

**COMMUNIST PARTIES IN RUSSIA, UKRAINE  
AND MOLDOVA**

**STRUGGLING WITH POPULAR DEMANDS**

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## STRUGGLING WITH POPULAR DEMANDS

- The appeal of left-leaning ideas is on the rise in Russia, Ukraine and Moldova. Nonetheless, the main left-wing parties, particularly the communists, remain stuck in the past and at odds with the interests of the electorate.
- The communists have gradually transformed from opposition forces and political competitors into conformists of the ruling elites. This new function dictates their key interest in maintaining the stability of the system, which also leads to growing dissent among the parties' members.
- Embeddedness in the existing political system is preventing the Left from self-reforming and impeding their transformation into modern national social-democratic projects. Yet Moldova has shown that in the new political context old 'Leninists' can reinvent themselves and become the most popular political project in the country.



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# COMMUNIST PARTIES IN RUSSIA, UKRAINE AND MOLDOVA

## STRUGGLING WITH POPULAR DEMANDS

### INTRODUCTION

The role and status of the Communist parties in post-Soviet politics have been under the radar in recent years. Today, while a former communist is the President of Moldova, the Communist Party of Ukraine (CPU) is fighting against being officially banned. Meanwhile, the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF) is playing the role of the chief opposition to the pension reform – the most unpopular reform to date under Vladimir Putin.

The current socio-economic difficulties and the demand for socio-economic protection offer a unique opportunity for left-wing parties to gain electoral support. However, regardless of the increasing support for leftist ideas, communist parties experience difficulties in increasing their political appeal.

In terms of the shift by communist parties towards a centre-leftist direction, these three countries represent a possible context for such development, starting from Russia and ending with Moldova via Ukraine's chaotic transformation.<sup>1</sup> In Russia, the CPRF is facing a serious generational challenge, while the Putin regime is struggling to maintain the legitimacy of the political equilibrium between the Kremlin and the opposition that is ostensibly loyal to it (the so-called systemic opposition). The CPRF's strong nominal and organizational position notwithstanding, the potential liberalization of party politics might be the kiss of death for the party. In the context of dynamic political pluralism, the CPU's status in Ukraine after the Maidan revolution shows that the backward-looking Leninist party does not have much to offer in the contest. Moldova, in contrast, has demonstrated a relatively powerful transformation of the Leninist party into a more centre-leftist, social-democratic political force.

The paradox is that communists still constitute a part of the systems they have to oppose, and remain oriented towards Soviet ideas. At the same time, communist parties are stuck in the past and their old 'dictatorship of the proletariat' slogans contradict

their elite status and stymie their transformation into modern national social-democratic projects. As a result, they remain convenient 'opponents' to the ruling elites, who lose the left-leaning and protest electorate to the populist parties.

These developments raise a series of questions about the communist parties, and their current ideological, political and organizational status. This Briefing Paper examines their role in the political system and their attitudes towards governmental participation, and highlights their future trajectories.

### COMMUNISTS IN RUSSIA: STUCK WITH PUTIN'S RULE

Leaving aside the Kremlin's administrative creation under Putin's reign, the party of power United Russia (UR), the CPRF has remained the largest political party in Russia since the end of the Soviet Union. In organizational and historical terms, it is the most established party in Russia. There are no potential challengers to the CPRF from 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, A Just Russia (SR) – the Kremlin-instigated social democratic formation – has not succeeded in challenging the CPRF.<sup>2</sup>

In short, the CPRF's status as the main Left political force in Russia is unambiguously strong. These positional benefits notwithstanding, its electoral performance has not recovered from the defeat it suffered in the early 2000s, with the advent of Putin's authoritarian regime. Whereas in 1999 it won a landslide victory in the Duma election with more than 24% of the votes and 113 seats, in 2003 it managed to win less than 13% of the votes and only 61 seats.

