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Introduction

Almost four decades after the demise of the Soviet Union, a peculiar outlier exists within the Russian Federation. Within Putin's regime, arranged in the form of a party-based authoritarian system, not only does an official opposition party exist, but it is also the heir of the CPSU, operating under the name of Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF). Founded in 1993, the CPRF has been the main opposition party in Russia since its creation, boasting a loyal electoral base as well as a strong local network in the Russian territory. Using a wide range of secondary sources, this thesis aims at explaining how the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF) managed to survive in post-Soviet Russia by analyzing the strategies it employed to remain a relevant political force, and by tracing its trajectory from an anti-system opposition party to a managed opposition within the party-based authoritarian system consolidated by Vladimir Putin after his election as president of the Russian Federation in 2000. The study examines how the CPRF evolved from inheriting the institutions, cadres, and ideological legacies of the Soviet party-state into becoming Russia's principal "within-system" opposition. This transformation was shaped first by the ultra-presidentialist political system established during the Yeltsin years and later by the consolidation of a dominant-party regime under United Russia. The thesis will be organized as follows.

The first chapter establishes the Soviet foundations of this trajectory. It explores the Leninist theory of party and state, the expansion of the party apparatus and its control over appointment lists, and the long-term consequences of civil-war improvisation, NEP retrenchment, and Stalinist redefinitions of state power for the relationship between ideology, party, and governance. This chapter shows how a hierarchical party-state capable of directing society was constructed, and how democratic centralism and the 1921 ban on factions produced decades of enforced unity. The introduction of *glasnost* and *perestroika* reopened internal debate, allowing platforms (de facto factions) to form and advocate for change, ranging from liberal social democrats to restorationist Stalinists. This re-emergence of organized tendencies, combined with semi-competitive elections, seeded post-Soviet party formation by preserving organizational habits, networks, and expectations of centralized coordination even as the CPSU's monopoly crumbled.

The second chapter follows the late-Soviet and early post-Soviet political struggles through Boris Yeltsin's ascent, the emergence of a parliamentary opposition under *glasnost*, and the cascading effects of national and republican mobilization. Particular attention is given to the struggle between Yeltsin's reformers and communist loyalists—organized within the Communist Party of the RSFSR—over control of the Russian republic. After the USSR's collapse, communist organizations and movements continued to operate illegally, adopting different survival strategies often inspired by their original CPSU platforms. Once the ban on communist activities was lifted, most of these organizations merged into the newly created CPRF. Yet from its inception, this amalgamation of often mutually incompatible groups into a single entity constrained the party's ability to develop a distinct ideological identity. Unity was maintained primarily by a shared communist legacy rather than coherent or consistent ideological positions.

The third chapter explains how, even within an executive-dominated system, the CPRF rebuilt itself faster and more thoroughly than any of its rivals. Legal and organizational continuity through the former CPSU's primary party organizations allowed the party to develop a territorial network and disciplined recruitment. Programmatically, the CPRF adopted a dual strategy: an orthodox internal line for members alongside a broader nationalist-populist "public ideology," crystallized in the 1995 platform *Our Soviet Homeland*. The possession of a clearly defined and loyal electorate ensured the party's dominance in the 1995 parliamentary elections, while the defeat in the 1996 presidential race revealed the limits of relying on a core vote in a national contest where only one winner can emerge. This chapter also documents the faction's cohesion and discipline in the first Duma and highlights the unresolved ideological tensions within the party.

Lastly, the fourth chapter traces how the CPRF gradually evolved into an acceptance of parliamentary routine and committee work, supporting key budgets and appointments. This constructive stance by the leadership provoked dissatisfaction among party radicals, who pressed for the preservation of Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy, while the leadership pursued legislative pragmatism. The chapter then analyzes the 1998 financial crisis and the 1999–2000 electoral cycle, emphasizing the party's programmatic moderation and strategic compromises. The narrative then broadens to the Putin years, examining the logic of a dominant-party system that segments "systemic" from "non-systemic"

opposition, the CPRF's periodic confrontations with the regime (for instance, over pension reform and the 2020 constitutional vote), and the state's counter-measures—including restrictions on ballot access, pressure on office-holders, and negative media coverage.

Chapter 1: The unraveling of the Soviet System

Introduction

This first introductory chapter will serve the purpose of setting the stage for the future analysis of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation. In the first section I will briefly go through the functioning of the Soviet System, by giving an account of the contributions of its leaders from Lenin to Brezhnev, as well as providing an insight into the support the system enjoyed from its citizens. The second section will analyze Gorbachev's attempts at reforming the system, detailing its policies and explaining why they failed to produce the outcome desired by the General Secretary. Lastly, the last section will be devoted to the study of the internal struggles within the CPSU, focusing on the nature anti-reform opposition and, most importantly, to the reemergence of factionalism within the CPSU after almost 70 years of monolithic unity.

1.1 The Soviet System

1.1.1 Building socialism, from Lenin to Stalin

For over 70 years the communist party was the leading force in Soviet society. Not just in the political sense, but in a more deeply rooted way that isn't understood by the public when thinking about the Soviet Union. Most imagine the CPSU as nothing more than an 18th century absolutist monarch, manifesting itself as a group of people rather than a single individual. Yet the reality is very different. The party, either directly or via the state institutions, controlled and directed every aspect of soviet society, from job allocations to the goods available in stores. Houses, jobs and even consumer goods were not bought, but rather allotted by the state to the people. Science, art and literature were based on new Marxists axioms to adhere to its vision of society. Emblematic is the ideologization of soviet genetics, where Darwinism and other concepts were refuted, as they considered

incompatible with Marxist principles. This ideologization of genetics, called Lysenkoism after its ideator, was eventually abandoned by Khrushchev in 1952 but serves as a stark example of how deep the CPSU went to reshape society.¹ But why did Soviet communists act in such a way? While it is true that all regimes tend to create narratives and institutions that allow them to maintain power over society, very few had implemented a level of state presence comparable to what the CPSU did in the Soviet Union. And even those who did so, modeled their regimes after the USSR itself. The central role of the party in society, while undoubtedly serving the function of ensuring its monopoly on power, is the result of a specific interpretation of Marxist political theory. During the beginning of the 20th century Lenin was working to synthesize Marxist principles into a coherent theory that could guide communism in its revolutionary endeavor as well as in its road to build a true communist society. In doing so, Lenin theorized two aspects that would be at the center of Soviet governance for its entire life. Firstly, Lenin theorized a party composed of a small number of fervent class-conscious professional revolutionaries, a vanguard movement tasked with forcing the logic of history to launch the proletarian revolution. The Revolution, however, was a mean, not the end goal, so the party's role had to adapt, being then tasked with reshaping society to eradicate the manifestations of capitalism; private property, profit, the market, and thus create a true communist utopia. With its primacy entrenched in the firm rejection of liberal democracy, declared bourgeoisie, and the claim of being the sole true representative of workers' interests, the party claimed it was the only entity deserving to govern the state.² Thus, the second key aspect of Leninist theory is in the role of the state. In classical Marxist theory, the state is envisioned as a manifestation of the dominant group, in this case the bourgeoisie, and is its primary tool to enforce its dominant role. Lenin, therefore, theorized that the party must gain control of the state and use it to guard against the reappearance of the bourgeoisie and dismantle all the manifestation of capitalism: the market, money, private property etc. Once the party, through continuous political work, had instilled enough class consciousness in the workers, the state, Lenin theorized would lose its *raison d'être*, being a manifestation of

¹ McDaniel, C. N. (2004). The Human Cost of Ideology as Science. *Conservation Biology*, 18(4), 869–871. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3589158>.

² Daniels, R. V. (1953). The State and Revolution: A Case Study in the Genesis and Transformation of Communist Ideology. *The American Slavic and East European Review*, 12(1), 22–43. Pg. 36 <https://doi.org/10.2307/3004254>.

the economic relations of the individuals, and spontaneously wither away.³ This arrangement resulted in a tight hierarchy of roles. Marxist ideology and his interpretation of reality sitting at the top of the hierarchy. A step below stands the party which, applying Marxist doctrine, guides the masses through the necessary steps to reach communism. Lastly, lies the State, the material executor of the party's policies and its instrument to reshape society according to its vision. It is in this institutional arrangement that lies the core of Leninism and, contrary to popular belief, is in service to this ideology that the Soviet Union existed for the next 70 years, as it would prove many times.

The spontaneous events of the February revolution gave Lenin the opportunity to launch his own attempt in October 1917. After successfully sidelining or absorbing the other revolutionary movements by early 1919, the Bolsheviks set out to create the newborn revolutionary state. Industry was nationalized, money and private property abolished, goods and food were requisitioned in the countryside and redistributed according to need. To enact those policies, Lenin had to create the necessary institutions and so he embarked on the creation of revolutionary state. Firstly, he transformed the former tsarist council of ministries into the council of people commissars (Sovnarkom), appointing fellow party members as the head of the preexisting ministries and charging them with make them run at the revolution's benefit. In rapid succession, the Sovnarkom approved the creation of a series of state institution that would one day be at the center of the soviet system: the Cheka, the military police entrusted with fighting the enemies of the revolution, the Supreme council of national economy (VVSUNKh) tasked with the direction of the nationalized economy, and lastly the People Commissariat for Nationalities, tasked with promoting Leninist policies among the non-Russian ethnicities. As the revolution descended into civil war, a small subcommittee of the Sovnarkom founded, the Council of Labor and Defense (STO), entrusted with navigating the economic and political crisis Russia fell into.⁴

Yet the necessities of governing the Soviet State during the chaos of the civil war led to a rising importance of practical solutions over ideological theory. While the fight for survival of the revolutionary state cemented the party's role, it forced a different role of

³ Ivi. Pg 32

⁴ Huskey, E. (2016). Executive Power and Soviet Politics (1st ed.). Routledge. Pg. 9 <https://www.perlego.com/book/1568172>.

the state apparatus onto Lenin design. With the economy and industries completely nationalized, and with the logistic of coordinating the work of thousands of local party cells in the immense Russian territory, the state was forced develop accordingly. Thus, more committees, offices, ministries and organizations were created to meet those ever-growing responsibilities, leading to considerable growth of the party apparatus. But with the state envisioned as operating under the guide of the party, the latter had to renounce its enclosed revolutionary structure, now unsuitable for the task. Therefore, the party would open its ranks to those deemed worthy, be it by class or spirit, and begrudgingly co-opted those who possessed the necessary competences to run the state apparatus. This last category would be closely monitored by party members, who had the task of monitoring their work, educating them on Soviet ideology and learn from them how to perform those tasks. Thus, from the beginning, the party aimed at internalizing all knowledge from all the categories necessary to run society. From industrial managers, to administrators, scientists, all of them were slowly given their place within the apparatus and tied to the party. But the reason it did so, once again, wasn't necessarily for power's sake, but rather to carry out the goals Lenin traced for the party. If the party was to reshape society, it needed the competences to guide the state towards its goal, but more importantly it needed to have the monopoly on those competences. Until the party had the means to educate its members in those tasks it needed to resort to the preexisting ones.⁵

When the civil war reached its conclusion, Lenin and the rest of communist leadership had the time to evaluate what had been done in the four years after the October coup. Economically Lenin had to concede that the outright implementation of communism had only damaged the Russian economy. It is unclear whether the economic policies of the civil war, posthumously defined as war communism, were the result of ideological fervor or were born out of practical necessity. Nonetheless, Lenin opted for a "strategic retreat", allowing for the reintroduction of a market economy under the close watch of the state. This was done particularly to appease the huge numbers of farmers that were on the verge of revolt after the repeated confiscations of their harvests during the civil war. Moreover, the introduction of the NEP would have enormous consequences for the rest of Soviet

⁵ Rigby, T. H. (2019). *Communist Party Membership in the U.S.S.R.* ([edition unavailable]). Princeton University Press. Pg. 81 <https://www.perlego.com/book/921669>.

history, since the adoption of some degree of market mechanism resulted in the perpetual tug of war between the radicals and the moderate fringes of the communists, that would characterize soviet economic discussion until its very end. Furthermore, the end of the civil war brought discussion on the topic of state institutions and their respective competences which, until then, have been based on more necessity rather than proper legitimacy. Sovnarkom's legitimacy derived mostly from being Lenin's body of his own creation. The Constitution of 1918 gave the legislative and executive role to the Central Executive Committee of the All-Russian Congress of Soviets. To maintain primacy of Sovnarkom, Lenin had one of his allies appointed as the head of CEC, creating a compromise where Sovnarkom made policies and the CEC implemented them via his administrative network of soviets. With time, many of the high ranking Sovnarkom members such as Trotsky and Stalin, started to send delegates to Sovnarkom meetings and using the party's CC to appeal unwanted resolutions. This naturally shifted importance from the Government to the party and the process accelerated with the foundation of the Politburo and Orgburo within the CPSU's CC. These institutions, which were supported by an extensive apparatus of full party officials, had authority over all agencies of the Soviet state, making sure that central policies and directives were implemented. At first Lenin standing and political ability curbed this shift, under the belief that if the party fell into day-to-day governing its policymaking role would be hindered.⁶ Ultimately, with Lenin sidelined by its worsening health, the party progressively became a lighthouse among the unending administrative battles and chaos of various ministries, committees, subcommittees et, worsened by the lack of a clear institutional framework. Even more, the party's CC progressively tied the work of the state offices to its control, resorting to appointing its members rather than having them elected. Thus, when Lenin died in 1924, he did so fearful of the "bureaucratic deviation" that the party had taken, slowly growing to become entangled with every aspect of society. Lenin's rule, while short and tumultuous, undoubtedly traced the path that the Soviet nation would follow in his lifespan. He is responsible for establishing the ideological basis on the relations between party and state, as well as the former undisputed dominant role of society. Furthermore, he played a central role in determining the institutional

⁶ Huskey, E. (2016). Executive Power and Soviet Politics (1st ed.). Routledge. Pg. 13 <https://www.perlego.com/book/1568172>.

organization of the Soviet state, shaping it in the form of a federation, on the basis that class rather than ethnicity was the real discriminant between individuals, and creating the ministries and offices that would play a central role in the almost century long Soviet history. But most importantly, by altering his interpretations of the state's role from destroyer of oppressing institutions to society's director, he provided its successor with the opportunity to bring this concept to extreme consequences.⁷

With Lenin's passing, the party was left without leading figure therefore different officials within the party started their bid for power. Even more, Lenin early demise meant that the main ideologue of the revolution disappeared right as the soviet state was structuring itself, leaving the door open for a possible reinterpretation of Leninist doctrine. Competition among party figures, however, took place mostly in the form of political and administrative maneuvers within the apparatus, and ultimately saw Stalin emerge as the undisputed leader of the Soviet Union. Stalin's tenure was characterized by a reversal of key points of Leninist theory, to justify the entrenchment of structural trends that had been developing under Lenin. This, however, is not to say that Stalin wasn't a true believer of the socialist cause, as he himself would prove, but rather that practical and ideological aspects shaped and influenced each other respectively. This tendency is evident when considering Stalin's attitude towards the NEP, which he outright rejected, regardless of its beneficial effects on soviet economy, which had returned to prewar levels. As mentioned, was mostly beneficial for the huge peasants' masses that dominated the Russian countryside, allowing them to trade their grain surplus and consumer goods. This arrangement, however, resulted in socialism taking root in the cities, where industries and commodities were state led, and capitalism existing in the countryside, where farmers de facto controlled the land.⁸ Stalin simply could not accept this, as it was firmly convinced that if capitalism survived in the countryside it would eventually creep back, perfectly in line with Marxist-Leninist interpretation. Regardless of the respite it brought the population, NEP had to be stopped. Stalin challenged the supporters of NEP within the party, accusing them of wavering in their convictions and stating that if they truly believed in the merits of Socialism, then they had to move against capitalism in the

