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Russian Radical Left in 2018. Still between Residual Ideas and Loyal Oppositional Status?

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In March 2018 Vladimir Putin was elected into fourth term in office with 76,69 % of the vote. Whereas in the same month Putin's public approval coincided with the election result (80 %), by December 2018 his public approval had dropped into 66 %.¹ Although the figure is anything but alarming, Putin's weakening popular appeal gives grounds to pay attention to the status of institutional arrangements in the given situation. The year 2018 provides at least four reasons to pay a closer attention to the *Communist Party of the Russian Federation* (CPRF). First, leaving aside the Kremlin's administrative creation under Putin's reign, the party of power *United Russia* (UR), CPRF has remained the largest political party in Russia since the end of the Soviet Union and in organizational and historical terms, it is the most established party in Russia. Second, the Kremlin's notable challenges of sustaining its political legitimacy – regardless of its administrative hegemony – have become apparent in the invariably weakening support of the Kremlin's UR, now comprising the regime's main goalkeeper, Putin, as well. Third, in line with global trends, there is a growing demand of social justice in Russia that has been the political home ground for the left. A hugely unpopular pension reform in the summer 2018 was a major turning point here. And finally, in contrast to these opportunities, besides CPRF's ageing leadership and core electorate, the reputation of all political parties, including CPRF, is extremely weak among the population. For instance, between December 2017 and August 2018 the electoral trust of UR dropped from 37 to 29 percent, while during the same period the trust of CPRF remained in 9 percent.²

¹ <http://www.levada.ru/indikatory/>

² <https://www.levada.ru/2018/09/17/partijnye-rejtingi/>

The federal level performance of CPRF has raised discontent for long especially in regions. The systemic role of the country's first oppositional party has less and less appeal among regional activists and supporters, while the party's efforts to expand its electoral ratings has become to a cul-de-sac. The principal reason behind this has been the dilemma of sustaining CPRF's official status and nominal leverage in relation to the Kremlin via party-based political activity. In other words, the only way to guarantee the official second position in federal elections is to provide a socialist alternative for the current regime but this alternative should not become too appealing. In terms of these developments, links between CPRF and the most active and influential extra-parliamentary radical left organization *Left Front* (LF) are important. LF has been an active player in the left's protest movement and was the initiator for nominating Pavel Grudinin for CPRF's candidate in the 2018 presidential election as well as Vadim Kumin for CPRF's candidate in Moscow mayoral election 2018. Nomination of both candidates beyond ideologically driven party cadres, initiated by an extra-parliamentary organization, indicates certain attempts to update CPRF's political output.

This paper examines the left's prospects to use left-leaning demands in society. In other words, how the most organized leftist movement in Russia tries to expand its political weight in the situation of the Kremlin's difficulties and of the inevitable generational rupture that awaits CPRF's leadership and the core electorate. As a whole, the paper discusses the left's role in the potential deterioration of the Kremlin's political status-quo. First, I will take a look at CPRF as the major oppositional player in post-Soviet Russia having an official institutional status that has resulted as a downward, yet still influential, political role to date. The next section sheds light on developments in 2018 and discusses how CPRF was unable to renew its role vis-à-vis recent opportunities. After this, the role and background of *Left Front* is discussed, focusing on its contribution to the leftist demand in society by figuring as a major actor in nominating candidates for CPRF in its major elections in 2018. The paper concludes that the recognition of the need for electoral expansion notwithstanding, the Russian left – systemic and non-systemic – is deeply stuck in the Soviet past as well as in the view that a left-patriotic coalition can bring a major political success.

CPRF's Political Chances and Ideological Challenges

Developments seen in 2018 deepened those problems of CPRF that have been recognized and discussed in previous studies, particularly by Luke March.³ These problems can be summarized in the dilemma that irrespective of leftist ideas' persistent demand in Russian society over the course of the Putin-era, CPRF's electoral ratings have plummeted in parliamentary and presidential elections since the 1990s. This can be seen in the following tables:

CPRF's results in elections of the State Duma

Year	Share of votes (%) and ranking	Number of seats in the Duma	Share of seats in the Duma (%)
2016	13,34 (2)	42	9,3
2011	19,19 (2)	92	20,44
2007	11,57 (2)	57	12,7
2003	12,61 (2)	61	11,3
1999	24,29 (1)	113	25,1
1995	22,3 (1)	157	34,9
1993	12,4 (3)	42	9,3