The main challenge for the CPRF today concerns its capacity to respond to intensifying grievances over social injustice in Russian society in recent years. In this respect, the party's overall leftist position and strong

1 This paper does not include Belarus since President Aleksandr Lukashenko's populist regime views itself as the successor to the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic, using elements of the communist ideology and governance structures.

2 In addition to its artificial status as a political party, strong federal and regional representatives of SR have been expelled by the regime in elections.

organizational network could provide a favourable opportunity to challenge the regime. The protracted socioeconomic problems that continue to thwart the Kremlin's attempts to devolve Vladimir Putin's legitimacy to the lower levels could increase the CPRF's potential leverage. In particular, this concerns the poor reputation of the government and United Russia. However, the CPRF is not immune to the poor reputation that dogs the political parties. Hypothetically, updating its residual ideas in tune with a more centre-leftist agenda could mark a step towards the shift that many former Eastern European communist parties succeeded in bringing about after the collapse of Communism.<sup>3</sup> Yet the CPRF's roots in the Soviet Union's political establishment and its current status in Putin's authoritarian system make this shift particularly fraught.

When Communism collapsed, Russia lacked viable ideological alternatives for the post-Soviet realities. This became particularly apparent after the failure of Boris Yeltsin's liberal reforms. In contrast to post-Communist states in Central Eastern Europe, which had a national history and identity prior to Communism, Russia does not have a viable and unifying pre-1917 legacy that would allow a clean break from the Soviet past. It is little wonder, therefore, that the post-Soviet Russian state narrative is so tightly bound up with the idea of the historical continuity of the Russian statehood, from the pre-Soviet to the Soviet, and up to the Putin era. Hence, the ideological obstacle to the transformation of the CPRF into a centre-leftist party is the party's indisputable and original role in Russia's modern history. For the CPRF, Communism has not only represented a radical leftist ideology, but perhaps even more so the continuity of Russia's national (i.e. imperial) greatness.<sup>4</sup>

In the 1990s, 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 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 effectively 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.

Between August 2016 and August 2018 public approval of the CPRF was 9–10%, while the readiness among Russians to vote for the CPRF in the Duma elections was 13–16% during the same period.<sup>5</sup> The notable decrease in public approval of the Kremlin's UR in 2018 has had no positive impact on the approval ratings of any of the systemic opposition parties. Support for UR dropped to 28% in August 2018 from the 37% support it had enjoyed in December 2017.<sup>6</sup>

In 2018, the selection of Pavel Grudinin as the CPRF candidate in the presidential election, and of Vadim Kumin as the party's candidate in the Moscow mayoral election, indicate distinct attempts to update the party's flagging political image. Both candidates had made their careers in business for the most part, and were outsiders as far as the party's traditional ideologically oriented cadres were concerned. More importantly, the CPRF's performance as the main conductor of protest activities against the government's hugely unpopular pension reform created unparalleled opportunities to challenge the regime.

Nevertheless, there are strong grounds for suspecting that these cases will eventually serve the Kremlin's interests and pressures to maintain the CPRF's loyal oppositional status, rather than the communists' genuine attempts to challenge the Kremlin-controlled political equilibrium. Being a systemic opposition party puts the CPRF in too beneficial a position to challenge the Kremlin's hegemonic electoral authoritarian rule, regardless of the opportunities that the present-day circumstances provide for the party.

In this regard, the increase in votes for the CPRF in the regional elections in September 2018 occurred largely due to protest voting against the establishment rather than an actual improvement in the party's political appeal. Yet, notwithstanding the socio-economic grievances that inform the CPRF's agenda, its position as the second most influential party in the absence of real electoral competition is beneficial in garnering protest votes from the electorate.

However, the party's capacity to use the recently emerged electoral potential is nebulous. Even in those regional elections where the CPRF has managed to

3 J. L. Curry & J. B. Urban (eds.) (2003), *The Left Transformed in Post-Communist Societies: The Cases of East-Central Europe, Russia, and Ukraine*, Rowman.

4 March, Luke (2002), *The Communist Party in post-Soviet Russia*, pp. 16–17.

5 Levada-Centre, *Partynie reytingi*, 17 September 2018, <https://www.levada.ru/2018/09/17/partijnnye-rejtingi/>. Last accessed 11 October 2018.