⁸ Kotkin (2018); Hoover Institution <https://www.hoover.org/research/why-does-joseph-stalin-matter>.

countryside.⁹ But alongside ideological reasoning stood practical necessities. Stalin simply could not settle for the slow development of industry under the NEP system. Over a decade past the revolution, it was clear the universal proletarian uprising that the Bolshevik had hoped had failed to materialize. The Soviet Union could not count on the help of more developed countries, nor the party could interface with more “aware” proletariats, as Lenin initially hoped. Thus, the CPSU became split among the Trotskyist internationalist, who sought to spread the revolution, and Stalin desire of protecting the acquired gains of the revolution, by entrenching in the URSS. Stalin’s idea prevailed, and immediate industrialization was needed to defend the Union, perceived as besieged by capitalist forces. NEP was abandoned, opening way to the collectivization of farms and central economic planning, with the introduction of the five years plans. Collectivization became a tool to forcibly export surplus grain in exchange for heavy machinery and precision tools necessary to industrialize the country. Implementing those plans required the party apparatus to grow exponentially, becoming entangled in every aspect of the state’s activity.¹⁰

By 1930 the party had gained total control over appointments for every state’s office, and regional and local party committees had shifted from political activity to ensuring compliance with central directives. This was necessary to ensure coordination and policy implementation among the hundreds of organizations tasked with directing the economy, the collectivization campaign over 120mln peasants and the mobilization of immense human capital to build the Soviet infrastructure. Instead of withering away, the state was actively growing, and Stalin was forced to ideologically address this issue, progressively redefining the role of the state during his rule. At the 16th party congress in 1930 he declared that the state needed to grow stronger to create the conditions for its withering. On the same line, at the 17th party congress in 1934 he stated that a stronger state was necessary to pursue a true classless society and for the moral education of the masses. When the 1936 constitution was introduced, declaring the ultimate elimination of all the exploiting classes, the ideological justification of a strong state apparatus became vigilance against the resurface of the enemies of the revolution. But it wasn’t until 1939 that Stalin would finally introduce its definitive interpretation of the state. The capitalist

⁹ Kotkin (2018) , Hoover Institution <https://www.hoover.org/research/why-does-joseph-stalin-matter>.

¹⁰ Ibidem.

encirclement made state retention necessary for the survival of socialism, and Stalin argued that even if communism was achieved, the state would persist as long as capitalist encirclement was still present. Only with a global proletarian revolution would the state finally wither.¹¹ Thus, under Stalin, the Marxist-Leninist interpretation of the state was completely overturned. The Marxist interpretation of the state as mere superstructure of existing economic relations was revisited, as the state became a prime mover of history, becoming the primary actor in shaping the economy and society. Likewise, Leninist interpretation of the state's post-revolutionary role as mere tool for the destruction of the previous regime was reverted, with the state now becoming the ultimate guardian of the revolution. This reversal of previous accepted ideology was attributed, as Stalin himself admitted, to the inability of the founding ideologues of socialism to consider the practical necessity of creating a socialist state. Furthermore, all attempts to reduce the scope of Stalin revision fell short, since the expansion of the party and state machinery were justified under the premise that the state was the manifestation of the dictatorship of the proletariat. Any attempt at stifling its growth would be depicted as weakening the worker's power.¹²

Complementary to the expansion of the state, was the growth of party's influence in its affairs. Before 1919 the party exercised control by placing its most prominent members at the head of important offices, and it wasn't until the 8th party congress that departments dealing with members census and cadre assignments were established. Other than the practical reasons listed in the section above, the party began controlling appointments rather than resorting to elections to ensure its vanguard role and maintain doctrinal homogeneity, as both would have been threatened otherwise. Further evidence of Lenin's unyielding devotion to ideological discipline was the banning of all internal factions in 1921.¹³ On the same logic, he stressed that if the party was to direct policy, it had the right to place entrusted individuals in important areas of the state. Thus, as the state's competences expanded so did the numbers of positions that were of interest for the party. So, from 1923, the Orgburo, the Secretariat and the Uchraspred began composing lists of

¹¹ Daniels, R. V. (1953). The State and Revolution: A Case Study in the Genesis and Transformation of Communist Ideology. *The American Slavic and East European Review*, 12(1), 22–43. Pg. 37-39 <https://doi.org/10.2307/3004254>.

¹² Ibidem

¹³ Rigby, T. H. (2019). Communist Party Membership in the U.S.S.R. ([edition unavailable]). Princeton University Press. Pg. 91 <https://www.perlego.com/book/921669>.

offices that required either direct appointment from the CPSU CC, list n°1, and those who required the CC's assent, list n°2. Eventually those lists would progressively expand in the following decades, encompassing position outside of state offices such as scientists, professors, journalists, enterprises managers and so on, with the party ultimately gaining total control over society. Once again Stalin developed Lenin legacy to its natural consequences. Having a seat in all major organization of the Central Committee, Stalin developed and used the party appointments to ensure career advancement for those loyal to him and generally to strengthen party control over the ever-growing state machinery.¹⁴ Thus at the end of his reign in 1953, the Soviet Union was shaped according to his vision. The Union was successfully industrialized; agriculture operated under the collective farms and the party exercised absolute control over the economy and society through the immense state apparatus. Furthermore, having emerged victorious from the Second World War, Stalin managed to break the capitalist encirclement by surrounding himself with other communist states. As such the Soviet Union emerged 40 years after the revolution both a superpower and a socialist state, with its claims to be a new model for growth, social justice, and workers' power apparently backed by its success.

1.1.2 From “Communism in 20 years” to the stagnation of Developed Socialism

Stalin's successor, Nikita Khrushchev, strived to move the system forward on the road to communism. While he himself had been a party member since the civil war, in which he fought as a red army soldier, the USSR had fundamentally changed in his four decades of existence. The Union had claimed its seat among the global powers, with a might army and its universally recognized sphere of influence, bolstering an extensive industrialized society. As such Soviet society was growing out of the siege mentality of protecting the revolution and was naturally beginning to desire the fruits of socialism. Having won the Great Patriotic War, the population hoped for the hardship of the previous era to be finally gone. Khrushchev's tenure as leader of the Union aligned with this new sentiment, aspiring to usher the Union into a new era, pledging to establish a communist society within his own lifetime. He pushed for advancement in science and technology, for a more

¹⁴Sandle, M. (2003). A Short History Of Soviet Socialism (1st ed.). Routledge. Chapter 4. <https://www.perlego.com/book/1613169>.

decentralized organization of the economy to overcome inefficiencies and, most importantly, to increase the living standards of soviet citizens, pushing for rapid urbanization and investing heavily in the production of consumer goods, accompanied by a resurface of amenities and social activities.¹⁵ Parallel to economic reforms, he denounced the excesses of his predecessor and rehabilitated many victims of the purges as well as the ethnic groups deported that Stalin had deported. Censorship was relaxed and cultural exchanges between blocks were fostered, leading to a cultural revival. Although the economy kept growing at an impressive rate, Khrushchev agricultural reforms failed to bring about the expected results. This, paired with some blunders in foreign policy, cooled the support of the party to his rule, which ultimately resulted in his sacking.¹⁶ Failures in domestic and foreign policy took place under Lenin or Stalin, yet the drastic departure from their ruling style proved to be Khrushchev's undoing. The use of terror under Lenin and Stalin were justified ideologically against enemies of the revolution and capitalist agents, in a condition of real, initially, and later perceived weakness of the Soviet Union. With the USSR dominant position worldwide, terror lacked its justification, and Khrushchev rejected it as legitimate state activity. This openness by the General Secretary, led apparatchiks and party members to grow bold and more proactive in showing their dissatisfaction or defending their interests.¹⁷ From that moment on the CPSU leadership had to consider the morale and the aspirations of their subordinates, thus being forced to take their interest into consideration if they wanted to hold onto their power. Thus, loyalty was ensured with privileges, offices and money rather than fear or racket.¹⁸

Khrushchev was ousted by a group of party members unsatisfied with his conduct and the leadership was assumed by the conspirators Brezhnev, Prodigoy and Kosygin, forming a *troika*. Brezhnev, very apt in the internal workings of the party, would go on to acquire ever-growing influence, effectively emerging as the leading figure of the Soviet Union until his death in '82. Once at the helm of the Union, Brezhnev had to solve an existential

¹⁵Sandle, M. (2003). A Short History Of Soviet Socialism (1st ed.). Routledge. Chapter 7.

<https://www.perlego.com/book/1613169>.

¹⁶Malia, M. (2008). Soviet Tragedy. ([edition unavailable]). Free Press. Pg 350.

<https://www.perlego.com/book/779753>.

¹⁷ Ivi. Pg. 354.

¹⁸ Bunce, V. (1983). The Political Economy of the Brezhnev Era: The Rise and Fall of Corporatism. British Journal of Political Science, 13(2), 129–158. Pg 137. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/193947>.

problem for Soviet Socialism, and the answer he formulated would ultimately send ripples down in history, all the way to 1991. The CPSU naturally wanted to maintain its role as a vanguard party, keeping its monopoly on power and its tight control over the economy and society. This, however, could not be achieved by reverting to Stalinist methods, as Soviet society was too far into destalinization to accept that. Yet the reforms started by Khrushchev could not be continued, as the party feared for their implication. Their fears would be proven correct in the events of the Prague Spring, in 1968.¹⁹ On the other hand, Khrushchev policies made Soviet citizens grow accustomed to the new small freedoms and higher standards of living. Additionally, the new generations who were now coming of age had not experienced the hardships of the revolution nor the Second World War. Those who could not enjoy the new influx of consumer goods, heard the speeches and the propaganda reels, and believed the promises of Marxist-Leninism to be finally coming true. Brezhnev now had to find a solution that satisfied both the party and their calls for stability, control and centralization and the grown expectations of the population, who wanted more opportunities, growth and prosperity. The solution was to restructure the entire system to maintain this balance, and have the state assume the role of ultimate arbiter of diverging interests between the various interest groups in Soviet society, ultimately devising a corporatist system whose currency was consensus.²⁰

Brezhnev struck a series of arrangements with key actors within the Soviet hierarchy and its representatives within the Warsaw pact. Central to the corporatist project was his alliance with industrial managers and regional party officials, since these groups played a pivotal role in the daily functioning of the Soviet planned economy. For their continued loyalty and compliance with directives from the center, the regime offered a degree of autonomy and protection. If production quotas were met and political order was maintained, they would be left to their own devices. Economic planners, accordingly, made sure to avoid much variance between five-year plans, giving managers and officials the time and the predictability they needed to fulfill their responsibilities within the rigid framework of central planning. Bureaucrats and lower-level party members, the core of the Soviet system, were similarly co-opted with the promise of job security and a varying

¹⁹ Malia, M. (2008). *Soviet Tragedy*. ([edition unavailable]). Free Press. Pg 350. <https://www.perlego.com/book/779753>.

²⁰ Bunce, V. (1983). The Political Economy of the Brezhnev Era: The Rise and Fall of Corporatism. *British Journal of Political Science*, 13(2), 129–158. Pg. 131. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/193947>.

degree of privileges, such as summer residences or the ability to buy luxury items from the west. In a political system where significant upward mobility was limited and politically dependent, such concessions served as the perfect incentives to cultivate loyalty. For the general population, the deal was structured differently but operated on the same principle of mutual benefit. The Soviet people were offered a sense of stability, access to consumer goods, though often limited, combined with low-cost housing, guaranteed employment, free education and healthcare, creating a baseline of material comfort. Additionally limited upward mobility was allowed, though exclusively via party membership or higher education. The corporatist arrangement was extended to the relations between the USSR and the Warsaw Pact members: material and financial support was offered in exchange for political loyalty and economic cooperation. Leaders of these regions received subsidies, investment, and other forms of support if they maintained political alignment with Moscow and ensured the continued shipment of goods back to the Soviet mainland.²¹

In many ways, the system created by Brezhnev proved to be remarkably effective, at least in the short to medium term. It provided stability, forestalled open rebellion, and preserved the regime's legitimacy. Yet, this all came at very grave cost. By prioritizing stability over performance, the regime created a bureaucratic culture more concerned with preserving status quo than reacting to emerging challenges, a system in which loyalty was rewarded more than performance, and where short-term equilibrium was prioritized over long-term vitality. Thus, Brezhnev ensured that the Soviet Union could endure but not adapt. Starting from the 70s onward, economic inefficiency and stagnation slowly crept in. Managers and regional officials lacked incentive to innovate or maximize productivity, careful not to exceed quotas as they feared that their production target would be increased in the next five-year plan. Additionally, surplus goods were often stashed away to either cover for low future production or sold to the black market. Over time, this reduced the dynamism of the Soviet economy, as performance gave way to box-checking. Managers became focused on navigating bureaucratic expectations rather than enhancing efficiency.

²¹ Sandle, M. (2003). *A Short History Of Soviet Socialism* (1st ed.). Routledge. Chapter 8.
<https://www.perlego.com/book/1613169>.

The corporatist deals also made the planned economy even more rigid. Long-term economic plans, reformed to offer a high degree of predictability, became obstacles to adaptability. Since plans became policy instruments to distribute resources among the various interest groups, they were negotiated with powerful industrial and bureaucratic actors and therefore altering them meant challenging entrenched interests. This in turn led to a significant misallocation of resources, since the regime had to appease managers regardless of their performance, foregoing economic rationality in distributing investment and material inputs. Underperforming enterprises or strategically important regions received disproportionate support to maintain the appearance of cohesion and success. This not only diverted scarce resources from more productive uses but also further entrenched inefficiency by shielding failing sectors from market or managerial discipline. Moreover, since ensuring maximum workers' employment was another key strategy to generate consensus, enterprises were pressured to use labor extensively rather than intensively, further undermining efficiency and preventing innovation in the organization of labor. Thus, economic policy became inflexible, unable to respond to ever-changing technology, consumer demand, or global market conditions. These rigidities, compounded with the growing complexity of the Soviet economy and society, made the implementation of meaningful reforms politically costly and logistically complex.²² Even more, because the system depended on the loyalty of entrenched elites, it became nearly impossible to reform without destabilizing the very foundations of the regime. Any move toward greater efficiency or accountability threatened the interests of those who were prospering in the status quo. Thus, the Soviet Union under Brezhnev lost not only its economic momentum but also its institutional flexibility, rendering it increasingly brittle in the face of mounting internal and external pressures. This in turn resulted in a considerable increase in corruption and nepotism. With minimal accountability and minimal likelihood of dismissal, bureaucrats felt secure enough to focus on personal and institutional survival rather than effective governance. Eventually this climate of administrative stagnation sheltered incompetence and rewarded compliance contributing to a pervasive culture of mediocrity.²³

²² Bunce, V. (1983). The Political Economy of the Brezhnev Era: The Rise and Fall of Corporatism. *British Journal of Political Science*, 13(2), 129–158. Pg 157. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/193947>.

²³ Sandle, M. (2003). *A Short History Of Soviet Socialism* (1st ed.). Routledge. Chapter 8. <https://www.perlego.com/book/1613169>.