Results of the CPRF's candidates in presidential elections

Year	Share of votes (%) and ranking
2018	11,77 (2)
2012	17,18 (2)
2008	17,72 (2)
2004	13,69 (2)
2000	29,48 (2)
1996	40,31 % (32,03 first round) (2)
1991 (CPSU)	16,85 (2)

³ See, for instance, March, L. (2002), *The Communist Party in Post-Soviet Russia*. Manchester University Press; March, L. (2003), 'The Pragmatic Radicalism of Russia's Communists' in *The Left Transformed in Post-Communist Societies*. J.L. Curry & J. Urban (eds.) Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc; March, L. (2011), *Radical Left Parties in Europe*. Routledge.

Although CPRF's result in the 2016 duma election was slightly better than in 2003 and 2007, it was far from the successes the party received in the Duma elections in 1995 and 1999. More importantly, in 2016 the party lost the significant increase of votes it received in 2011 when UR and the Kremlin faced notable a negative consensus launched by the extra-parliamentary opposition. CPRF, and two other 'systemic' oppositional parties, LDPR and *Just Russia*, reaped the harvest of the motto 'vote any other party except United Russia', invented by a rising star of the non-systemic opposition, Aleksey Naval'nyi.⁴ Results in presidential elections have followed the overall downward pattern as well; from the near victory in 1996 to the hitherto worst result in 2018. The latest result encapsulates the role and challenges of the left's political representation in today's Russia. Regardless of the CPRF's acceptance of LF's nomination of Pavel Grudinin, a nearly outsider and not member of the party, for the presidential race, it did little to change the party's reputation as a loyal supporter of the regime.

Since the end of the Soviet Union, Russians' values have reflected a significant leftist dimension. Socialist, social-democratic and communist sentiments have exceeded 50 % of the Russian electorate, which is far more than any other ideology.⁵ Recent data on Russians' value orientations indicate even stronger longing for social justice. According to the poll of the Sociological Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences, 59 % Russians regarded social justice as the most important value for the country's future.⁶ This was 12 percent higher than in 2014. In the same poll, 37 % of Russians wanted to live in the future based on human rights, democracy and freedom of individual expression, whereas in 2014 the number was 27 %. Both orientations point at values close to the left, yet values close to Western liberal, or the so called new left, have appeared problematic for Russia's left-wing political structures (e.g. rights of women, LBGT, or ecological issues).

A major explanation for CPRF's residual nature can be found in its role as a representative of *patrimonial communism*.⁷ The outcome of this legacy has been that whereas leftist movements in general – moderate and radical – have identified themselves as progressive movements historically, CPRF's development has followed a different path. In ideological terms, after its establishment in 1993, CPRF largely continued the conservative- Stalinist line of the CPSU

⁴ <https://navalny.livejournal.com/603104.html>

⁵ March, L. (2015), 'The 'Post-Soviet' Russian Left – Escaping the Shadow of Stalinism?' in *Systemic and Non-Systemic Opposition in the Russian Federation*, edited by Cameron Ross. Routledge, p. 99

⁶ <http://www.sib-science.info/ru/institutes/dorozhe-velichiya-06112018>

⁷ Two others communism types are *bureaucratic authoritarian* (e.g. GDR and Czechoslovakia) and national consensus (e.g. Poland, Baltic states), Kitschelt via March 2002

that the opponents of Gorbachev's perestroika echoed at the end of the Soviet Union. The success of the party in the 1990s was linked to the party's capacity to act as an umbrella of anti-Western sentiments targeted against the Yeltsin regime within the political and socio-economic turbulence that followed the dissolution of the Soviet Union.⁸ Contrary to post-communist states in Central Eastern Europe that had national history and identity prior to communism, Russia lacked the adequate pre-1917 history for her post-Soviet choices that had made easier a solid rupture from the Soviet past. Instead, the failure of Yeltsin's liberal reforms strengthened the idea of seeing communism as an intrinsic part of the national continuity, carving out the peculiar, and electorally successful, combination of Soviet communism and nationalism in the 1990s.⁹