6 Ibid.

challenge UR, the party has thus far submitted to the Kremlin's 'rules of the game'. In this vein, unsurprisingly, party leader Gennady Zyuganov criticized the government's pension reform not in terms of challenging the president but as a move that serves to destabilize the political system.

For instance, on the common election day on 9 September 2018, CPRF candidate Andrei Ishchenko was on the verge of beating acting governor Andrei Tarasenko from UR in the Primorsky province gubernatorial election in the Russian Far East. However, due to blatant vote-rigging, Tarasenko eventually 'received' more votes. A public outcry and protests immediately ensued, and Ishchenko himself went on hunger strike in protest against the manipulation. However, he and his comrades soon submitted to the compromise suggested by the Central Election Committee to organize a new election, instead of defending the CPRF's obvious victory in the second round.<sup>7</sup>

Against this background, it appears that nothing short of disruption in the CPRF's systemic opposition status would provide a new beginning for the party, along with a change of the ageing party leadership. Zyuganov, the leader of the CPRF since its inception, was born in 1944. Whereas a generation change is unavoidable, the rapid collapse of the Kremlin's political design is uncertain. If this is about to happen, a big question mark hangs over the CPRF's prospects for a profound renewal of its members and the core electorate<sup>8</sup> on the basis of its residual structures and backward-looking ideas within the open political competition.

## COMMUNISTS IN UKRAINE: LOST IN THE POST-MAIDAN TRANSFORMATION

Regardless of significant differences between the political systems in Russia and Ukraine, the post-2014 status of the Communist Party of Ukraine (CPU) clarifies the potential fate of the unreformed CPRF in the case of open political competition. Like its Russian sister-party, the CPU was traditionally among the most popular and most organized political parties in Ukraine. In the first round of the presidential elections in 1999,

the three leftist candidates combined – including CPU leader Petro Simonenko – received 44.5% of the votes. Although their support has since declined, the CPU – unlike its leftist rivals, which became marginal during the 2000s – remained an integral part of the political system. In the 2012 parliamentary elections, the CPU won 13.2% of the votes and became the second political force in the South East.

In 2015, the CPU was banned by the Kyiv District Court upon a motion issued by the Ministry of Justice.<sup>9</sup> Yet unlike the banning of Communists in the early 1990s in Russia, which actually created a 'forbidden fruit effect' and led to the rapid mobilization of powerful communist circles and the formation of the CPRF,<sup>10</sup> the CPU was plunged into a deep political, organizational and ideological crisis, with public support plummeting to the lowest point in its history.

The deep crisis was not a consequence of legal or geopolitical challenges after the Euromaidan Revolution. The primary cause was the CPU's failure to adapt to new domestic developments. First, as the revolution and the war finally triggered the birth of the modern Ukrainian nation, the CPU's denial of Russian aggression and criticism of the 'IMF-US-controlled oligarch-fascist' government strongly clashed with new dominant societal attitudes. Public opinion in Ukraine swung decisively in favour of the country's independence, which contradicted the CPU's narrative of reviving the USSR. Furthermore, its traditionally critical rhetoric towards the ruling elites contradicted its serving as the ruling partner of Viktor Yanukovich's Party of Regions. For protest voters who chose the party in 2012, the CPU was associated with the ousted Yanukovich system.

Second, the party's attempts to become a part of the post-Yanukovich political system de-legitimized the CPU in the eyes of some of its traditional (Leninist and Russia-oriented) electorate. The CPU experienced an inner rebellion by several regional units against the central leadership. It lost a number of influential party members and grassroots activists, who supported separatist movements across the South East of Ukraine or joined other political projects.<sup>11</sup> The CPU's

7 'Ediinaya Rossiya' proigrala vybory v regionakh. Posledstviya, 18 September 2018, <https://zona.media/chronicle/primorye>. Last accessed 11 October 2018.