The Soviet citizens, eventually, started to grow disillusioned with the party and the system. Individuals learned that effort beyond the minimum was rarely rewarded, while challenging inefficiencies could be professionally dangerous. Thus, apathy became a defining feature of the era, as a rational response to a system in which initiative had no real payoff. This sad reality shown in a soviet saying of the period “we pretend to work as long as they pretend to pay us”. The regime’s ability to suppress dissent was not matched by a capacity to inspire belief in the system’s future, for the party could not promise anything but continuous present. The stark contradiction between the party’s own narrative, still tied to old stale Leninist discourses of class struggle, and the privileges of the nomenklatura became evident. This was further exacerbated by the aging leadership, often remaining in office until death. Awareness of Western standards of living, often through goods bought in the ever-growing black market, combined with limited political participation and stifled upward mobility, fostered a latent legitimacy crisis. Though no one dared to challenge the system directly, those feelings lingered between the surface of apparent complacency, waiting to be channeled by the right individuals. As had always been the case in the Soviet Union, change and novelty could only originate from the top. Thus, when Brezhnev and his old subject passed in the early 80s, a younger generation, educated under the Khrushchev’s thaw rose through the ranks and the direction of Soviet governance would change drastically.²⁴

1.1.3 Public support for the CPSU

Throughout the existence of the Soviet Union, the regime enjoyed fluctuating yet overall consistent public support, ensured by a sophisticated combination of propaganda, social policies, ideological indoctrination, and repression. During the initial years of Soviet history, public support varied considerably and followed the cleavage of the former tsarist society. Most of the former aristocracy and educated intelligentsia were naturally resentful towards the Bolsheviks and their obedience was ensured under the threat of capital punishment. Conversely, a good portion of the workers and peasants supported the revolution and its promise of land concessions and worker’s freedom. Following the

²⁴ Sandle, M. (2003). A Short History Of Soviet Socialism (1st ed.). Routledge. Chapter 8.
<https://www.perlego.com/book/1613169>.

Russian Civil War and establishment of the USSR, the populace demonstrated broad support toward Soviet institutions, viewing the regime as legitimate and crucial for societal stability, protection from external threats, and improvement in living standards. The introduction of the NEP led to a rapid increase in agricultural output, the return of, albeit simple, consumer goods as well as some degree of cultural revival within the cities. However, the late 1920s and early 1930s saw declining support, coupled with diminishing hopes among those anticipating a return to pre-revolutionary norms. The introduction of collectivization in the countryside almost always took place in a violent manner, and the inefficiencies of collectivized agriculture led to food shortages all over the Union, while the abandonment of NEP in favor of a planned economy resulted in a lack of amenities and consumer goods.

This declining trend of public support, however, was reverted by the mid-1930s, which at this point is characterized by increased public loyalty toward Stalin's regime. This period of enhanced support peaked dramatically during World War II and its immediate aftermath, where widespread patriotism intersected effectively with regime allegiance. Historical accounts, such as the Harvard Project interviewing Soviet emigrants, revealed that about a third of respondents had previously supported the Soviet regime during their residence there. Official Soviet propaganda played an essential role in constructing optimistic portrayals of socialist life, even amid severe hardships, and incredible resources were poured into agit-prop activities.²⁵ Propaganda depicted product shortages, forced collectivization, and political persecutions as temporary challenges imposed upon the Soviet Union by hostile capitalist agents, seeking to destabilize the revolution. Despite the lack of rigorous quantitative data from the period, personal diaries and eyewitness testimonies suggest widespread acceptance of this narrative, particularly among the youth, who embraced the promises of increased social mobility, job security, and improving living standards, as the Soviet Union was gradually transforming from a rural society into a developed urban and industrialized society. State-sponsored hero worship further solidified public enthusiasm. Figures who represented the advancement of Soviet society such as pilots, explorers, miners, and exemplary factory workers became national celebrities, receiving extensive media coverage and government commendation. Against

²⁵ Shiraev, E., Loparo, K., Carroll, E. (2008). *The Soviet Union*. Palgrave Macmillan. Chapter 3 <https://www.perlego.com/book/3498791>.

this backdrop of technological and social advancement, public acceptance of harsh political repression grew. Many Soviet citizens internalized official propaganda portraying victims as saboteurs or traitors, thus legitimizing arrests, executions, and deportations. Notable is the cultural example of Pavlik Morozov, a literary character depicted denouncing his father for anti-state activities, perfectly representing the party's attempt at reshaping society by, in this case, reverting traditional family values.²⁶

Moreover, loyalty toward the regime and party was ensured by its total monopoly on skills, access to education and social mobility. In this sense, support for the Soviet system flourished among diverse groups who relied on the party for their station and increase in living standards, notably among party members, scientists, mid-level bureaucrats, teachers, and substantial segments of the working class. These groups became ardent supporters, forming a robust social-psychological foundation underpinning the socialist regime. It is important to note that, contrary to some beliefs, millions genuinely endorsed socialist values without coercion, exhibiting enthusiasm and sincere belief in the party's vision. Mass mobilization campaigns effectively recruited hundreds of thousands of volunteers for major infrastructure projects, illustrating that material incentives and genuine patriotic commitment coexisted in motivating participants.²⁷ Moreover, the propaganda machines worked nonstop at every level, organizing cultural events such as public festivals and rallies. Government-sponsored celebrations created an emotionally charged atmosphere that unified people around shared national and ideological narratives. Popular Soviet songs praising Stalin, the Communist Party, and the achievements of the USSR became everyday expressions of support, enjoyed both officially and informally.²⁸ World War II further strengthened public perceptions of the Soviet system as powerful, fair, and victorious. The regime successfully intertwined patriotic fervor with ideological loyalty, exemplified by soldiers' rallying cries of "For the Motherland, for Stalin!" The war catalyzed a surge in Russian nationalism, which Stalin strategically leveraged to deepen allegiance to his personality cult, portrayed as the savior of the Soviet Union and the Revolution.

²⁶ Shiraev, E., Loparo, K., Carroll, E. (2008). *The Soviet Union*. Palgrave Macmillan. Pg. 117
<https://www.perlego.com/book/3498791>.

²⁷ *Ibidem*.

²⁸ *Ivi*. Pg. 135.

However, Khrushchev's subsequent anti-Stalin campaign significantly affected public perception, fostering cautious optimism and slowly extending the support of the regime to those groups that had previously suffered under Stalin, by reintegrating purged minorities and progressively shutting down the gulag system. Khrushchev's policies, emphasizing improved living conditions, increased openness, and peaceful coexistence with capitalist nations, contributed to heightened public expectations and overall regime support in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Moreover, the emphasis that Khrushchev put on technological advancement and on the achievement of scientific milestones ahead of the capitalist competition, an example of which is the USSR undeniable triumph during the space race, helped cement the idea that the Union was on pace to reach the communist utopia. The ideology of Marxist Leninism, integrated and practiced virtually anywhere in Soviet Society, was seen as the prime mover for modernization and the main reason for the improvement of the quality of life.²⁹ As such, legitimacy was becoming increasingly tied with progress, and as long as the expectations of a better tomorrow were reasonably justified, the party's centrality and its ideological interpretation of the world were wholeheartedly supported by the population.³⁰

Under Brezhnev, Andropov, and Chernenko, despite tightened censorship and limited access to Western information, public acceptance persisted, albeit more passively. During this era, formal support was widespread, though accompanied by increasing cynicism and political apathy. Although official socialist values, collectivism, altruism, egalitarianism, continued to dominate educational and media discourse, genuine enthusiasm waned noticeably from the 1970s onward. Apathy characterized significant segments of Soviet society, particularly after Stalin's death. Many citizens deliberately avoided political discussions, driven by fear, caution, or genuine disinterest. This apolitical stance became increasingly acceptable during the post-Stalin period, as the regime prioritized formal loyalty over active ideological engagement. Opposition and open defiance were notably rare, predominantly individual, and seldom escalated into collective action. Acts of dissent typically involved personal letters, diaries, or private conversations rather than public protest, largely due to fear and effective repression by the state security

²⁹ Brzezinski, Z. (1961). The Nature of the Soviet System. *Slavic Review*, 20(3), 351–368. Pg. 360
<https://doi.org/10.2307/3000499>.

³⁰ Ibidem.

apparatus.³¹Notably, to further prove how deep the party's ideological agitation had penetrated in the collective psyche, even critics within the Soviet Union maintained certain socialist principles, such as belief in public ownership of heavy industries and universal social welfare systems. Surveys of emigrants in the 1980s revealed that despite their opposition to the regime, most still endorsed fundamentally socialist ideals, underscoring how deeply the party's ideology had been internalized. On this note, Soviet perceptions of foreign policy largely mirrored official propaganda. The populace widely supported Soviet stances on international conflicts, such as the Spanish Civil War, Korean War, and Vietnam War, viewing these as legitimate struggles against imperialist aggression. Public opinion similarly favored the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia and the 1979 invasion of Afghanistan, reflecting widespread belief in the regime's narrative of defensive actions.³²

Overall, the Soviet Union's success in securing public support throughout its history was achieved through a complex interplay of propaganda, ideological education, and repression, combined with genuine belief, patriotism, and pragmatic acceptance by its citizens. The party's vanguard role meant that any meaningful improvement of social or private life happened within the party's logic and, most importantly, by its actions. Furthermore, their total monopoly on competencies meant that all those figures who run the state machinery and its development, such as managers, engineers, scientists and so on underwent ideological indoctrination at the hand of the party and, most importantly, could exercise their professions only under the party's approval. This ensured not only the total support of the most useful social groups but also prevented those intellectually versed groups to develop meaningful alternative to the party's rule. Moreover, the efforts from Khrushchev onward, to expand amenities, consumer goods as well as a deep network of social security meant that the population could always expect a reasonable quality of life, ensuring the loyalty of those who lacked ideological fervor but fostering complacency.

³¹ Shiraev, E., Loparo, K., Carroll, E. (2008). *The Soviet Union*. Palgrave Macmillan. Pg. 127
<https://www.perlego.com/book/3498791>.

³² Ivi. Pg. 121.

1.2 Gorbachev's attempts at reforming the Soviet System

1.2.1 Andropov, Chernenko and Gorbachev

After Brezhnev passed away in 1982, he was succeeded almost seamlessly by Yuri Andropov, director of KGB from 1967 to 1982. Andropov was the first secretary of the CPSU to have such a background and there is no doubt that his previous post gave him a unique insight into the socioeconomical state of the Union. He, therefore, conceived a series of reform policies to kickstart soviet growth once again, addressing what he believed to be the main causes of stagnation. Firstly, he addressed workers' discipline, introducing harsher punishment for absenteeism, a significant plague, and low-quality production. Secondly, he launched a campaign against alcoholism, which had become a serious social issue in Soviet society, and against corruption. Lastly, he attempted a timid economic restructuring, reducing government control over a limited selection of enterprises and allowing managers to retain a larger share of the profits and use them as they saw fit to expand production. This latter policy yielded some results, as industrial output marginally increased, and more capital was directed toward technological investments. Andropov did not see the need to restructure the Soviet system in his entirety but rather sought to increase the efficiency of the existing command economy. Sadly, as he was already at an advanced age when selected as General Secretary, his reform was cut short by his death only 2 years after his nomination.³³ His successor, Konstantin Chernenko, lacked the reformist aspiration of his predecessor. He was a product of the Brezhnev school of thought, valuing stability and discipline above all other matters. Chernenko, however, was already terminally ill before assuming office and his precarious health deteriorated during his tenure, forcing him to spend most of his time in power away from political decision making. One after the other all gerontocrats that had ruled uncontested for the two previous decades passed, leaving room for novelty and dynamism, and thus Mikhail Gorbachev, already groomed for the role by Andropov, was elected as secretary of the CPSU, kickstarting a chain of events that would result in the

³³ Sandle, M. (2003). *A Short History Of Soviet Socialism* (1st ed.). Routledge. Chapter 7-8. <https://www.perlego.com/book/1613169>.

collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the socialist experiment in Russia after 70 years.³⁴

Before we delve into the reforms brought forward by Gorbachev, it's important to first clarify something important about the Soviet Union that often gets overlooked. Even though the USSR was experiencing socioeconomic stagnation, the system itself was indeed solid. The general apathy of the Soviet civilians, in addition to what previously mentioned, was the natural consequences of a society that was directed and shepherded, both at the macroscopic and microscopic level, by the state, and therefore the party, towards progress, rather than naturally evolving towards it. It is hard to really grasp how deeply rooted the party was in society. All positions of importance, from the most insignificant to the highest, were held either by a party member, or with the assent of the party. To some extent one could even say that, ultimately, the party was the real true citizen of the Soviet Union, its rights firmly recognized in articles 6 and 56 of the '77 Constitution. All the above, coupled with the tight control the state had on the circulation of ideas, people and progress, makes it hard to believe in a scenario where unrest from below could prevent the USSR from reaching the 21st century. Authoritarian regimes can survive through crisis and hardships as long as they maintain their monopoly on power and violence. The party, when Gorbachev entered office, had both.³⁵ This is not to say dissatisfaction and dreams of a different nation weren't being discussed in the living rooms of intelligentsia or in the stairwells of the Brezhnevkas among trusted people. In their minds however, most of them still designed change within the socialist structure. Ultimately, it would be the state's intervention to make those feelings emerge, as we will see, with lethal consequences for the system itself. Gorbachev was part of a younger generation of Soviet leadership; he joined Komsomol in '46 and the party rank and file in the early 50s. He defined himself as a child of the XX congress. It's of extreme importance to underline what was the political atmosphere in his formative years as a party man. Khrushchev's Thaw and Destalinization were introducing new alternatives for the socialist model, and the Khrushchev's promise that the Union will reach a communist society in 20 years surely resounded in the most fervent. After rising through the party

³⁴Malia, M. (2008). *Soviet Tragedy* ([edition unavailable]). Free Press. Pg. 407-408.
<https://www.perlego.com/book/779753>.

³⁵Brown, A. (2023). Mikhail Gorbachev and the Politics of Perestroika. *Russian History*, 49(2-4), 123-145. Pg 124. <https://doi.org/10.30965/18763316-12340044>.

ranks, he was groomed by Andropov as his most probable successor. It is disputed whether Gorbachev's reforms were the product of a well-defined scheme or whether he acted more reactively, though Gorbachev never intended for his reforms, no matter how radical, to dismantle the socialist system, nor to end the party's role as the leader of society but rather strengthen it.