Along with the consolidation of Putin's electoral authoritarianism that marked shift from party competition to party hierarchy,¹⁰ CPRF did not avoid the dilemma that concerns all ideologically radical parties aiming to calibrate their role with the political competition. In the case of the radical left, this is *the dilemma of democratic socialism*, 'the choice between a party homogenous in its class appeal but doomed to perpetual electoral defeats or a party that struggles for electoral success at the cost of diluting its class orientation'.¹¹ This dilemma is accompanied with *perverse trick of democratic institutions* which means that the more successful radicals are at exploiting these institutions, the more their radicalism risks being undermined (ibid.). In general terms, CPRF's electoral downfall since the advent of Putin's rule partially fits with this picture given the rapid improvement of Russians' standard of living in the early 2000s. Social contracts made by Putin's rule satisfied the great majority of the population, and the alternative CPRF provided appeared too radical and politically irrelevant.

However, developments seen in 2018 suggest that, first, Russia is still far from a liberal democratic context to say nothing about the status of her democratic institutions. Second, demands of social justice exist in time, and the Kremlin's narrative of stability and well-being, contrasted as the major achievement from chaos and poverty of the 1990s, has lost much of its credibility. People's socio-economic grievances are increasingly projected against Putin's system instead of sensing them as repercussions of the 1990s, and perceiving current difficulties as harmless drawbacks of the greater stability. Indeed, more and more people expect changes instead of

⁸ Flikke, G. (1999), 'Patriotic Left-Centrism: The Zigzags of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation', *Europe-Asia Studies* Vol 51, Issue 2, 275-298.

⁹ Flikke 1999; March 2002; March 2003.

¹⁰ Gel'man, V. 2008. Party politics in Russia: from competition to hierarchy. *Europe-Asia Studies* 60(6), 913–30.

¹¹ Przeworski and Sprague via March 2011, Introduction. March, L. 2011.

stability.¹² Whilst this expectation is related to the sense of social injustice,¹³ a radical leftist alternative should have a notable political potential.

Moreover, we can speculate that in the context of poorly developed democratic institutions, ‘dilemma of democratic socialism’ and ‘perverse trick of democratic institutions’ should not be a problem. Increasing demand of social justice and of individual rights notwithstanding, Russians are largely prone to support strong-hand governance.¹⁴ It follows that CPRF, or radical left in general, could avoid corroding effects of democratic institutions on its agenda. It seems that the supply side of the Russian left somewhat interprets the situation exactly according to given factors. CPRF’s programmatic dimension is rife with revolutionary discourse, yet this discourse repeats historical allusions of the Bolshevik revolution. Following the comprehensive analysis of CPRF by a leftist think-tank CEPR, the party should take advantage of its organizational strength and continuity but get rid of its clumsy and past-looking revolutionary principles in order rejuvenate its electoral profile (the average age of the party member in 2017 was 55,6 years).¹⁵ In short, the party should orientate itself towards radical transformation in capitalizing the leftist appeal in society by updating and crystallizing its oppositional status. Indeed, this partially happened in the 1990s when CPRF’s was built as a political nexus of conservative communists and national-patriots against the Kremlin’s liberal and pro-Western policies.

If difficulties of the Putin regime will deepen into a political crisis within the legacy of Russia’s weak political pluralism, a radical leftist supply should not be the problem as such. The open question is whether a potential crisis of the political system become compounded with the radicalization of the electorate. And if this is about to happen, could CPRF redeem itself as the most credible flag bearer of the revolutionary minded electorate? Existing signals for such scenario are not promising for the CPRF. For sure, criticism against the Kremlin has been on the rise but sociological data on Russians’ political attitudes do not support any revolutionary behavior.¹⁶ Furthermore, CPRF’s gradual integration into the Kremlin-led political process under Putin’s rule has demonstrated that dilemmas of democratic socialism and perverse trick have a strong counterpart in Russia’s less democratic circumstances. That is, the dilemma of the systemic opposition.