8 The average age of CPRF members in 2016 was 55.6 years. 'Doklad TSEPR. KPRF na razvilke: chtoby pobedit' - nuzhno menyat'sya', 25 December 2017, <http://cepr.ru/2017/12/25/kprf>. Last accessed 11 October 2018.

9 In its motion, the Ministry referred to Ukraine's de-communization laws, signed in May 2015, which inter alia condemn Nazi and Communist totalitarian regimes and ban their symbols. Verkhovna rada Ukraini, Zakonotvorchist, [http://w1.c1.rada.gov.ua/pls/zweb2/webproc4\\_1?pf3511=54670](http://w1.c1.rada.gov.ua/pls/zweb2/webproc4_1?pf3511=54670). Last accessed 11 October 2018.

10 March 2002.

11 Political projects, unlike ideology-based parties, do not aim to rise to power, but pursue specific short-term interests, such as weakening the electoral support of real parties, providing parliamentary representation for oligarchic business groups, and so forth.

reluctant support of Ukraine's territorial integrity and its participation in the presidential and parliamentary elections was seen as a betrayal. By July 2014, a third of its Verkhovna Rada deputies, including the ex-deputy Speaker of the Parliament and its sponsor Igor Kaletnik, as well as chief ideologue Aleksandr Golub, left the party protesting against the lack of action, corruption and betrayal of communist ideas.

Thirdly, the CPU became embroiled in an ideological crisis. The de-communization laws prohibited the party's major symbols and propagation of its ideas. More importantly, as in the case of the CPRF, other political forces effectively hijacked the CPU's most resonant symbols. The May 1<sup>st</sup> and May 9<sup>th</sup> (Victory Day) celebrations are associated with the Opposition Bloc (OB) and 'Za Zhittya' ('For Life') parties. The communist-leaning Union of Veterans competes with the Russia-sponsored 'Immortal Regiment' public movement to hold memorial demonstrations under the same name.

In this situation, Moscow is not eager to support the CPU despite its pro-Russia rhetoric, and promotes other political forces in Ukraine. For instance, during his appearances on Russian TV, CPU leader Petro Simonenko is often referred to as an agent of the Ukrainian Security Service and a traitor. He is openly accused of 'losing' Ukraine. In turn, Ukraine's security services also treat Simonenko as a Russian agent and have launched criminal cases against him and his colleagues. The law banning the CPU simply drew a line under the communists.

The party continues to function, however, as the Constitutional Court is reviewing its case, and it is even aiming to take part in the 2019 elections. In 2015, it formed the 'Left Opposition' with the Progressive Socialist Party, Workers' Party and Slavic Committee of Ukraine, and launched cooperation with the 'Nova Derzhava' Party. But these attempts have proved futile. A poll conducted by the Razumkov Centre in August 2018 estimated electoral support for the 'Left Opposition' at a negligible 0.8%.<sup>12</sup>

The rapid decline of the CPU immediately raised expectations for the emergence of a new pro-Ukraine Left. In May 2018, a SOCIS poll recorded that almost a third of Ukrainians were ready to vote for a left-leaning party, while more than 50% would support the non-radical Left according to the Electorate

Committee of Ukraine.<sup>13</sup> Yet, in the void left by the CPU, no 'new Left' seemed to emerge in Ukraine.

Both new and old left-leaning parties are mired in challenges. The Socialist Party of Ukraine (SPU) was a promising Left organization that abandoned Soviet-oriented ideas, until it alienated its electorate by switching political coalitions from a pro-European to a pro-Russian one in 2006. Several influential members including the then Minister of Interior Yuri Lutsenko left the party and formed the 'People's Self-Defence Party' which, unlike the SPU, made it into parliament during snap elections. Since 2014, a few attempts to revive the SPU have been made by associates of Minister of Interior Arsen Avakov and ex-head of Yanukovich's administration Sergey Levochkin. The former leader of the SPU, Olexander Moroz, also formed the 'Truth and Justice Party' in 2016. Yet none of these projects have a chance of getting into parliament in 2019.