1.2.2 Reforming the System

The first step in the reform program was the launch of the *Uskorenie* (acceleration) campaign, an attempt to jumpstart new growth in the economy, under the assumption that social progress was dependent on economic reforms. To some degree, this was a reprise of the campaign already sponsored by Andropov. He himself used the terminology at the onset of his rule and was then reused by Gorbachev "in waiting" during 1984, and later in '85, during his speech at the Central Committee plenum. The *Uskorenie* campaign would attempt to stimulate growth through technological innovations and higher capital investments in industry. Simultaneously Gorbachev tried to appeal to the workers and party men, resorting often to moral exhortation and grandiose speeches, in a manner similar to early communist mobilization campaigns. After two years, the sought acceleration ultimately failed to materialize. Once again, the attempted reform relied on top-down management and the mechanism of the command economy. In addition, the Soviet tendency to stimulate increments in productivity by simply increasing the amount of input, in this instance capital assigned to the enterprise, was reaching diminishing returns. The lack of structural reforms to accompany the *Uskorenie* initiative considerably limited its ability to generate change. It started to become apparent that the Stalinist economic model had reached its maximum potential. Moreover, the appeals of the General Secretary mostly fell on deaf ears.³⁶

Gorbachev therefore came to two crucial realizations: firstly, economic reforms could not happen in the absence of parallel social reforms, and secondly, that Soviet citizens needed to become active participants in the reform process to make it appealing to them. This last insight persuaded Gorbachev to launch the second phase of his program in late '86: *Glasnost*, meaning openness. The monopoly of the state on information was slowly lifted,

³⁶ Malia, M. (2008). *Soviet Tragedy* ([edition unavailable]). Free Press. Pg. 412.
<https://www.perlego.com/book/779753>.

and citizens were now allowed, and even encouraged, to participate in the political debate and to point out the deficiencies of the system. In Gorbachev's vision, this radical change would inject new vigor into both society and the party itself.³⁷ The former would gain some agency in shaping policies while the latter would have his performance questioned, thus gaining accountability. Even more, this move was a calculated strike aimed at those in the apparat and bureaucracy who had resisted all previous attempts in reform. They would therefore be pressured from the top by Gorbachev and his allies, as well as the bottom, by the Soviet citizens.³⁸ Corruption ended being openly denounced, and inefficiencies, social issues and moral decay were openly discussed in state's media and in hundreds of newly founded magazines and journals. Nationalistic sentiment and cries for pluralism dangerously started to reemerge in the Baltic states and in the satellites of the Warsaw pact. Soon Glasnost gained momentum of its own, leading to the discovery of the crimes of the Soviet past and its victims: the purges and the show trials of the Stalin era, the gulag network in Siberia, even old Bolshevik thinkers such as Bukharin were being reconsidered. After 70 years of secrecy there was plenty to be reconsidered and judged. Even more, the CPSU legitimacy was slowly being eroded by the reforms themselves. As mentioned previously, the party was fused with the state, thus criticism of either the system or the state meant necessarily criticizing the party as well. It would now be impossible to revert to the previous status quo, and Gorbachev knew it well. The stir caused by Glasnost could only be justified if it was followed by a serious attempt to change the system, otherwise it would have just been instability for the sake of it. Even more, not showing a true attempt at deeper reform after such popular participation would alienate citizens even more, with possibly even a worst outcome than the one we know of. Therefore, the next stage of Gorbachev's policies aimed exactly at the restructuring of the socialist model, it was Perestroika. Choosing the term restructuring rather than reform was a conscious choice by Gorbachev. In this manner he sought to reassure the growing opposition within the party and to somewhat limit the expectations of the reformers, implying that the core tenets of the Soviet state would not be changed.

³⁷ Battle, J. M. (1988). *Uskorenie, Glasnost' and Perestroika: The Pattern of Reform under Gorbachev*. *Soviet Studies*, 40(3), 367–384. Pg 370. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/151659>.

³⁸ Ivi. Pg. 369.

In the economic sphere, Perestroika aimed at drastically reducing the state's ministries control over the economy and introducing some degree of market mechanisms. With the introduction of the Law on State Enterprise in 1987, enterprises could now decide with greater autonomy their production levels, determining output based on demand from other consumers and enterprises, as well as their investments.³⁹ Furthermore, enterprises were now responsible for financing their own economic activity. A mandatory quota of production was still destined for the state, but its amount was reduced. Prices were allowed to fluctuate, within certain limits, to approximately reflect offer and demand, and enterprises were encouraged to produce according to those informations. Even more enterprises that met the production quotas could sell any eventual surplus. This wasn't the only inspiration from the Lenin days, as the promulgation of the Law of Cooperatives took place the following year. For the first time since the NEP, small private enterprises were legalized, allowing citizens to form cooperatives in areas such as retail, services, and manufacturing, traditionally dominated by the state. Generally, all activities that were not explicitly prohibited could be initiated by cooperatives. These cooperatives operated outside of central planning. They could set their own prices and were exclusively profit based, becoming often more efficient and dynamic than traditional state enterprises.⁴⁰ They could adapt more quickly to demand and fill the gaps in services left by the state planning. Worth mentioning is that a considerable number of those cooperatives were already operating in the second economy, the black market, before their activity was liberalized. Those reforms, however, failed to yield the expected results, due to many different reasons: Firstly, the continued existence of Gosplan and other ministries made it so that managers and economic planners authority overlapped, with disruptive results. Even more the existence of two markets made them in competition with one another. A curious example is the chronic shortage of sugar sweets in state shops, due to private alcohol producers having to resort to sugar in the candy for their brewing process, since normal sugar wasn't readily available. Many enterprises also lacked the dynamism necessary to navigate this new mixed economy, and often simply reduced production to

³⁹ Cook, L. J. (1992). Brezhnev's "Social Contract" and Gorbachev's Reforms. *Soviet Studies*, 44(1), 37–56. Pg 49. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/152246>.

⁴⁰ Goldman, M. I. (1990). The Soviet Economy and the Need for Reform. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 507, 26–34. Pg. 31-32. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1047522>.

meet the lowered state quotas. Other firms instead decided to diversify production to generate surplus, however they often specialized in high paying consumer goods that had limited market. Those imbalances led to disruption in the supply of intermediate goods, worsening the hoarding of materials, making the already low production of consumer goods plummet.⁴¹ Secondly apparatchik against market reforms, either for ideological reasons or for fear of losing their influence, sabotaged or ignored directives from the leadership, with ministries often demanding higher quotas than what had been established.⁴² Thus, Perestroika was characterized by a chronic shortage in consumer goods that, paired with the parallel political reforms, fostered dissatisfaction among the general population that further alienated the CPSU from the people.

Parallel to economic reforms, Perestroika brought forward radical changes in Soviet politics. As mentioned previously, at the core of Gorbachev's political vision rested the moral and institutional renewal of the party, believing it should return to its role as the moral and political vanguard of socialism. The CPSU was imagined as a reformed and purified political institution, stripped of its bureaucratic deviation but retaining its central role in governance and ideology. The first step of this renewal took place at the January 1987 Central Committee plenum, where Gorbachev called for intra-party democracy, open debate, and multi-candidate elections within the CPSU as well as pursuing the idea of secret ballots for electing regional and national leaders. Since Lenin's ban on factions in 1921, unity and adherence to party directive have been one of the core tenets of socialism. Even when, privately, there were disagreements on policies, party members were expected to show single minded unity in all declarations and public appearances. By removing this principle, party members started to aggregate themselves in factions with similar views. Thus, the party started to experience centrifugal forces from the reformers on one side and the conservatives on the other. The same thing took place in the communist parties of the federated republics and the satellite republics, only with the reformers pushing for increased autonomy and even independence, with dangerous implications.

⁴¹ Dunlop, J. B., & Rowen, H. S. (1988). Gorbachev versus Ligachev: The Kremlin Divided. *The National Interest*, 11, 18–29. Pg 21. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42896770>.

⁴² Malia, M. (2008). *Soviet Tragedy* ([edition unavailable]). Free Press. Pg. 477-478. <https://www.perlego.com/book/779753>.

The second radical step was the introduction of limited elections and the introduction of new institutions to accommodate them. The first test for this new concept was the 19th party conference scheduled for June 1988, where for the first time intra-party democracy would be tested with the announcement of multicandidate election for the deputies of the conference. Due to mounting pressure, however Gorbachev did not provide a specific blueprint on how to conduct elections for the representatives. This, coupled with rising opposition from the party's conservative meant that, for the most part, the electoral process was plagued by sabotages from the conservatives, with candidates being chosen by the party structure, with the party ultimately winning around 87 percent of the seats. Yet there were instances of electors managing to strong-arm local apparatchiks in to accepting their candidates, for example in the Yaz factory in Tolyatgrad. Therefore, even though this attempt was mostly unsuccessful, limited breakthroughs in some regions coupled with Gorbachev loud calls for democratization left room for optimism. After all the rank-and-file had shown initiative in participating enthusiastically at the idea of intra-party elections.⁴³ In his second attempt Gorbachev decided to forego the moral exhortation and progressive speeches in favor of something more effective, opting to entrench Perestroika into law, by amending the Brezhnev constitution of '77. The amendments resulted in the establishment of a new plenary body, the Congress of People's Deputies (CPD) and a restructured Supreme Soviet, which would act as the primary legislative bodies of the USSR.⁴⁴ The rationale of such a maneuver was to create new institutions to separate the CPSU from state power. In this new arrangement, the CPSU would be slowly reduced to a think tank for general policy and ideology.⁴⁵ The Congress was envisioned as a quasi-parliamentary assembly composed of: deputies directly elected by the people; deputies chosen by public organizations (such as the CPSU, Komsomol etc.); a quota system guaranteed the party and its satellite institutions several seats. Although the party's dominance was ensured by the electoral results, the Congress would prove to be a source of instability. As the entire Union watched the first sessions of the

⁴³ Unger, A. L. (1991). The Travails of Intra-Party Democracy in the Soviet Union: The Elections to the 19th Conference of the CPSU. *Soviet Studies*, 43(2), 329–354. Pg. 349. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/152112>.

⁴⁴ Cappelli, O., di Leo, R., White, S., Cappelli, O., di Leo, R., White, S. (2014). *The Soviet Transition* (1st ed.). Routledge. Pg. 94-96. <https://www.perlego.com/book/1579294>.

⁴⁵ Hahn, G. M. (1997). The First Reorganisation of the CPSU Central Committee Apparatus under Perestroika. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 49(2), 281–302. Pg 298. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/153988>.

Congress, the non CPSU representatives harshly criticized the party's conduct and its monopoly over political power. ⁴⁶Naturally, this was an opportunity for political figures to publicize themselves, and the Congress would cement, among many, an ascending Boris Yeltsin as a leading figure of the reformist sphere. Addressing the congress, he launched a harsh critique of Gorbachev's lack of deep radical reforms and called for a rapid and definitive transition to democracy. The conservatives were of no exception, attacking both the secretary and the reformers apparent betrayal of the socialist cause. The effect of seeing this discussion unravel on the national media cannot be appreciated fully, not by people who did not experience the realities of the Soviet System. Witnessing these passionate speeches, those radical and deep critiques of the system, where once there was only monolithic unity must have felt entirely alien. The reformers appeals did not fall on deaf ears, and all over the Soviet Union public unrest started to emerge, echoing the demands of the reformist. Soon after, article six of the constitution, the article entrenching CPSU' leading role in society, came under fire, as both the reformers, now organized in the Democratic Platform, and protesting citizens called for the abrogation of the article and its provision. Gorbachev once again responded with half measures. In 1990 he responded by amending only parts of the article, a solution that left both the conservatives and the reformers unsatisfied. The role of the party was still recognized by the Constitution; however, the new text allowed for the existence of other parties. Parallel to the constitutional amendment, Gorbachev created the office of the President of the USSR, accompanied by a newly created President's Council, whose members were appointed directly by the President. With the creation of this new office, Gorbachev aimed at replacing the CPSU as the source of its power, by creating a new executive position independent of the party. Furthermore, the President Council was created with the goal of substituting the organs of the Politburo and the Secretariat.⁴⁷ The President would be elected by the Congress of People's Deputies and would wield considerable executive power. The move, however, rather than strengthen Gorbachev's legitimacy would only undermine it further. Firstly, he rejected the proposal to have the presidency be elected by universal suffrage, missing a critical chance to increase his political power by deriving its

⁴⁶ Cappelli, O., di Leo, R., White, S., Cappelli, O., di Leo, R., White, S. (2014). *The Soviet Transition* (1st ed.). Routledge. Pg. 94-96. <https://www.perlego.com/book/1579294>.

⁴⁷Huber, R., Kelley, L. (2016). *Perestroika Era Politics: The New Soviet Legislature and Gorbachev's Political Reforms* (1st ed.). Routledge. Pg 60. <https://www.perlego.com/book/1569775>.

legitimacy directly from the people. Instead, he was the only candidate presented for the office and the election process was limited to only the deputies of the CPD. This course of action proved to be detrimental to his political image as a reformer as well as his popularity.⁴⁸

Thus, in mid-1990 the USSR was ready to implode under the pressure of the reforms. Glasnost and Perestroika, by legitimizing dissent and political initiative, eroded the authority of the party which, as mentioned earlier, was the stone on which the state rested. The tragedy of Gorbachev's tenure as head of the Soviet Union was his uncompromising faith in socialist ideology, leading to his inability to comprehend the realities of the Soviet System and the structure on which it rested. For example, the main rationale behind the democratization process was to discipline party members by making them accountable. In his mind, there was no risk for the CPSU to lose its leading role, by virtue of its legacy as the vanguard of socialism, since he could not fathom for electors to choose other alternatives. Likewise, he failed to understand that the dominance of the Communist parties in the Eastern bloc and the in the federated republics was the result of imperialist dominion, rather than unwavering faith in the communist cause. Therefore, when free elections were issued in the eastern bloc, one by one communist party lost their dominance. Similarly, Gorbachev failed to appreciate the destabilizing effect that Glasnost would have on the Soviet system. Once again, believing that the Soviet system was the perfect state, he believed that even the most destabilizing reforms could not convince the population to abandon the perfect system, no matter how flawed. Moreover, another evident failure of his reform attempt rests on his inability to translate his ideas into a written codified policy, resorting instead to speeches, moral exhortations and appeals to the sentiments of the people and the party members. The years of the Bolshevik revolution were long gone, and the tactics used to mobilize successfully angry masses were ill-suited for the complexities of modern Soviet society. Lastly, his refusal to leave the party behind proved to be his undoing. In doing so he allowed for an institutionalized conservative opposition that could block or sidestepped his reforms, by virtue of their control of the state apparatus. At the same time, the reformist saw the attempt to preserve the party by Gorbachev as a lack of commitment to the democratization process.

⁴⁸ Brown, A. (2023). Mikhail Gorbachev and the Politics of Perestroika. *Russian History*, 49(2-4), 123-145. Pg 134. <https://doi.org/10.30965/18763316-12340044>.

Furthermore, his unwillingness to leave the party behind and create new organization of devoted democrats seriously hindered Gorbachev's ability to affect change within the Soviet framework, as the various sprouting democratic movements lacked cohesion and a clear leader, something that Gorbachev could have provided, ensuring simultaneously legitimacy vis-a-vis the reformers, while also giving him control of the reform pace rather than reacting to the pressures of the democratic group⁴⁹. Thus, by trying to appease both sides, he ultimately alienated both and was ultimately left without support when he needed the most.

1.3 The Party Apparatus Loses Cohesion

1.3.1 Ligachev attempts at reducing the scope of the reforms

In the early 80s, after the demise of Brezhnev, there was a consensus within the party that the system needed to be reformed, or at the very least some serious reinvigoration. There wasn't, however, a consensus on how to achieve those objectives. Some believed that the faults lied not within the system itself but rather in the progressive decline of discipline within the apparatus and in a loss of ideological fervor. Others instead held more radical positions, in one direction or the other, but kept quiet as democratic centralism demanded. Thus, when Gorbachev announced in 1985 his intention to embark in a series of reforms, the CPSU wholeheartedly supported his endeavor. The rhetoric of *Uskorenie* reassured the party that the reform process wouldn't be a total revision of the Soviet system but rather a new attempt to galvanize the economy and society through the all too familiar instruments of Soviet economic planning and ideological mobilization, that had characterized soviet reform attempts since the Stalinist era. Moreover, the language of *Uskorenie* addressed exclusively the disappointing economic performance of the USSR and its growing technological gap with the West, which fitted perfectly with the long-term objectives of the Marxist-Leninist theory. When, however, *Glasnost* took the place of the disappointing *Uskorenie*, the conservatives and fundamentalist within the party

⁴⁹ Ogushi, A. (2007). Why Did CPSU Reform Fail? The 28th Party Congress Reconsidered. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 59(5), 709–733. Pg 732. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20451392>.

started to grow wary. Yegor Ligachev, the secretary of the central committee and second secretary of the CPSU, became the mouthpiece of the unconvinced and, as the reform process went on, he rose to become the unofficial leader of the hard liner's opposition. He himself believed in the need for reforms, supporting Gorbachev installment as General Secretary, yet eventually became one of his stronger critics. At first his opposition to Glasnost was subtle, paying lip service to the reformist agenda. Yet in his speeches he attempted to limit the scope of the policies by exhorting the most radical reformist to address mainly issues of critical importance, rather than the axioms of the socialist systems. With the natural support of the potential "losers" of Perestroika, he avoided to outright challenge the reforms but rather choose to create powerbase inside the apparatus⁵⁰.