¹² http://www.ng.ru/economics/2017-12-13/1_7135_citizens.html

¹³ <https://www.vedomosti.ru/opinion/articles/2017/12/19/745708-rossiyane-peremen>

¹⁴ <https://www.levada.ru/2017/12/11/17232/>

¹⁵ <http://cepr.su/2017/12/25/kprf/>

¹⁶ <https://www.levada.ru/2017/09/28/rossiyane-ne-veryat-v-protesty/>

Opportunities of 2018

By the year 2018 there have been no potential challengers for the CPRF among the radical left and the ideological rivalry within the communist movement that occurred in the early 1990s has not threatened the party for years. Moreover, *Just Russia* (SR) – party as the Kremlin-induced social democratic formation has not succeed to challenge CPRF, largely because of the Kremlin’s repressive measures against SR’s powerful and too disloyal representatives (see below). More importantly, in the framework of systemic parties, CPRF has remained its semi-oppositional status in contrast LDPR whose incarnation Vladimir Zhirinovskiy has acted as a regime spoiler throughout its existence.¹⁷ CPRF’s oppositional dimension becomes apparent in regions in particular. As distinct from LDPR and *Just Russia*, CPRF has been the most active organizer of anti-governmental protests.¹⁸ Yet, in terms of protests against the government’s pension reform in the summer 2018, CPRF’s activity was also seen as a part of its systemic role strengthened by the party leader Ziuganov’s cautious criticism against Putin in the height of public discontent.¹⁹

In the situation of rapidly erupted popular grievances, CPRF’s systemic status has important consequences for the Kremlin-led pseudo-democratic design as a whole. First, as it seen above in the public approval of political parties, the systemic opposition’s reputation and capacity to conduct credible protest activities among the population is weak. Second, from the Kremlin’s viewpoint, in order to keep the non-systemic opposition marginalized, the scope of oppositional avenues that can be allowed for the systemic opposition becomes uncertain since there is danger that the systemic opposition becomes a real one. The evolution of *Just Russia* party up to protests of 2011-12 is the case in point. Third, if the frustrated electorate of the systemic opposition – communists in particular – sense that their party leadership conforms too much to the government’s unpopular measures, there is a risk that middle-range and regional leaders of the party form more oppositional fractions within the party, and /or start to cooperate with the non-systemic opposition. Indeed, there are examples of this kind of cooperation in regions where

¹⁷ <https://www.proekt.media/investigation/ldpr-business/> ; Andreas Umland (1997), Vladimir Zhirinovskii in Russian Politics: Three Approaches to the Emergence of the Liberal-Democratic Party of Russia 1990-1993 (Dr. Phil. in History, Free University of Berlin).

¹⁸ Jan Matti Dollbaum (2017), ‘Curbing protest through elite co-optation? Regional protest mobilization by the Russian systemic opposition during the ‘for fair elections’ protests 2011–2012’, *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 8 (2017) 109–122.

¹⁹ <https://www.dw.com/ru/комментарий-пенсия-реформа-критиковать-нельзя-поддерживать/a-45330958>

CPRF has been active anti-governmental protester regardless of its official, or ‘co-opted’, position in the local decision making organs.²⁰

In this respect, there are deep grounds to suspect that the ‘party’s activism without damaging results to the Kremlin’s status-quo’ shows the importance that the official role of ‘the second party’ in the Duma plays at the cost of political opportunities that emerge for the party. The fate of *Just Russia* after 2011-12 protests is not the option regardless of opportunities that the regional elections in September 2018 provided for CPRF in terms of increased protest voting against the regime. The case in point is the fate of elections in Primorsky region gubernatorial election in the Russian Far East. The CPRF candidate Andrei Ishchenko was about to win the sitting governor Andrei Tarasenko from UR but due to blatant vote-rigging Tarasenko eventually won. Fury and protests of Ishchenko’s voters were immediate, and Ishchenko himself declared hunger strike against the fraud. However, soon he and his comrades submitted to the compromise of the Central Election Committee of organizing the third round of elections, instead of defending CPRF’s obvious victory in the second round.²¹

CPRF’s role and reputation of the loyal ‘second party’ with an ageing, and nowadays, anti-charismatic leadership, incarnated in 74-year old Gennady Ziuganov, has distanced many ideologically principled supporters of the party. At the same time, CPRF’s reputation has effectively blocked any genuine prospects of finding new supporters. While recognizing this dilemma, experiences of the lost opportunities of the 1990s have seemingly strengthened the party’s programmatic ethos around achievements of the 1990s. That is, cultivation of the idea of left-patriotism against all-encompassing liberalism instead of increasing CPRF’s leverage as an official oppositional party by absorbing ideas of the anti-Kremlin opposition as a whole. For CPRF the dividing line of Russia’s politics has remained between liberal-bourgeois and left-patriots, not between the Kremlin and the rest. Next, let us take a look at how this dividing line is interpreted by the *Left Front* which was the initiator of nominating Pavel Grudinin and Vadim Kumin as the CPRF’s candidates for the presidential and Moscow mayoral elections in 2018.