In the absence of any new viable Left options, the Left electorate has been taken over by populist formations. 'Za Zhittya' and OP, the 'Our Land' Party and the Agrarian Party compete for the left-leaning electorate at national and regional levels. In his former stronghold in the South-East, Petro Simonenko has marginal support of 0.8%. In Donbas, Petro Simonenko (2.6%) trails far behind OP leader Yuriy Boyko (8.8%) and 'Za Zhittya' front figure Vadim Rabinovich (13.9%).<sup>14</sup> Meanwhile, the leader of the Batkivshchyna Party, Yulia Tymoshenko, has recorded the strongest support in polls of people over 60 years of age across the country.

At the time of new national development after Euromaidan, the CPU resisted any change. A Levada-Kyiv International Institute of Sociology poll identified the significant rupture in attitudes towards Stalin in Russia and Ukraine, which pointed to the futility of the Left's ideological persistence. In February 2018, 77% of Ukrainians harboured a negative attitude towards Stalin compared to 37% in 2013.<sup>15</sup> The CPU failed to recognize the new trends and public opinion and missed an opportunity to reinvigorate itself.

12 Za pivroku do vivoriv: reytingi kandidativ i partii, motivatsii vivoru, ochikuvannya gromadyan, 4 September 2018, <https://dif.org.ua/article/za-pivroku-do-vivoriv-reytingi-kandidativ-i-partiy-motivatsii-vivoru-ochikuvannya-gromadyan>. Last accessed 11 October 2018.

13 Centre Socis, Sotsial'no-politichni orientatsii ukrainsiv, May 2018, [http://socis.kiev.ua/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/socis\\_201805.pdf](http://socis.kiev.ua/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/socis_201805.pdf). Last accessed 11 October 2018.

14 Za pivroku do vivoriv: reytingi kandidativ i partii, motivatsii vivoru, ochikuvannya gromadyan, 4 September 2018, <https://dif.org.ua/article/za-pivroku-do-vivoriv-reytingi-kandidativ-i-partiy-motivatsii-vivoru-ochikuvannya-gromadyan>. Last accessed 11 October 2018.

15 In comparison, in Russia 44% of the population harboured a negative attitude towards Stalin in 2018, 'Attitude of the citizens of Ukraine and Russia to Stalin', 10 April 2018, <https://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=news&id=761>. Last accessed 11 October 2018.

## CASTING OFF LENIN'S CHAINS: THE TRANSFORMATION OF COMMUNISTS IN MOLDOVA

As this paper has shown, two systemic parties, the CPU and the CPRF, have embarked on different trajectories since 2014. While the latter continues to enjoy significant public support, the former experienced a rapid decline. The difference in trajectories lies in diverse societal and political developments. The Russian political system continued to erase traces of pluralism and competition. The CPRF, while having been deeply embedded in Putin's regime, enjoys a systemic opposition status – a chief opposition force to the Kremlin. The collapse of the Yanukovich system in 2014 deprived the CPU of its special role in the Ukrainian political system. The ensuing reformatting of Ukraine's politics after Euromaidan followed the societal transformations and the increasing demand for pro-Ukrainian national-oriented political forces.

Moldova's evolution provides insights into the potential post-transformation trajectories for the Left that could await Ukraine. After the collapse of Communist rule in 2009, the Communist Party of Moldova showed a steady decline. Weakened by a youth revolt against its rule, the party, which was single-handedly controlled by Vladimir Voronin, steadily lost voters and party members alike. The CPM still gained 39% in the 2010 elections, making it a major opposition force. However, during 2012–2013, a group of its high-profile members left to re-launch the Socialist Party of Moldova (PSRM). In 2014 the CPM lost the election, not only to the ruling coalition but also to the PSRM, which won 21% of the votes. In 2016, the party split again, with two-thirds of its resigned members establishing the Social Democratic Platform faction in parliament, which later merged with the ruling party.