As Glasnost sprouted all kinds of historical and ideological revisionism, a sizeable portion of party members and functionaries felt that the fundamental parts of the socialist system were being threatened. Even worse, when the reforms extended to embrace democratization and market-like mechanisms, the resistance of the conservatives stiffened as the reforms expanded. Gorbachev's route seemed to lead dangerously towards the reevaluation of the core values of Marxist-Leninism and the establishment of a multi-party social democracy, which eventually forced the conservatives to push back. In 1988, while Gorbachev was on a trip in Yugoslavia, an essay titled "I cannot forsake my principles" appeared in soviet newspapers, written by a chemist professor, Nina Andreyeva. The essay defended Stalin and his policies, strongly condemned Gorbachev's reforms, and called for an immediate end to the reformation project. It is not clear whether Ligachev played a major role in fabricating the Andreyeva affair, but the wording used in the essay, which closely resembles the former's wording in his speeches, as well as the timing of its release opens the possibility that Andreyeva was used as a figurehead. Pravda and other newspapers close to Gorbachev soon began referring to the Andreyeva article as the manifesto of the reactionaries, indirectly admitting that behind the scenes the party was split.⁵¹ At the 19th All Union Party conference the divisions of the CPSU became evident. Initially convened by Gorbachev to introduce the new policies of

⁵⁰Hazan, B. (2019). *Gorbachev And His Enemies* (1st ed.). Routledge. Pg. 18-20.
<https://www.perlego.com/book/1475046>.

⁵¹ Hazan, B. (2019). *Gorbachev And His Enemies* (1st ed.). Routledge. Pg. 40-42.
<https://www.perlego.com/book/1475046>.

Perestroika, it soon devolved into an open confrontation between the two extremes of the party, to which followed a direct confrontation between the mouthpieces of those tendencies, Ligachev and Yelstin. To make matters worse, the conference was televised, which showed the USSR how rifts and divisions were growing within the CPSU to a baffled Soviet public. Ultimately the opposition managed to reduce the scope of the final resolution. Rather than the blueprint for democratization that Gorbachev had hoped for, the resolution contained mostly broad goals and general statements, which relied on the support of lower party's official to be translated into actual changes. Most importantly, however, Gorbachev managed to secure, albeit narrowly, his mandate to continue with the reforms. After the conference Ligachev, now with the participation of KGB's director Cebrikov, kept opposing the reforms with the usual methods: support for the general aims of Perestroika, followed immediately by a critic of all the single policies that compose it. The growing insistence of the opposition forced Gorbachev to counterattack. Stealing a page from Ligachev's playbook, he convened a central committee plenum when the former was away, managing to remove the director of the KGB and demoting Ligachev from his position in the secretariat as head of ideology to head of agriculture. In a stroke of political mastery, Gorbachev ensured that his adversary's political platform was sensibly reduced. Losing the ideological post reduced his opportunity to speak on the issues of state's policy, and most importantly the reforms, while his reassignment as head of agriculture meant that his political career was now closely tied to tangible outcomes and the successful implementation of agricultural reforms, something that the USSR had always struggled with.⁵²

1.3.2 Resistance from the apparatus

The victory over Ligachev, however, did not cause conservative resistance to cease as the core of the opposition manifested itself not through famous party figures, nor was it organized in a well-defined group, until at least the very final year of the USSR. The real meaningful opposition that Gorbachev had to face had its core in the untold thousands of faceless apparatchiks inside the sprawling party apparatus. As has been customary in every reform attempt since the dawn of society, individuals choose whether to support or resist reforms based on whether they would improve or damage their social status. Since

⁵² Ivi. Pg 72-73

Gorbachev program poses above all an existential threat to the apparatchiks, it's not surprising that the most obstinate attempts at stifling Perestroika originate from this direction. Moreover, due to the central role that the bureaucracy plays in running the system as well as implementing CPSU policies, Gorbachev economic and political reforms needed the cooperation of the apparatus to be implemented effectively. But since the design of Perestroika aims at the dismantling of the planned economy, the superstructure responsible for its running, the ministers, the central planners, the enterprise directors and the farm managers, an awkward situation has emerged, where the apparatus is tasked with implementing those same policies that would have it dismantled. As such, the bureaucratic opposition operated in many ways, shielded by its inner workings. Ministries refused to relinquish control, demanding higher production quotas than what had been publicly established and preventing inputs reaching the newly created private firms of reformist managers.⁵³ Factory managers often ignored the Gorbachev calls to participate in the proto market that was being created and kept following the quotas of economic planners without deviation. Other functionaries instead resisted through foot-dragging, delaying the implementation of new regulations behind the red tape of the bureaucracy, constantly creating new bureaucratic hurdles to delay the reforms and quietly encouraging them to be ignored. Others instead tried to co-opt the reforms, implementing them in name but not spirit. The managers of large state enterprises enjoyed considerable benefits such as residences, cars, special stores and informal power within their locales. Early perestroika offered them incentives, such as profit retention and bonuses for efficiency, but by 1989–90, talks of market competition and privatization put them on high alert. Open market liberalization would expose their factories to competition or the risk of bankruptcy and would make them responsible for the quality of their output vis-à-vis other economic actors. They, therefore, often resorted to sabotaging the nascent cooperative sector, by refusing to supply materials to private cooperatives or colluding with local officials to block the issuing of business licenses⁵⁴. When reformers pushed for the breakup of big state monopolies the directors lobbied against it. Since the planned economy guaranteed their status regardless of their performance, they lacked incentives to support the changes. Similarly, collective farm managers and agricultural directors

⁵³Hazan, B. (2019). *Gorbachev And His Enemies* (1st ed.). Routledge. Pg. 225-226.

<https://www.perlego.com/book/1475046>.

⁵⁴ Ivi. Pg 228.

were wary of perestroika's return to private land ownership, fearing the breakup of their local "fiefdoms"⁵⁵. Thus, broad agricultural reform stalled, in part due to the resistance of these managers' and the Party's reluctance to confront them. Lastly, local party leaders often ignored Gorbachev calls for democratization and often maintained a key role in the electoral process by either rejecting or harassing non-CPSU candidates and instead imposing their preferred candidates. As we've mentioned, the nature of the conservative opposition within the CPSU and its apparatus lacked a proper organization to represent its interests. Only with progressive political liberalization would a more organized group emerge, as the erosion of the ban on factionalism within the party made ideologically close members coalesce into different factions. Thus, the conservative could now attack the reform process directly, without the need to hide their true opinions. Even more, the multiplying issues generated by Gorbachev economic reforms gave the conservatives an endless source of talking points. The General Secretary gave them legitimacy and platform express their dissent in the form of the Congress of People's Deputies. This subject will be analyzed further in the research, and for now we will deal with other interest groups that tried to oppose the implementations of the reforms.

The Soviet armed forces were another powerful constituency whose reaction to Gorbachev's reforms ranged from wary acceptance to outright opposition. The military had long enjoyed priority status under Soviet rule, with lavish budgets, political influence and a central role in projecting Soviet superpower might. Gorbachev's policies, however, demanded significant concessions from the military: cuts in defense spending, arms control agreements with the West, withdrawal from the protracted war in Afghanistan, and non-intervention in Eastern Europe's revolutions. Many in the officer corps perceived these measures as weakening their standing with the USSR, others instead believed that Perestroika was slowly eroding to the Soviet Union safety. By the mid-1980s, the defense budget had reached an estimated 20–25% of the GDP. With the growing Russian foreign debt, Gorbachev concluded that this budget was becoming unsustainable.⁵⁶ Thus, he initiated negotiations with the West to reduce tensions and start a disarmament process. The INF Treaty of 1987 eliminated a whole class of nuclear missiles, and unilateral force

⁵⁵ Hazan, B. (2019). *Gorbachev And His Enemies* (1st ed.). Routledge. Pg. 217.

<https://www.perlego.com/book/1475046>.

⁵⁶ Ivi. Pg. 127.

reductions were announced. While many senior officers understood the economic logic, they feared that the USSR was conceding too much to the West. Perhaps the greatest shock to the military, as well as party conservatives, was Gorbachev's decision not to use force to prevent the collapse of communist regimes in Eastern Europe in 1989. To many officers, the loss of the Empire's Eastern provinces was baffling. Not only was the international standing of the USSR damaged, but also a key piece of Soviet security was abandoned. The new political freedoms also allowed the military blunders of the Afghan intervention to circulate among the party, damaging the status and career of the affected officers.⁵⁷

In similar fashion, the KGB naturally ill received Gorbachev's propositions, such as a "law-based state" and protection of human rights, since those propositions were a threat to the existence of the secret service itself. Soviet security organs were, traditionally, the backbone of the regime, and their reaction to Gorbachev's reforms evolved from initial support to deep hostility as the reforms gathered momentum. Early on, KGB leaders cautiously backed Gorbachev, reassured by their former director, Yuri Andropov, endorsement of Gorbachev. However, as Glasnost and Perestroika expanded, the KGB became a hotbed of reactionary sentiment. Agency hardliners feared that too much openness would unleash "counterrevolutionary" forces: nationalists, dissidents, and even Western agents that could destroy the USSR from within. To the KGB's traditionalists, Gorbachev's permissiveness in the face of such deviations significantly alienated the Service. Furthermore, the KGB had enormous resources and privileges, from its own troops and prisons to a vast surveillance network, that were threatened by the reforms. As one would expect, the KGB refrained from confronting Gorbachev directly, professing loyalty to Gorbachev while simultaneously working quietly to undermine the application of the reform, using their control over society to apply localized pressure where needed.

Lastly, opposition also came from the increasing number of disenfranchised citizens that Perestroika was generating. In 1989-1990 the economy was in a dire state, with unfamiliar hardships, such as overinflation and unemployment, plaguing the population.⁵⁸ Workers who had initially been promised that Perestroika would bring prosperity felt

⁵⁷ Ivi. Pg. 145.

⁵⁸ Cook, L. J. (1992). Brezhnev's "Social Contract" and Gorbachev's Reforms. *Soviet Studies*, 44(1), 37–56. Pg 50. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/152246>.

betrayed. The coal miners' strikes dramatically illustrated growing public opposition. In July 1989, approximately 400,000 miners across the USSR went on strike, in an unprecedented labor revolt. Their initial demands were economic (better supplies, higher wages) but further developed to the request of political representation and the resignation of the party's leadership.⁵⁹ Gorbachev defused the situation by negotiating with the protesters yet, when the concessions failed to materialize, the miners once again organized mass demonstration, asking for Gorbachev resignation. The introduction of market principles coupled with the "bureaucratic resistance", had generated chronic goods shortages. Even more, now that enterprise managers had to live off generated profits, the practice of overemployment ended abruptly, leaving many unemployed. Others instead were tired of the continuous unrest and demonstrations that were taking place and just wanted the return to the previous stability. Among those who still retained employment, there was still fear of the consequences of the economic reforms, especially among the unskilled workers. These hardships made daily life difficult, undermining faith in the reforms. Others instead were true believers of the communist system, their opposition born out of ideological disagreement with the reforms. As the dissatisfaction grew, Gorbachev powers grew precarious, making the opposition grew desperate enough to launch a counteroffensive they would ultimately bring to the fall of system.

1.3.3 The Reemergence of Factionalism within the CPSU

For most of its existence, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union showed outside observers nothing short of monolithic unity. This granitic unity was historically rooted in two foundational principles: democratic centralism and the ban on factions. Democratic centralism, in its Leninist formulation, was conceived as a mechanism to allow internal debate until a consensus was met, after which all party members were expected to uphold and implement the decision without further dissent. This concept, designed to ensure cohesion during the Bolshevik underground activity and the civil war, prioritized discipline over debate. Complementing democratic centralism was the 1921 ban on

⁵⁹Hahn, G. (2018). *Russia's Revolution from Above, 1985-2000* (1st ed.). Routledge. Pg. 344.
<https://www.perlego.com/book/1382194>.

organized factions, instituted at the 10th Party Congress. This measure sought to safeguard party unity amidst internal crises like the Kronstadt rebellion and ideological divisions following the civil war. The ban served not only a disciplinary function but became a powerful tool in the hands of Stalin and his successors to eliminate dissent and centralize authority. Through mass purges and the systematic silencing of alternative views, Stalin institutionalized monolithic unity, effectively eradicating political pluralism within the party and by extension, Soviet society. After Stalin's death, these principles persisted. While Khrushchev and Brezhnev allowed a degree of intellectual elasticity, the party's public image remained unified. Dissent, where it existed, was cloaked in indirect language or confined to elite academic circles. The policies of Glasnost and Perestroika, however, created conditions for the return of internal debate within the CPSU. In response to the general atmosphere of systemic re-evaluation, coupled with the relaxed censorship, among the Soviet population hundreds of intellectual clubs, activists' organization and associations sprouted to address all sorts of topics. Naturally, some of those informal clubs appeared among party members and Soviet intelligentsia and began discussing how to properly reform the party and the ideology. Contemporary studies have identified various distinct tendencies within the party, ranging from liberal social democrats to Stalinist restorationists. These included: 1) liberals advocating for Western-style parliamentary democracy, 2) left-populists focusing on grassroots ecological socialism, 3) neo-NEPists calling for civil cooperation and economic pluralism, 4) traditionalists defending working-class leadership, 5) radical worker fronts opposing privatization, 6) neo-Stalinist "restorationist" groups, 7) lastly a silent, depoliticized majority, who simply wishes for the return to a semblance of stability.⁶⁰ When Gorbachev introduced semi-competitive elections and intra party democracy, party members with similar ideas naturally coalesced into groups, and political factions started to form within the Party. For public reasons the word faction was carefully avoided in favor of platform, but in practice, they acted as full-fledged factions, with proper congresses held for their foundation and conferences for establishing policy goals. Slowly they started to naturally create ties with sympathizers within the apparatus and became particularly active in lobbying for their

⁶⁰ Hill, R. J. (1991). The CPSU: From Monolith to Pluralist? *Soviet Studies*, 43(2), 217–235. Pg 224. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/152106>.

interests, such as for the removal of article 6 from the constitution, or in the creation of the Communist Party of the Russian SSR.