²⁰ Dollbaum 2017; <https://primamedia.ru/news/594574/>

²¹ <https://zona.media/chronicle/primorye>

Left Front, Grudin and Kumin

The most visible, active and influential extra-parliamentary left movement in Russia has been *Left Front* (LF). It was established in 2008 as a coordination organ for radical left organizations.²² The coordinator of the front since the beginning has been Sergey Udal'tsov from the *Vanguard of Red Youth*, a radical left protest organization. The actual founder of LF has been regarded Ilya Ponomarev, a member of the Duma from *Just Russia* party, and who currently lives in Ukraine.²³ It is indicative that before his career in *Just Russia*, Ponomarev worked with CPRF but drifted into a conflict with the party.²⁴ Whilst *Just Russia* appeared into political scene as the Kremlin instigated social-democratic spoiler in 2006, by 2010 it has become a more or less genuine oppositional force in the parliament. Gradually persuading members from other parties, it began more and more vocally to challenge the Kremlin-led status-quo between the governing UR and systemic oppositional parties. Ponomarev's extra-parliamentary LF was part of this process that culminated in protests in the winter-spring 2011-12 when LF became the major left organization in the protest movement, and Udal'tsov became one of its leaders who collaborated with other protest forces, for instance, with Aleksey Naval'ny. The 2011-12 anti-governmental protests demonstrated temporary capacity of the politically active 'rest' against regime; diverse ideological groups with different institutional affiliations (parliamentary and extra-parliamentary) were able to unite against the Kremlin.

The level of repressiveness that regime began to use since the spring 2012, after recovering the winter's shock, is understandable for a regime that is based on electoral-authoritarian design. The large-scale negative consensus and partial deterioration of the systemic opposition was a serious threat whose repetition had to prevent to happen in the future at any cost. A *Just Russia* was forced back into line, Ponomarev and other members who were active in protests (Gennady and Dmitry Gudkov) were expelled, while LF faced the harshest repressive wave of all protest actors. The Bolotnaia square demonstration caused indictments for 12 people of whom seven were LF activists. Udal'tsov and Leonid Razvozzhaev were both jailed for 4,5 years.²⁵

In light of the protest mobilization in 2011-12 LF succeeded to demonstrate the left's capacity to act as a noteworthy political actor. It managed to update the left's political role from CPRF's stagnant and pseudo-oppositional status while, regardless of its radical reputation, its approach

²² <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/1044452>

²³ <https://lenta.ru/news/2016/06/24/ponomarev/>

²⁴ <https://web.archive.org/web/20140714221947/http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1P1-88388960.html>

²⁵ <https://republic.ru/posts/1/980472>; <https://echo.msk.ru/news/1366368-echo.html>

to politics was more serious than carnivalistic and theatrical stunts of the National-Bolshevik party, a flag bearer of Russia's revolutionary street-opposition since the early 1990s.²⁶ However, since 2012 LF's balancing between radical programmatic principles and tactical plans in building a convincing leftist agenda via existing parliamentary representation has become obvious. Within his return from the jail to the front's leader-coordinator in 2017, Udal'tsov declared the left's necessity to find a unite candidate for the 2018 presidential election.

The political context for Udal'tsov's enterprise looked optimal. Besides societal developments in 2017 that indicated citizens' growing demand for socio-political and left-leaning issues, CPRF was at risk of losing its 'regular' second position to LDPR in the 2018 election. In all probability Ziuganov's candidacy as a rule had led to such result. Given this background and emerging societal grievances, LF organized primary of left-patriotic presidential candidates whose winner became Pavel Grudinin, a successful strawberry farmer and non-party member from the Moscow oblast.²⁷ His nomination as CPRF's presidential candidate can be seen as a rupture in the party's long-lasting lack of charismatic leaders whose Luke March sees as an 'endemic function of the party's organization'.²⁸ In short, LF's political measure towards vote expansion could raise some promises on the left's political capacity to capitalize the leftist demand in society vis-à-vis the Kremlin's difficulties in the situation of ageing and potentially rupturing CPRF.

