist groups, less leader-focused, more pro-democratic, less ideological, younger and more oriented towards solidarity with European counterparts. One such is the Russian Socialist Movement: Isabel Magkoeva, 21, a feminist activist, is typical of this newer generation. It is also seldom remarked that the 'punk collective' Pussy Riot see themselves as part of the autonomous left – feminist, pro-Western and akin to Occupy. However, it is symptomatic of divisions within the

Isabel Magkoeva (Credit: Russian Socialist Movement, CC BY SA 3.0)

Russian left that solidarity with Pussy Riot came largely from abroad – they are just one of many micro-groups not integrated with or supported by a wider left 'movement' as such.

In sum, the Russian left has hardly escaped Stalin's shadow, at least as long as a largely 'palaeostalinist' communist party remains dominant. But there are significant signs of change. Indeed there is a certain 'Europeanisation', in terms of the Russian left becoming closer to contemporary European patterns – those of a declining communist party, a stronger social democratic party, and a profusion of diverse 'new fringe' trends that are interesting but not particularly socially relevant (yet).

Also similar is that the socio-cultural support for left-wing ideas is greater than left parties' electoral results. This is itself a legacy of Stalinism (partially because of the survival of Stalinoid parties; more broadly because of the credibility deficit that left-wing ideas still often suffer). However, much of the weakness in the Russian context results from the specific framework of Putinite politics – weakened social movements and the dominance of pseudo-opposition parties sustained by the state. So a genuine (radical) left in Russia is unlikely without radical changes in the nature of the regime.

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