The first such group to be created was the Democratic Platform, founded in January 1990. The DP was amalgamation of moderate CPSU intellectuals leaning towards social democratic positions and was focused mainly with revolutionizing the party and its inner workings. Its main goal was the transformation of the CPSU into a social democratic party, having it relinquish its monopoly on political power and becoming just one party within a multi-party democratic system.⁶¹ His program therefore called for the immediate abandonment of democratic centralism, the end of the party's overreliance on committees, the abolition of the nomenklatura system as well as the elimination of the apparat privileges, and ultimately the purge of the corrupts elements within the CPSU. When Boris Yeltsin theatrically left the party at the 28th CPSU congress, the DP split itself among those who wanted to follow Yeltsin example and those who still believed in the original plan of change the CPSU from within. Those who left the party eventually founded the Republican Party of the Russian federation, while those who remained in the party created the Democratic movement of Communists.⁶²

In response to the creation of the Democratic Platform, a group of devoted Marxist Leninist party members founded, in April 1990, the Marxist Platform. Like their adversaries, the MP sprouted from groups of party intellectuals within the CPSU. Contrary to their counterpart, they didn't address only issues within the CPSU but rather sought to provide Marxist solutions to the issues plaguing the Soviet Union, thus their agenda was much broader in scope.⁶³ They were in support of democratization and market reforms only if they happened with the workers' active participation. Furthermore, they pushed to make the Soviets instrument of actual political power and, while they rejected a multi-party democracy, they strongly supported Gorbachev's propositions of intra party democratization. Overall, a lot of their political ideas closely resemble those of the Workers Opposition of the early revolutionary days and their emphasis of worker

⁶¹ Ivi. Pg. 225.

⁶²Urban, J., Solovei, V. (2021). *Russia's Communists At The Crossroads* (1st ed.). Routledge. Pg 16-17. <https://www.perlego.com/book/2527786>.

⁶³Urban, J., Solovei, V. (2021). *Russia's Communists At The Crossroads* (1st ed.). Routledge. Pg 17. <https://www.perlego.com/book/2527786>.

participation in the state's governance. The MP enjoyed some degree of political success, with three of its members elected to the Central Committee in 1990.⁶⁴

To challenge the moderates and reformist platforms within the CPSU, the hardliners followed the example of their adversaries and created their own platforms within the CPSU. One of such platforms was the Communist Initiative Movement, founded in January 1990, representing the most powerful and numerous of the factions within the CPSU, allegedly counting over one and a half million party members. The CIM members were entrenched in deeply conservatives' positions. Strongly against any resemblance of capitalist restoration, they outrightly rejected the market reforms brought forward by Gorbachev as well as his attempts at introducing a multi-party democracy. They remained true to Leninist's concepts such as Democratic centralism and dictatorship of the proletariat, still believing firmly in the CPSU's role as the vanguard party. Strongly opposed to Gorbachev and his policies, they would be the main actors in the creation of the Communist Party of RFSSR, in an attempt to create a parallel power base within the Russian SSR to mobilize the apparatus to challenge Gorbachev revisionism.⁶⁵

Further down the list of the anti-reform factions, the Bolshevik Platform traces its origins in political organizations outside of the CPSU. The progressive democratization of political life allowed Soviet civil society to create organizations aimed at influencing policies, and citizens were quick to respond. The All-Union Society "Unity for Leninism and Communist Ideals" was one of such organization. This platform came into existence following the publication of the Andreyeva Letter and selected the author as its political leader. The group strongly opposed the historical revisionism generated by Glasnost, calling for the CPSU to return to its Bolshevik roots. Due to its emergence early in the reform process, at first the All-Union acted as an outside opposition to the party. Later, as factions emerged in the CPSU, they decided to abandon the outside opposition strategy in favor of creating a conservative faction within the party, forming in 1991 Bolshevik Platform.⁶⁶

⁶⁴Hill, R. J. (1991). The CPSU: From Monolith to Pluralist? *Soviet Studies*, 43(2), 217–235. Pg 226. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/152106>.

⁶⁵ Urban, J., Solovei, V. (2021). *Russia's Communists At The Crossroads* (1st ed.). Routledge. Pg 18-19. <https://www.perlego.com/book/2527786>.

⁶⁶ Urban, J., Solovei, V. (2021). *Russia's Communists At The Crossroads* (1st ed.). Routledge. Pg 12. <https://www.perlego.com/book/2527786>.

The emergence of proto parties, both inside and outside the CPSU, was a source of further challenges for the Gorbachev's leadership and for the stability of the Soviet Union. Originally, the longstanding tradition of monolithic unity shielded Gorbachev from political dissent and opposition against its policies and generally allowed for stability within the Soviet institutions. The introduction of elections and factionalism within the party caused his political opponents to double in number, with those in favor of complete democratization criticizing the slow pace of the reform and the communist traditionalist chastising him for its deviationism. Where before Gorbachev could focus his efforts in trying to outmaneuver the opposition inside the apparatus, now he had to compete politically with other movements and various political figures. The CPSU policy making bodies were ill-equipped to deal with this sudden resurface factionalism, as shown for example in the 28th party congress. The need for a political compromise brought the advancement of state's policy to a standstill, furthering the crisis of legitimacy of the whole system.⁶⁷ Moreover, Gorbachev's policies aimed at reducing party control in day-to-day governing gave further impulse to the development of factions as pro-parties. The newly created semi-parliamentary institutions at the Union and SSR level allowed faction to express themselves outside of the CPSU and gained new institutional avenues to control policies and influence the direction of the reforms. In pursuing their political objectives, the platforms turned their gaze toward the federal republic's own organs of state. Parliamentary committees, republican councils, and ministerial bureaucracies, especially within the Russian SSR, became the levers through which each group pursued its objectives. By exploiting legal competencies at the republican level, they sought to entrench their preferred policies locally and, where possible, to outmaneuver the authority of the CPSU at the union level.

Ultimately, the resurface of factions is the natural result of the unclear design of Gorbachev's reforms and, most importantly, the fading of the CPSU's leading role. Monolithic unity and the rejection of any hint of factionalism was the prerequisite for the CPSU to exercise absolute control over the state. Everything short of complete uniformity would have made it impossible for the CPSU to control, and most importantly run, an apparatus so extensive and with so many tasks to perform. Compliance and uniformity

⁶⁷ Ogushi, A. (2007). Why Did CPSU Reform Fail? The 28th Party Congress Reconsidered. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 59(5), 709–733. Pg 728. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20451392>.

were thus a virtue, and discussion was allowed within predisposed spaces where it wouldn't have disturbed the overall process. Perestroika and Glasnost, however progressively eroded the necessity for such virtues, as the CPSU was slowly relinquishing its monopoly over the state machinery. The implementation of decentralized decision making, with varying degrees of success, the rearrangement of institutions and ministries outside the reach of the party apparatus, the progressive differentiation between state and party functions and the introduction of semi-Liberal election meant that the CPSU was progressively relinquishing its power to other actors and, most importantly, was being put in the awkward position of becoming a mere political party. In this new, although grossly incomplete, transformation the necessity for unity went away and was replaced by the desperate search for solutions to solve the ongoing crisis. In this light, the reemergence of factionalism can be understood as the natural result of Gorbachev attempts at transforming the party. First, by reducing the scope of the CPSU to encompass only general policymaking, it undermined the necessity for monolithic unity, and later the introduction of intra-party democracy and open discussion fostered the formation of platforms and factions, which further undermined the legitimacy and control of the CPSU. Yet, as we will see in the next chapter, while those proto parties were the demise of the CPSU, the more orthodox formations would carry the seed of the communist rebirth in the post-Soviet era and will dramatically influence its path.

Conclusion

This introductory chapter had the purpose of setting the stage for the analysis of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation. First, this chapter has outlined how a Leninist conception of party primacy and the role of the State fused together and shaped Soviet institutional development, establishing the party-state's commanding role in governance. It showed how Stalin transformed the state's function, abandoning the NEP, and mobilized the masses in the search for rapid industrialization, thereby expanding the party apparatus into all spheres of administration. It then examined Khrushchev's partial liberalization and shifting bases of regime legitimacy, followed by Brezhnev's corporatist bargains that traded stability for sclerosis. The chapter also traced fluctuations in public support—from wartime peaks sustained by propaganda and social guarantees to the

apathy of the 1970s—highlighting the intertwining of ideological socialization, material provision, and repression. Finally, it analyzed Gorbachev’s policies of Uskorenie, Glasnost, and Perestroika, and showed how the reforms eroded the CPSU’s monopoly, catalyzed platforms and proto-parties, and shifted contention into republican arenas, especially the RSFSR. These dynamics set the analytical foundation for the subsequent chapter’s focus on the reorganization of the communist movement in the post-Soviet context.

Chapter 2: The Foundation of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation

Introduction

This second chapter will analyze the creation of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation and its conduct in his first year. The chapter will start right where the last chapter ended, detailing Yeltsin's meteoric rise and how his bid for power shifted the stage of the political struggle from the Soviet Union down to the Russian SSR, prompting the creation of the Communist Party of the Russian SSR, laying the seeds for the CPRF. After touching briefly on the fall of the Soviet Union, the chapter will give a detailed account on the activities of the communist movement during Yeltsin's ban of the CPSU and the Russian SSR CP as well as analyzing the Constitutional Court ruling that lifted it, prompting the subsequent communist reunification efforts that resulted in the foundation of the CPRF. Lastly the chapter will end by giving an account of the Constitutional Crisis of October 1993, with the goal of explaining how the institutional struggle and its bloody resolution shaped the party's strategy moving forward.

2.1 The Russian Question

2.1.1 The Rise of Yeltsin

As the Soviet Union reached its waning years, Gorbachev reforms paved the way for new charismatic leaders to emerge in the political sphere. The most influential among them was Boris Yeltsin, the first President of the Russian SSR and later of the Russian Federation. Born in the Sverdlovsk Oblast in the Ural district, he joined the ranks of the CPSU in 1961. Showing great talents as an administrator, he steadily ascended the party's ranks, until he became the first secretary of his home oblast in 1976. His talents did not go unnoticed and was recalled in Moscow in 1985 to assume the leadership of the Moscow City Party Committee and was later invited in the Politburo by Gorbachev himself. A staunch Leninist, he abhorred the bureaucratic deviation the CPSU

experienced, feeling that the privileges and power of the nomenklatura and party members betrayed the spirit of the Revolution. Thus, when Gorbachev initiated his reform project, Yeltsin immediately supported it. Yet as Uskorenie made way to Glasnost, he grew disillusioned with the pace and the rhetoric of the reforms. He manifested his growing dissatisfaction by writing a letter of resignation from both his post in the Moscow Committee and the Politburo.⁶⁸ Receiving no answer, Yeltsin opted for something more impactful and decided to speak his grievances at the Central Committee plenum held in October 1987. After hearing all the self-congratulatory speeches of Gorbachev and the other party members, as well as claims of the successes of Perestroika, Yeltsin gave his own rebuttal. He criticized the slow pace of the reform and stated that their implementation was far behind what was being said by his colleagues. In addition, he lashed out against those in the apparatus who were working against Perestroika, undermining change at every turn. Lastly, he reiterated his decision to resign from the Politburo and from his post in the Moscow Committee.⁶⁹ This direct challenge to the CPSU's leadership was unprecedented, and the other members of the plenum reacted accordingly. For next three hours speeches denouncing Yeltsin followed one after the other, interrupted only by reaffirmations of loyalty towards Gorbachev and his Perestroika, some of which were sincere while others less so. Two weeks later at the Moscow Gorkom plenum Yeltsin was once again denounced by his colleagues, yet this time the attacks encompassed his whole political career.⁷⁰ Gorbachev, present at the meeting, revealed some extracts of Yeltsin's speech to the plenum and accused him of being motivated by personal ambition. As a result of his outburst, Yeltsin was demoted, being given a ministerial position as vice deputy of the USSR State Construction Committee. Unsurprisingly a smear campaign was conducted against him in the media.⁷¹ Yeltsin denouncement of the party and the pace of the reforms made him a dangerous figure for both the conservatives opposing the reforms and Gorbachev, who was trying to balance the restructuring of the Soviet system with preserving the leading role of the party.

⁶⁸ Ellison, H. (2012). Boris Yeltsin and Russia's Democratic Transformation ([edition unavailable]). University of Washington Press. Pg. 17. <https://www.perlego.com/book/723519>.

⁶⁹ Zlotnik, M. (2003). Yeltsin and Gorbachev: The Politics of Confrontation. *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 5(1), 128–164. Pg. 136. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26925263>.

⁷⁰ Ivi. Pg. 137

⁷¹ Ellison, H. (2012). Boris Yeltsin and Russia's Democratic Transformation ([edition unavailable]). University of Washington Press. Pg. 20. <https://www.perlego.com/book/723519>.

Thus, he was sidelined to a managerial role, where he couldn't express his opinion on ongoing policies nor contribute to the policymaking process. Ironically, however, one year later Gorbachev would unknowingly create the conditions for his return as a political figure.

The 19th party conference, originally scheduled for 1991, was purposefully anticipated by Gorbachev to further advance his reforms, particularly the democratization of the party and political life. The conference proved to be unprecedented, as the full span of diverging political opinions within the CPSU was exposed for the whole Union to see. Hardliners, moderates and radical reformers debated passionately in a way that hadn't been seen since the revolutionary days. Even though the party still exercised tight control over the selections of the delegates for the conference, Yeltsin managed to narrowly secure a spot. With his selection as a conference delegate from Moscow and Sverdlovsk denied, he managed to secure one from Karelia at the last moment.⁷² Given his reputation however, the party attempted to limit his exposure by preventing him access to the press and ignoring his numerous requests to speak during the conference. In order address the other delegates, Yeltsin had to walk all the way to the front of the hall, demanding to speak at once.⁷³ In his speech, he reiterated many of his criticisms on the slow pace of Perestroika that he'd expressed a year earlier. However, on this occasion his denouncement didn't take place behind closed doors but rather in front of the liberalized media. As a result, his popularity grew immensely. While Yeltsin impatient and blunt character proved to be detrimental for his career at the higher levels of the CPSU, it had the opposite effect on the masses. His vocal, unapologetic stance for immediate systemic reforms of both the Party and the State naturally made him more appealing to the most radical reformers. Even amongst the more moderate ones, Yeltsin drive and charisma proved to be much more attractive in the long run over the much timider Gorbachev. While the latter had to juggle pressure from both the conservatives and the democrats in implement his reforms, Yeltsin wasn't hindered by those limitations. Even more, Gorbachev inability to translate Perestroika into a well-defined set of policies and goals progressively eroded his support, as the Soviet political landscape became more open to political discussion. Furthermore,

⁷² Ellison, H. (2012). *Boris Yeltsin and Russia's Democratic Transformation* ([edition unavailable]). University of Washington Press. Pg. 22. <https://www.perlego.com/book/723519>.

⁷³ Breslauer, G. W. (2002). *Gorbachev and Yeltsin as Leaders*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Pg. 245. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511613531>.

the Conference provided Yeltsin with much more than just visibility, for it had established the Congress of People's Deputies and a semblance of multicandidate elections to elect its members.⁷⁴ Without realizing Gorbachev had just given his future rival both immense popularity and the chance to cash it in the upcoming elections. Choosing Moscow among the alleged 50 constituencies that proposed him as their candidate, Yeltsin started his political campaign, using all the media outlet at his disposal. In a perennial cat and mouse game, he held as many interviews as possible, constantly avoiding the party's attempts at censorship. Moreover, he released an unprecedented number of statements to the foreign press, as always not shying away from expressing his unfiltered opinion. This naturally led to attrition with the KGB director, but at the same time made him a very popular figure abroad. Ultimately, the party could not prevent his supporters from growing immensely. In the street of Moscow banners writing "Yeltsin you are Perestroika" started to appear, marches in support of his elections were commonplace, to the point where the CPSU designated candidate who had to run against him withdraw and choose to run in Voronezh instead. When the polls closed, Yeltsin had won 89% percent of the votes, triumphantly returning to Soviet politics only a year after his sacking.⁷⁵

It is evident that his radical proposals gave him an edge and made him stand out among countless candidates. However, most influential in his success was his approach to politics, a novelty in the Soviet Union. Yeltsin engaged with the people on a personal level, often seen talking to citizens to hear their grievances. Where party officials debated in long, prewritten speeches, he often improvised and spoke carried by passion. He never shied away from answering questions, even those he wasn't willing or ready to answer. Even more Yeltsin appeared to be practicing what he had been preaching: the man who spoke endlessly against the privileges and hypocrisy of the nomenklatura and the state officials was often seen walking in the city streets or taking the public transportation. Therefore, at the opening session of the Congress he didn't shy away from attacking once again those within the party who tried to resist Perestroika. After securing a place as a deputy, his next object was to be elected to the Supreme Soviet, the supreme legislative body, that was now being selected by the Congress. Although some independent

⁷⁴Murray, D. (2018). *A Democracy Of Despots* (1st ed.). Routledge. Pg. 23
<https://www.perlego.com/book/1597924>.