However, a closer look to political discussions and justifications over choices among LF reveals that the dilemma of democratic socialism is no less slashing for it than for CPRF. Nominations of Grudinin and Kumin both indicate that there is a reflection of the fact that the left's electoral, that is, CPRF's, appeal, must be expanded. Backgrounds and platforms of the candidates indicate an explicit attempt to downplay old Soviet vocabulary, yet ideological frameworks behind them show no signs of break-up from the Soviet-era programmatic principles. Disputes over Grudinin's candidacy in particular underlined the left's challenges in coalition building towards liberal-leftists views, that is, towards a genuine social-democratic position. Grudinin's as well as Kumin's views were in tune with social democratic ideas that reject communism's class-based principles, for instance, by emphasizing sovereignty of private property

²⁶ Huttunen, T. & Lassila, J. (2016), 'Zakhar Prilepin, the National Bolshevik Movement and Catachrestic Politics', *Transcultural Studies*, Vol 12: 1, 136 – 158.

²⁷ <https://www.novayagazeta.ru/news/2017/12/01/137517-levyy-front-vydvynul-direktora-sovhoza-imeni-lenina-v-prezidenty>

²⁸ March 2003, 197

and the importance of entrepreneurs.²⁹ For instance, in the interview at the *Echo Moscow Radio*, Kumin painted socialism with a broad brush and emphasized the role of left parties in defending interests of entrepreneurs.³⁰

The main advocates of the rights of entrepreneurs, primarily small and medium-sized consumers, are the socialist parties, the social democratic parties. This is happening in China, Vietnam, and in Western Europe, in England, and anywhere. That is, socialists become the main advocates of the rights of entrepreneurs. This is a global trend. Accordingly, entrepreneurs are often put forward primarily by small and medium companies, as myself and Grudinin... nominated by socialist parties... We are not big businessmen... This is a real trend. There is nothing wrong there, you can only welcome it. And thank God that the party is now going to this direction.

Grudinin's platform was also devoid of traditional communist clichés, such as class struggle, bourgeois or proletariat.³¹ Even the word capitalism is mentioned only once in connection with oligarchic capitalism. Although the program is unashamedly leftist-populist in advocating the omnipotence and blessing of the state's role in fixing all societal problems, the avoidance of CPRF's traditional ideological references and slogans indicate Grudinin's and Kumin's attempts to update the party's agenda to all-encompassing leftist direction.

However, for those who suspected Grudinin's sincerity for communism or even socialism, he appeared as an additional proof of CPRF's loyalty to the regime.³² For them Grudinin is simply a capitalist with his private enterprise disguised in kolkhoz named after Lenin. Or, following categorical positions of the radical left, elections as a whole are meaningless since they always serve bourgeois interests.³³ Such disputes illustrate that the Russian left voiced via LF is still deeply in flux regarding plausible and effective methods of the political struggle.

Given the electoral ratings of the new candidates – Grudinin 11,77 %, Kumin 11,38 % – the balancing between political competition and party programmatic principles resulted as the combination of the worst alternatives of both dimensions. The core electorate and party activists could not identify with candidates who seemingly violate traditional programmatic (com-

²⁹ <https://www.novayagazeta.ru/articles/2018/02/23/75598-levyy-demarsh>

³⁰ <https://echo.msk.ru/programs/personalno/2257108-echo/>

³¹ <https://kprf.ru/activity/elections/171941.html>

³² Batov 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mphf2kHIJTQ>

³³ Semyon 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mphf2kHIJTQ>

munist) principles. Consequently, those who could vote Grudinin or Kumin as potential alternatives for the regime did not vote them because of the programmatic stagnation of CPRF. In both cases, CPRF's reputation as a loyal backer of the Kremlin did not disappear at any rate.

Udal'tsov was a key player in promoting Grudinin's candidacy. Again, for those who tend to see CPRF solely as the Kremlin's puppet, the position of LF appeared as a further proof of the Kremlin's co-optative capacity. LF was not able to unite diverse left-leaning electorate behind Grudinin, while its electoral work with CPRF vitiated its oppositional status further.³⁴ From a viewpoint of an ordinary Russian voter looking for a left-leaning alternative for Putin, ideological justifications by Udaltsov's close comrade in LF, Maksim Shevchenko, were hardly up-to-date. Instead of downplaying Grudinin's ideological purity for the sake of obvious demands of social justice, Shevchenko pinpointed the candidate's ideological 'orthodoxy' vis-à-vis his capitalist undertakings:³⁵

From the point of view of Lenin, there is no socialism without capitalism. Therefore, it is the time for us to first build capitalism, because we have no market and free capital, and everyone lives on handouts from various security forces. Our system is called localism.