In polls, the CPM, described as 'an unreformed, unrepentant party of the Leninist mold',<sup>16</sup> lost its core electorate to the PSRM, which rose to become the most popular party in Moldova. PSRM leader Igor Dodon was elected President of Moldova in 2016. Despite evidence of collusion with the government, an International Republican Institute poll states that 36% are ready to vote for the PSRM in the next election compared to 16% support for the centre-right opposition and 9%

support for the ruling party. The Communists have 3% support.<sup>17</sup>

The rapid rise of the PSRM in 2014 was largely attributed to Russia's support. However, while other pro-Russia projects quickly faltered, the PSRM maintained its strong and sustainable position. Notwithstanding its pro-Russia orientation, the PSRM currently maintains that it is ready to cooperate with both Russia and the EU in the interest of the people. Its social-oriented programme and narrative ostensibly meet voters' expectations. The Socialists have dropped the 'Bolshevik slogans' and instead aim at addressing key public concerns such as low income/pensions, corruption and unemployment. President Dodon stresses his support for traditional values, the Orthodox Church and the traditional family. For Dodon, strong-handed populist Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenko is the role model, which resonates well with the public's demands.

## CONCLUSIONS: BETWEEN REFORM AND DECLINE

Despite the resurrection of the CPRF, the CPU's trajectory in post-Maidan Ukraine highlights the potential challenges that old Left movements face. The loss of systemic status and inability to adapt ideologically to new societal trends after 2014 offer two insights for Russia's communists after Putin.

First, in the case of the regime change, the status of the chief systemic opposition is detrimental for the party. The diverse party factions, the spread of which is contained by the special status of the party in the political system, and which forces any dissenting voices to refrain from any measures enabling them to compete for positions and power, are impossible to control in the absence of the old regime. This has led to inner fragmentation and the party's survival depends on fast ideological and organizational reformatting.

Second, whereas nostalgia for the Soviet Union as well as the cult of Stalin enjoy relatively strong support in Russian society, a possible advantage for the CPRF in this respect could be the role of being the electoral home for these views. However, this card was already used in the early 1990s, and now the problem is that both phenomena are decreasingly related to ideas of

16 Vladimir Tismaneanu, 'Moldova's Revolution Against Cynical And Cronyist Authoritarianism', Radio Free Europe, 13 April 2009, [https://www.rferl.org/a/Moldovas\\_Revolution\\_Against\\_Authoritarianism/1607656.html](https://www.rferl.org/a/Moldovas_Revolution_Against_Authoritarianism/1607656.html). Last accessed 11 October 2018.

17 Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Moldova, May–June 2018, [http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/2018-7-16\\_moldova\\_poll\\_presentation.pdf](http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/2018-7-16_moldova_poll_presentation.pdf). Last accessed 11 October 2018.

communism that the party is still eager to demonstrate. In the greater scheme of things, the significance of the Soviet Union in Russia is diminishing for natural demographic reasons,<sup>18</sup> yet the paternalistic longing for a strong state might remain an important societal demand in the future. Thus far, popular imaginings of Soviet-like social order and the populist image of strong leadership are value orientations shared by the Putin majority. Likewise, multiple political forces, not only communists, will be ready to nurture these sentiments if they appear relevant in post-Putin Russia.

In this situation, Moldova serves as an example of how new Left forces can reinvent themselves after defeat and adapt to popular demands. Yet in the medium term, the post-Zyuganov communist party will compete with populist and nationalist forces. The experience of the CPU shows that unreformed communists would not be prepared to compete with these new players. In Russia, effective protest mobilization among young people by Alexei Navalny, as well as his agility in shifting from exclusive right-wing populist themes to inclusive left-wing populist topics (like resistance towards the pension reform) show that communists in Russia are far from monopolizing these issues. Apparently, in the open political competition they are even further from such a goal.

18 Levada Centre, 'Raspad SSSR: prichiny i nostalg'iya', 5 December 2016, <http://www.levada.ru/2016/12/05/raspad-sssr-prichiny-i-nostalgia/>. Last accessed 11 October 2018.