⁷⁵Ellison, H. (2012). *Boris Yeltsin and Russia's Democratic Transformation* ([edition unavailable]). University of Washington Press. Pg. 24. <https://www.perlego.com/book/723519>.

candidates managed to win some seats, the Party still held 87 percent of the seats, due to its successful manipulation of the election. It seemed impossible that the CPSU majority would elect Yeltsin for the Supreme Soviet, and it would have been, if not for a voluntary withdrawal of an elected deputy in his favor.⁷⁶ At the Supreme Soviet the independent deputies organized themselves into the first parliamentary opposition in Soviet history, the Inter-Regional deputies' group. Their aim was to complete the process of Perestroika, leaving behind Gorbachev's half measures. They called for immediate transfer of power to the Soviets, for the liberalization of the political sphere, for the introduction of multi-party elections and the reduction Party control, as well as the introduction of market reforms and the reestablishment of private property, with particular attention to the redistribution of the land to the Kolkhoz to farmers. Eventually, the IRDG would push for the abolition of Article 6 of the Constitution, which would end the CPSU's vanguard role. The Communist Party, fearing that others would follow the IRDG example, actively attempted to limit their activities. The Group was prevented from organizing an official congress and was accused of fostering factionalism. Nevertheless, those attacks proved futile, as the IRDG managed to organize a congress in Moscow and created a bureau of 25 members to organize its activities, led by a committee of 5 (Yeltsin, Afanasev, Sakharov, Palm and Popov), its own newspaper and its own contributory fund.⁷⁷ Two Years after his political humiliation, Yeltsin reemerged as the uncontested leader of the reformist faction. However, his political future didn't rest in the Soviet Union, but rather in one of his constituent republics, the Russian SSR.

2.1.2 The fall of communism in Eastern Europe

Meanwhile, Glasnost started to gain traction in other parts of the Soviet Bloc, giving nationalistic sentiment and ethnic grievances a chance to reemerge. Countless demonstrations took place in the Baltic states and in the Eastern republics, denouncing the revealed crimes of the Stalinist regime and the subordinate status that was forced upon them. As the people started to openly discuss their history, nationalistic sentiments that laid under the surface emerged. However, it was only with the new liberties brought on by Perestroika that the situation became uncontrollable. As part of the reform process,

⁷⁶Ellison, H. (2012). Boris Yeltsin and Russia's Democratic Transformation ([edition unavailable]). University of Washington Press. Pg. 24. <https://www.perlego.com/book/723519>.

⁷⁷ Ivi. Pg. 25.

Gorbachev abandoned Brezhnev's doctrine and decided to grant the regimes of Eastern Europe autonomy in implementing the reforms, encouraging them to make their own Perestroika.⁷⁸ This reversal in foreign policy responded to a very specific necessity. Gorbachev realized that rapprochement with the East was fundamental to the reform process. A détente would result in less military spending and renewed economic and scientific collaboration. Gorbachev knew well that the West wouldn't take his attempts seriously unless he released the grip on Eastern Europe. However, this increased autonomy, coupled with the ongoing liberalization, produced the same destabilizing effects as it did 30 years prior. As the demonstration grew in frequency and touched previously unspeakable topics, they were met with no repression from Moscow. Thus, both the population and the local communist regimes realized that they were left to their own devices and started to act accordingly. With the upcoming elections of 1989, the popular fronts organized themselves into parties and the local communist parties, to ensure their survival, started to slowly embrace the claims of the population. In Poland the recently legalized Solidarity movement, clandestine social organization that challenged the local regime, enjoyed huge success in the elections, forcing the local CP to allow them into the government. It soon became evident that the Polish CP had lost all semblance of legitimacy and kept their parliamentary seats only due to the semi-free nature of the elections. Poland's regime was peculiar one, as there were two other small parties that governed alongside the communists, although they had sacrificed all semblance of independence in exchange for their existence. Solidarity leader, Lech Walesa, reached out to them to create a coalition government that could isolate the communists. The two satellite parties, the Democratic Party and the United People's Party, accepted in fear of losing their position⁷⁹. When Moscow showed no interest in stopping the formation of the coalition government, it was clear that the Brezhnev Doctrine was effectively dead.

In the following year the socialist regimes would be dismantled piece by piece, until finally, on the 1st of January 1990, the first shock therapy in the now dismantling Soviet bloc was introduced. With no repression attempts from Moscow, the population of the

⁷⁸Malia, M. (2008). *Soviet Tragedy* ([edition unavailable]). Free Press. Pg. 459-460.

<https://www.perlego.com/book/779753>.

⁷⁹ Ibidem

other Eastern Republics felt emboldened to take similar action. Soon after, in October, the Hungarian communists abandoned the Soviet model in favor of a social democracy, renaming their party “socialist” and reenrolling all the members who wished to join the reformed party.⁸⁰ A month later in East Germany, when a soviet official announced that the population could now traverse into West Germany, the people responded rushing to the Berlin Wall and tearing it down. A year later Germany would be reunified. In Czechoslovakia a wave of demonstrations, named the Velvet Revolution, led to the end of communist rule, with free election set for the following year. In Bulgaria, senior officials launched a coup against Zhikov, the leader of the local communist party, forcing him to choose between resignation or execution. After he chose to resign, the communist relinquished their monopoly on power ending Soviet rule in Bulgaria.⁸¹ Romania was the only country in the Warsaw Pact to end communist rule with violence. The army, refusing Ceausescu’s order to quell the popular protest with blood, joined side with the protester and arrested him and his wife.⁸² Something similar was taking place in the Baltic states where, under Glasnost, the clauses of the Molotov-Ribbentrop treaty were revealed. This, compounded with the changes of Perestroika, led to a wave of nationalist protests, resulting in the three-republics declaring the primacy of their national law over USSR law in 1989. As was the case for his policies within the Soviet Union, Gorbachev failed to realize the implication of the reform process he initiated. The communist regimes of the outer empire derived their legitimation from Moscow, and it was the threat of a Red Army intervention that kept them in power. Once Gorbachev removed the source of their power, it didn’t take long for the communist regimes to look for legitimation in their own population. Gorbachev decision not to intervene was motivated by different reasons. As previously mentioned, brutal repression would end any détente with the Western bloc, but this wasn’t the only reason. In the URSS, discipline was failing and, judging by the state of the union in ’89, it is difficult to imagine a material and political support for a military expedition. Even more, suppressing the democratization he himself started would have legitimized the conservative’s narrative and alienated the reformist, spelling his political downfall.

⁸⁰Malia, M. (2008). Soviet Tragedy ([edition unavailable]). Free Press. Pg. 460.
<https://www.perlego.com/book/779753>.

⁸¹ Ivi. Pg. 461.

⁸² Ivi. Pg. 462.

2.1.3 The reemergence of Ethnic and Nationalists sentiment during Perestroika

Parallel to the rise of nationalism, ethnic tension exploded in the frontier regions, especially in those with consistent ethnic minorities. In the Nagorno Karabakh, a region of Armenian majority that Stalin assigned to the Azerbaijan SSR, the local population used the liberties given by Perestroika to organized demonstrations calling for the reunion with Armenia. Soon the marches exploded in violence, with Armenian attacking the Azer minority in Karabakh. When the news reached Baku, the Azer in the city responding with the tragic pogrom of Sumgait against in the Armenian district. The increasing tension escalated into a low intensity conflict between the Armenian and the Azerbaijan SSR, with Red Army soldiers deserting to join the conflict for their respective ethnicity. Three Years later the conflict would escalate into open warfare between the countries.⁸³ Not too far West, the Abkhazian minority in the Georgian SSR petitioned Gorbachev directly for secession form Georgia, and to be restored as a full-fledged SSR. The Abkhazian SSR had been established in 1921 and was united a year later as a treaty republic with the newly founded Georgian SSR. By virtue of its status, it enjoyed considerable autonomy, and all the institutions of federative republic. Yet in 1931 Stalin reduced it to a simple autonomous region within Georgia. With Perestroika generating a wave of nationalism among Georgian, the Abkhaz minority started fearing the possibility of Georgian independence and organized a series of protests in the streets of Tbilisi, which the local authorities quelled in violence. Tension continued to grow as the Soviet Union collapsed, leading to a successful armed secession from Georgia in the following years.⁸⁴ The roots of these ethnic conflicts can be traced to the Bolshevik vision of nationality. When the civil war ended, the Bolshevik could finally devote their effort to building the socialist nation. They now faced the daunting task to address the countless ethnic groups that lived within their borders, as it had been the case in the defunct Russian empire. The approach favored by Lenin was strongly inspired by Marxist ideology, that saw classes as the one true division among people, and relegated nationalism and ethnicity as a mere bourgeois

⁸³ Saparov, A. (2014). *From conflict to autonomy in the Caucasus: The Soviet Union and the making of Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno Karabakh*. Routledge. Pg. 166.

https://abkhazworld.com/aw/Pdf/From_Conflict_to_Autonomy_in_the_Caucasus_Arsene_Saparov.pdf.

⁸⁴ Ivi. Pg. 150-151.

construct. Thus, Lenin organized the Soviet state as a Federation, creating a multitude of socialist republics, which in turn contained autonomous regions and oblasts following ethnic lines, to appease the different ethnic groups. This wasn't a genuine attempt to create a decentralized state, which would go directly against the tenets of democratic centralism, but rather a temporary concession for the sake of stability, based on the Marxist interpretation on the issue of nationalities. Nonetheless those principles would be entrenched in the USSR Constitution, and almost 70 years later they would serve as legitimization for the various popular fronts emerging with Perestroika. Bolsheviks were in fact convinced that national borders and ethnic differences would eventually wither away spontaneously, just like the state, once the revolution was advanced enough to reach a true communist society. In the meantime, the Bolsheviks would co-opt local elites into ruling their respective region under the guide of the CPSU and use them to build socialism. It was official practice that the general secretary of the local communist party was of the titular nationality of that territory. Under Lenin, the policy of *Korenitsatsiya* was launched, which gave different nationalities the right to their own language and culture, as well as some degree of autonomy. This policy was reverted by Stalin, who instead decided to push for a strong russification process, fearing that local nationalism would grow too strong.⁸⁵ From that moment on, the loyalty of the local elites rested on a delicate balance between the threat of force, economic support and privileges, while ethnic grievances and jealousies were silenced by Soviet repression. As was the case with Eastern Europe, as soon as those elements were removed, the pent-up grievances and the interest of the local elites reemerged, with deadly implications.

Thus, at the beginning of 1990 the democratization process was maturing in a system that had been strongly delegitimized by Glasnost. It is at this moment that both Gorbachev and Yeltsin had to place their bets moving forward. Gorbachev decided to invest in the Communist Party and its reformation, and by extension the USSR, by creating the office of the President of the USSR, elected by the by the CPD. Yeltsin instead, understanding the implications of the growing nationalism, choose to focus on the Russian SSR and its reformed local Congress and Supreme Soviet. The loss of eastern Europe and the unrest

⁸⁵Slezkine, Y. (1994). The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism. *Slavic Review*, 53(2), 414–452. Pg.433. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2501300>.

in the frontier republics had a disastrous impact on the economy and contributed to the rise on Russian nationalistic sentiments. Furthermore, Russian minorities in other socialist republics were at risk of being separated from their homeland and were frightful of future discrimination. The discontent with Gorbachev's leadership and the state of the USSR was aptly channeled by Yeltsin, who started to embrace a Russian nationalist rhetoric.⁸⁶ In doing so, he planned to use the Russian SSR and his electorate as a base to challenge definitively Gorbachev's leadership. Even more, Yeltsin hoped to use the Russian SSR as instrument to implement his program of social democratic and market-oriented reforms, effectively sidestepping his rival. At the march elections for the Russian Congress, the city of Sverdlovsk elected Yeltsin as deputy to the Russian congress. Furthermore, the elections was a victory for the reformers, with the informal organization Democratic Russia securing a majority over the communist in the Russian Congress of People's Deputies. With the majority secured, Yeltsin was elected at the Russian Supreme Soviet and became its chairman, effectively becoming the leader of the Russian SSR. Gorbachev tried to prevent his election by appealing to the deputies, stating that his election would be a danger for the Soviet Union. His prediction would eventually prove correct.⁸⁷

2.1.4 The CPSU's hardliners on the offensive: the creation of the Communist Party of the Russian SSR

Against this backdrop, the anti-Perestroika forces within the apparat started to coordinate their efforts, switching from passive bureaucratic resistance to an active one. The pivotal role of the Russian SSR became evident among the more conservative Party members at the top of the hierarchy, united in the Communist Initiative Movement, and among middle and lower ranking members of the apparat. The CIM had been relentlessly pressuring Gorbachev to allow the creation of a Communist Party in the Russian SSR (RCP), something always rejected by the CPSU for fear of federative deviations. At their congress in January 1990, the idea was first advanced and was later developed in a following congress in April, after Yeltsin had become the Chairman of the SS. The CIM efforts had been welcomed enthusiastically by many within the apparatus, especially those whose positions was jeopardized by the reforms. The conservative plan wasn't

⁸⁶ Zlotnik, M. (2003). Yeltsin and Gorbachev: The Politics of Confrontation. *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 5(1), 128–164. Pg. 144. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26925263>.

⁸⁷ Ivi. Pg. 145.

dissimilar to what Yeltsin wanted to achieve and differed only in its end goal. The objective of the conservatives was to create a powerbase in the Russian SSR to challenge Gorbachev and his new institutions at the federation level, using the resources and the institutions of the RSFSR to stop Gorbachev's reforms.⁸⁸ After all, 54% percent of CPSU members were inside the territory of the Russian SSR, not to mention that, if a Russian CP was to be founded, it would be given its own apparatus, allowing it to exercise economic and political control of the RSFSR. In this manner, the anti-Perestroika forces would control the largest SSR in the Union and could use the Soviet apparatus to remove Gorbachev.⁸⁹ Yeltsin's election as chairman of the Supreme Soviet, however, gave the conservative yet another reason to act quickly. It was becoming increasingly evident, at least to Gorbachev's opponents, that the next phase of the struggle for Perestroika would take place at the national level. Having declared the primacy of Russian law over USSR law, Yeltsin had begun implementing his reform project within the Russian SSR. To circumvent Gorbachev, the conservatives became even more active in lobbying for the creation of a RCP, as it was now necessary to counter Yeltsin at the SSR level as well as Gorbachev at the USSR level. At first Gorbachev managed to block those proposals but when, under pressure from the independent reformers, Article 6 was amended to allow for political pluralism, it was impossible to keep the RCP from being created. In April Gorbachev reluctantly chaired meeting of the Russian bureau within the CPSU's CC, and a preparatory committee for an RCP congress was created. With issues rising constantly in the USSR however, Gorbachev was absent for most of its work, leaving the conservatives working on their own devices. The disdain felt toward Gorbachev by the future RCP members became apparent at its founding Congress in June. Initially, the gathering was supposed to be an all-Russian conference on the matter of the RCP and saw the participation of both the CC's Russian Bureau and an initiative committee created by the CIM. When the conference started, however, the delegates immediately transformed it into a founding Congress and forced Gorbachev to present his speech only after the delegates had thoroughly debated on the RCP foundation. Given Gorbachev position as General Secretary of the CPSU, this violation of protocol was especially grievous, and

⁸⁸Urban, J., Solovei, V. (2021). *Russia's Communists At The Crossroads* (1st ed.). Routledge. Pg. 39. <https://www.perlego.com/book/2527786>.