Shevchenko's balancing with capitalist realities and programmatic principles resonates with LF's idea on a broad left alliance written in the front's program. The role of social democracy is seen simultaneously as a political ally and a transitional period towards socialism:³⁶

To achieve these goals (which the Left Front regards as a minimum program), the allies of the communists can become social democratic, and even left-liberal politicians, trends and organizations. The specific measures included in the Program are not yet socialism, but a series of practical steps towards socialism. At the same time, we will seek socialist transformations directly, fight for such a development of events at which the social democratic stage will develop into a socialist one.

Even though Grudinin's and Kumin's candidacies were attempts to update the left's agenda from the communist revolutionary rhetoric, the legacy of the 'scientific communism' is apparent in LF's biased interpretations on leftist tendencies in the world. For instance, all examples

³⁴ <https://www.novayagazeta.ru/articles/2018/02/23/75598-levyy-demarsh>

³⁵ <https://www.novayagazeta.ru/articles/2018/02/23/75598-levyy-demarsh>

³⁶ https://www.leftfront.org/?page_id=2413

of social justice are seen in relation to ideas of Soviet-type socialization (nationalization). European social democratic parties have not echoed the given teleology for years. As an example, following Udal'tsov, 'Grudinin declares a moderate program of socialist transformations, conditionally Scandinavian model.'³⁷ Besides obvious ideological stretching, Udal'tsov sees that the success of Grudinin

'will be the best response to sanctions and pressure on Russia because there is a worldwide request for an alternative to American hegemony (and) (i)t is Russia that could build a new left bloc all over the world.'³⁸

The problem of CPRF and LF lies not only in their stubbornness in Marxism-Leninism but, in particular, in their inability to recognize the change that appeared in Russia's political and societal processes from the 1990s to the 2000s. Indeed, stability has been the cornerstone of Putin's policies whose stronghold derives from dark experiences of the 1990s. It is thus revealing that regardless of obvious inflation of the Kremlin's stability narrative, the radical left is incapable to recognize the narrative's weakening appeal otherwise than resorting to dogmatic Soviet references. When the dilemma of democratic socialism is recognized, or it becomes too obvious through political realities – that is, the dilemma of choosing between political coalitions and programmatic principles – the discourse is desperately stuck in the ideological struggle over orthodoxy. For instance, Udal'tsov's 'prison comrade' from Bolotnaya, Leonid Razzvozhayev criticized those comrades who resist any attempts to broaden the left's leverage via coalitions.³⁹

I urge all the so-called 'beginner' Marxists to read, or rather to be guided by the latest works of Lenin and Stalin. Since, naturally, if we take a number of earlier works of Ilyich, then they may conflict with the later ones, and various demagogues use this to mislead novices. But as rational people, you should understand that if there are contradictions with the early works, then later works were written for this: to remove these contradictions, so that the followers could see a more optimal variant that led to success... I can say that in the modern history of Russia, the very broad coalition offensive of various political forces on the ruling oligarchic regime in 2011-2012 still remains the most prominent popular action that has occurred since 1993. And it was precisely this structure that most frightened the authorities, who threw a huge amount of resources at the suppression of popular protest.

³⁷ <https://www.novayagazeta.ru/articles/2018/02/23/75598-levyy-demarsh>

³⁸ <https://www.novayagazeta.ru/articles/2018/02/23/75598-levyy-demarsh>

³⁹ <https://www.leftfront.org/?p=14231>

Razzvozhayev criticism points at positive experience of the coalition with liberals in the 2011-12 protests and this could be a further opportunity to work with liberals who have shown increasing leftist sympathies, with Naval'nyi in particular. However, instead of stepping into a stage where a new, cooperative leftist agenda could be formulated, creative energy is wasted in political 'intellectualism' among the comrades.

Razzvozhayev supported Udaltsov's efforts to unite for Grudinin's candidacy in the presidential election, the stance that deeply divided the extra-parliamentary left, either because of Grudinin's fake-socialism, of CPRF's loyalty to the Kremlin, or of both.⁴⁰ However, Razzvozhayev's cooperative signal towards liberals is distant to Udaltsov's position who, after releasing from the jail, has repetitiously pointed out that cooperation with liberals is excluded, and LF's efforts should be targeted at the coalition of left-patriotic forces.⁴¹ By framing the anniversary of the Maidan revolution in Ukraine in February 2019 and its potential in Russia, Udaltsov senses the situation in the way in which Soviet glory and left's patriotic potential are weapons of action, not the cooperation with liberals.⁴²

There can be only one conclusion. We have little time. Just as the Soviet Union used every day to prepare for the inevitable confrontation before the start of the Great Patriotic War, we must also remember that our June 22 is not far off. I repeat once again - we just need a single Coordination Headquarters of the left and patriotic forces. The longer we delay its formation, the more difficult it will be for us to play a significant role in the mass street protests that are brewing. Today we must work as a team, develop a single plan of action and strengthen the rigidity of our demands. So far this has not happened, which means we lose time and lose in the struggle for the minds and hearts of opposition-minded citizens. It is time to finally understand this disturbing truth.

Conclusions

The shadow of the 1993 constitutional crisis has been intrinsic for CPRF's party identity. The anti-Yeltsin coalition of communists and anti-Western nationalists of that time was later materialized in CPRF's electoral success throughout the 1990s. In the first post-Soviet decade the cultivation of the Soviet-era achievements and national dignity were the remit of the communists, whose anti-Western nostalgia for the lost empire also spoke to many non-communist opponents of the Yeltsin regime. In this respect, the Putin era marked a notable takeover of the

⁴⁰ <https://www.novayagazeta.ru/articles/2018/02/23/75598-levyy-demarsh>

⁴¹ <https://republic.ru/posts/1980472>

⁴² <https://www.leftfront.org/?p=13907>

patriotic agenda from the communists. The Soviet-era pride, particularly the memorialization of the *Great Patriotic War*, was nationalized in the name of Putin-led state power. As a result, the CPRF was largely left stranded with Soviet-era political symbols, and rapidly abandoned by the politically indifferent majority of Russians. Along with Putin's growing popularity and the improving economic situation, the CPRF eventually became a loyal player in the Kremlin's semi-authoritarian rule, or at least, its capacity to dissolve this reputation has been weak. Instead of updating its agenda around left-leaning issues towards broader coalitions in the fight against the regime, it still believes in the strength of leftist patriotism. Even in the unfolding situation where patriotism has begun to lose its 'Crimean boost', directly linked to the declining approval of the regime.

Regardless of LF's intentions refresh the left's political output and build oppositional coalitions, it is also stuck in the worldview in which liberalism is thoroughly toxic, regardless of liberals' institutional position. Putin is liberal as much as Naval'nyi. This prevailing position demonstrates that the dividing line for the ideological and organizational mainstream of the Russian left does not appear between the Kremlin and the society. Instead, the division between the bourgeois and the proletariat still haunts interpretations of the left's role in the political process. For instance, Udal'tsov's recent views on Russia-Ukraine relations, in which he maintains coexistent criticism against the Kremlin and the capitalist West, blur further his formulations on European social democracy and gives grounds to suspect his level of realism on the state of affairs:⁴³

Our homegrown gangster capitalism is losing compared to the more civilized European and American capitalism (which, of course, does not negate its predatory nature). Therefore, there is only one way out - to change course and move towards socialism. Such a turn will cause a positive response both in Ukraine and around the world. Otherwise, sluggish conflict with the Slavic brothers may last for many years.

In terms of envisioning the potential transformation of Russia's left – which has remained radical in its postulations – one could argue that the ideological, and consequently reputational, obstacle for its transformation into a center-leftist party is in its commitment to Soviet Union's ideological nature as indisputable and indigenous in Russia's modern history. The commitment

⁴³ <https://www.leftfront.org/?p=15433>

to national patriotism besides radical leftist ideology indicates the fixation of seeing leftist ideology as part of Russia's national (that is, imperial) greatness.⁴⁴ In the case of CPRF, this difficulty can be explained by the party's roots in the Soviet Union's political establishment, as well as by its official, yet gradually deteriorating, status in Putin's electoral authoritarian system. The case of *Left Front* shows that the most active and influential extra-parliamentary leftist organization is still stuck in the lack of viable political and ideological alternatives after the collapse of communism.

⁴⁴ March, Luke (2002), *The Communist Party in post-Soviet Russia*, pp. 16-17; Flikke 1999.