⁸⁹Hahn, G. (2018). *Russia's Revolution from Above, 1985-2000* (1st ed.). Routledge. Pg. 127. <https://www.perlego.com/book/1382194>.

showed the hostility the delegates had toward him. Soon after Polozkov, who would be later elected as General Secretary of the RCP, openly criticized Gorbachev's conduct, pointing out the failures of his reform program and his inability to defeat those who had turned their back on socialism. Moreover, to Gorbachev dismay, his recommendation for the RCP secretary was ignored.⁹⁰ After his election, Polozkov quickly adopted a more conciliatory approach. While he made no attempt at hiding his adherence to Leninist principles, he declared that he was eager to collaborate with both Gorbachev and Yeltsin and quickly distanced himself from the extremist hardliners such as N. Andreyeva. Among the rank of the RCP figured the names of communists who would eventually become the leaders of Russian communism after the fall of the URSS. They were Tiulkin, Kriuchkov, Prigarin, Kuptsov and finally, the future leader of the CP of the Russian Federation, Gennady Zyuganov.⁹¹ It's worth mentioning that since its foundation, the RCP leadership was already becoming divided among different ideological currents. When all the pillars of socialism were discussed and challenged, they as well would develop their personal interpretations of socialist theory, upon which their future political careers would be based. For the moment, however, most of the leadership was gravitating towards two different poles, uncompromising orthodox Marxist-Leninism on one side and a more moderate one, open to a varying degree of reforms. Zyuganov instead was an outlier, for he joined the RCP on the ground of his Russian nationalism. While he was a devoted communist, he opposed Gorbachev and Yeltsin policies for their disastrous effect on the Soviet Union, and by extent Russia, rather than for ideological reasons. Zyuganov nationalist ideas weren't shared among the conservatives of the RCP, but they would, however, become an ideological cornerstone of its successor, the CPRF, as well see later in the chapter.⁹²

⁹⁰ Harris, J. (2004). *Subverting the system: Gorbachev's reform of the party's apparatus, 1986–1991*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers. Pg. 110-111. <https://archive.org/details/subvertingsystem0000harr/mode/2up>.

⁹¹ Ivi. Pg. 112-113.

⁹² March, L. (2002). *The Communist Party in Post-Soviet Russia*. Manchester University Press. Pg. 21. https://archive.org/details/communistpartyin0000marc_w7a1/page/176/mode/2up.

2.1.5 The collapse of the USSR

Immediately after his election as chairman of the Supreme Soviet, Yeltsin made two watershed decisions that sealed the Union's fate. Firstly, he declared the sovereignty Russian SSR, stating that Russian law had primacy over Soviet one, as well as complete independence in governing its internal and external affairs. Under this premise, Yeltsin argued for the introduction of a new Constitution via referendum, for the definitive transition to a market economy, and the creation of new independent institutions.⁹³ Secondly, when at the 28th party congress Gorbachev reaffirmed the vanguard role of a reformed CPSU, Yeltsin responded by resigning from the Communist Party, stating that his responsibility towards the Russian desire for democracy took precedence. Soon after the deputies of the Democratic Platform followed Yeltsin's example and left the CPSU, intending to create a new party. Already before the Russian declaration of sovereignty, the Baltic states and the Azer and Georgia SSRs had declared their own. Yet those declarations happened independently of one another, with gaps in time between them. When Yeltsin announced his intentions, a chain reaction started. One by one the SSRs declared their independence within days of one another, in an event known as the "Parade of sovereignties" that lasted for the entire summer.⁹⁴ It therefore became evident to Gorbachev that Lenin's URSS was now dangerously out of date and needed renewal if the Union was to keep existing. Therefore, he was forced into negotiations with the republics to draft a new treaty of the Union. Yeltsin and the other republics' leaders pushed strongly for a confederation, with a high degree of autonomy, while Gorbachev draft kept considerable power at the center. To undercut the republic's resistance, Gorbachev announced a Union-wide referendum on the preservation of the USSR. The vagueness of the question posed and the boycott of the referendum by the Baltic states and the Caucasus republics, the most independentist regions, resulted in a positive outcome for Gorbachev. Yeltsin, however, once again used Gorbachev initiatives against him, affixing to the question on the URSS a vote on the creation of the Presidency of the Russian SSR, elected by popular vote and with considerable executive powers.⁹⁵ Yeltsin's proposal passed with

⁹³ Ellison, H. (2012). Boris Yeltsin and Russia's Democratic Transformation ([edition unavailable]). University of Washington Press. Pg. 29. <https://www.perlego.com/book/723519>.

⁹⁴ Malia, M. (2008). Soviet Tragedy ([edition unavailable]). Free Press. Pg. 470. <https://www.perlego.com/book/779753>.

⁹⁵ Ellison, H. (2012). Boris Yeltsin and Russia's Democratic Transformation ([edition unavailable]). University of Washington Press. Pg. 35-38. <https://www.perlego.com/book/723519>.

overwhelming support and the elections were scheduled for March 1991, with the most prominent figures being the RCP's candidate Ryzhkov and the eventual winner Yeltsin.

Parallel to the question of the new union treaty rested the matter of economic liberalization. In 1991 it became evident that the economic reforms envisioned by Gorbachev had failed. The coexistence of a state-led market with a private one, the struggle between central planners and independent managers, the loss of the outer empire and its output, and the complete lack of institution, regulations, and retail networks to support economic liberalization had brought the Soviet economy on its knees. The command economy, that although stagnating had satisfied USSR's necessities, was unable to run as intended and the private economy lacked the necessary environment to develop. Thus, what the USSR was experiencing in '90-91 was essentially the worst of both worlds. This, in addition to Yeltsin's calls for a market economy and economic integration in the new union, pushed the reforming part of the CPSU to plan for more incisive reforms. Therefore, various commissions tasked with planning a definitive market transition appeared. The most radical one, a shock therapy approach proposed by economist Shatalin and Yavlinski was rejected by Gorbachev and his presidential Council, and other less radical ones were progressively being proposed. However, after Yeltsin coopted Shatalin and his plan, with the intention of implementing it autonomously in Russia, Gorbachev was forced to seek rapprochement with Yeltsin. The result was the 500-day program, a shock therapy approach that would be implemented in the time span that gives it its name. The program, however, gave the republics autonomy in collecting taxes, managing natural resources, currency emissions and foreign trade.⁹⁶ As soon as the details of the plan were revealed in the Russian CPD, Polozkov and the rest of the RCP strongly rejected it, warning against the disastrous effect it would have on the Russian economy.⁹⁷ Furthermore, if this plan was to be implemented, it would eventually result in dissolution of the Soviet State, and when the moment came Gorbachev could not accept that. But it wasn't just his ideological conviction that led him to that conclusion, but also

⁹⁶ Ellison, H. (2012). *Boris Yeltsin and Russia's Democratic Transformation* ([edition unavailable]). University of Washington Press. Pg. 34. <https://www.perlego.com/book/723519>.

⁹⁷ Harris, J. (2004). *Subverting the system: Gorbachev's reform of the party's apparatus, 1986-1991*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers. Pg. 128. <https://archive.org/details/subvertingsystem0000harr/mode/2up>.

the awareness that after many reformers resigned from the CPSU, the Party, and therefore the apparatus, shifted significantly towards the conservative camp.

With Perestroika now effectively promising the demise of the Soviet Union, the hard liners shifted from their previous passive resistance to an active one. In the last months of 1990, meetings with officials from the military-industrial complex, the army, and the bureaucrats became more frequent and confrontational. In January a crackdown by the Soviet authorities in a seceding Lithuania caused many victims and was interpreted as a message to the rest of the republics. In March, the leaders of the RCP attempted to have Yeltsin removed from his position as Chairman of the Supreme Soviet and were stopped only by massive demonstration in the city of Moscow, threatening open revolt if Yeltsin was removed.⁹⁸ As the conservative grew bolder, Gorbachev tried to appease them by trying to retreat on more conservatives' positions. He issued decrees limiting the press and demonstrations, and elected conservatives' figures in important offices, the most important being the nominations of hard liner Pavlov as prime minister of the USSR. Pavlov himself in June would lead a quasi-Coup, petitioning the Supreme Soviet of the USSR to transfer executive powers from the President of the Union, Gorbachev, to the prime minister of the Union, himself. The Supreme Soviet denied the request and Pavlov had to backpedal, stating that his intentions were being misrepresented.⁹⁹ Meanwhile, the issue of the Union Treaty still loomed in the background, and Gorbachev was still forced to make concessions. When the final draft was announced in August, it was clear that the republic had won the negotiations. The new Union Treaty recognized the sovereignty of the republics and their autonomy, it bound the Union and its members to respect human rights as expressed in the UN Declaration and recognized the right of all republics to leave the Union if they so wished.¹⁰⁰ The announcement of the treaty in August forced the hard liners to attempt one last decisive action to prevent what they considered the end of the Soviet State, unknowingly contributing to its ultimate demise. On August 19, eight high ranking ministries and officials from Gorbachev's government created the State Committee of the State Emergency. Taking advantage of Gorbachev's absence, they

⁹⁸ Harris, J. (2004). *Subverting the system: Gorbachev's reform of the party's apparatus, 1986–1991*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers. Pg. 142. <https://archive.org/details/subvertingsystem0000harr/mode/2up>.

⁹⁹ Murray, D. (2018). *A Democracy Of Despots* (1st ed.). Routledge. Pg. 110-113. <https://www.perlego.com/book/1597924>.

¹⁰⁰ Ellison, H. (2012). *Boris Yeltsin and Russia's Democratic Transformation* ([edition unavailable]). University of Washington Press. Pg. 42. <https://www.perlego.com/book/723519>.

launched a full military coup in Moscow, attempting to seize power. The SCSE immediately attempted to gain legitimacy by promising a series of populist measures, mainly the restoration of order, of the economy. Moreover, the SCSE declared the disbanding of all political parties and declared Martial Law.

By summer 1991 however, the Soviet population had been made aware of its prerogatives after years of Perestroika and Glasnost, and had already made their voices heard in more than one occasion. The putschist, being mostly bureaucrats and state officials, while holding positions of great power, lacked real influence among the population. Even more, the SCSE members gravely overestimate the army's loyalty. After years of war in Afghanistan and the failed military interventions in Azerbaijan and the Baltic states, compounded by the social changes of Perestroika, the Soviet army had changed. Many soldiers were young and shared the same ideals of the civilians that had rushed into the streets to protest the SCSE actions. Notably, some soldiers and officers defected to the opposition, with even some KGB's detachments refusing to act against the protesters, further undermining the coup's objectives. Yeltsin, that was just outside of Moscow when the putsch took place, immediately rushed to Moscow and joined the protests in the city. Understanding the opportunity he had just been given, he delivered a speech against the SCSE on top of a tank, becoming the symbol of the struggle for democratization and forever cementing his legacy as the defender of soviet democratization. When it became clear that the previous regime could not be restored, the SCSE was forced to abandon its attempt.¹⁰¹ Gorbachev, who was in Crimea when the coup took place and had been under house arrest, returned to Moscow and attempted to gain control of the situation. Unfortunately, he made the mistake of insisting on asserting the CPSU's leading role in the Democratization process. Thus, at the CPD session held in the aftermath of the coup, Yeltsin forced the general secretary to read the transcript of the SCSE creation, showing the role the CPSU had in the attempted coup. From that moment on the Soviet Union unraveled. Most of the SSRs had been announcing their sovereignty, the CPSU had lost what little legitimacy it had left, only supported by the remaining most devoted communists. In November the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, that had been ruling

¹⁰¹ SHAUMIAN, T. (1991). The August Coup: As I Saw it. *World Affairs: The Journal of International Issues*, 3, 17–20. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45064112>.

the country for over 70 years was banned by Presidential Decree. Meanwhile by December, all the Soviet Republics had declared their intention to secede from the Union, with only Russia and Kazakhstan remaining in the USSR. Soon after Yeltsin, who had traveled to Kiev to discuss economic agreements, signed the Belovezha Accords alongside the Ukrainian and Belarusian Presidents, dissolving the Soviet Union.

2.2 The Communist movement during the period of prohibition

2.2.1 The range of Communist parties, movements and organizations

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the subsequent ban of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) by Russian President Boris Yeltsin on November 6, 1991, did not result in the disappearance of the communist movement in Russia. Instead, it led to a proliferation of organizations, factions, and movements aiming to restore or reinvent communism under the new legal and political constraints. This period, between the ban and the formal founding of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF) in February 1993, is often referred to as the "period of prohibition" and was marked by factionalism, ideological contestation, legal battles, and grassroots resilience. Gorbachev's attempts to implement intra party democracy and the progressive abandonment of democratic centralism, although too late to save the party, laid the foundations of communist survival. The various groups and platforms that emerged within the CPSU in its last years served as lifeboats in the immediate aftermath of the ban and sprouted in the parties and organization of post-soviet Russia. Following the ban on CPSU activities, by early 1992, at least thirty different political groups had emerged, many of which claimed to be the CPSU's rightful heirs. These included a whole spectrum of political associations, from the more organized movements to the more spontaneous associations, varying in size, strategy, and ideological orientation. Among the most notable neo communist parties were the Russian Communist Workers' Party (RCWP), the Union of Communists (UC), the Russian Party of Communists (RPC), the Socialist Party

of Working People (SPWP), the Bolshevik Platform, the All-Union Communist Party of Bolsheviks (ACPB). To better understand the full range of the neo communist parties, their political program and their relationship with the defunct CPSU, a summary of the political stance of each party is to understand how divided communist leadership was after the fall.

The first neo communist movement to be analyzed is the RCWP. Founded in November 1991 in Ekaterinburg and led by hard liners Anpilov and Tyulkin, it traces its origins to the Communist Initiative Movement, one of the many platforms within the CPSU, that brought together orthodox Leninist party members who sought to reestablish the leading role of the workers.¹⁰² The RCWP's charter reflected this ideal, mandating that a majority of its elected members had to be workers. The party rejected parliamentary democracy, market economy and any form of private property. Furthermore, it found in Khrushchev's reform's the seed of collapse.¹⁰³ Moreover, the RCWP called for the restoration of the Soviet Union and the return to the command economy. From its first moments, the RCWP claimed its legitimacy as the true heir of the CPSU. It strongly rejected the possibility of restoring the defunct CPSU, arguing that it had succeeded the party, both spirit and function. There is a strong possibility that this idea might find its origins in the CIM, since the platform played a key role in creating the RCP, hoping to create a pole within the RFSSR to counter Gorbachev's reforms. In line with its Leninist ideals, the RCWP saw itself as the vanguard party of the workers class¹⁰⁴, making its leadership strongly opposed collaboration on equal terms with the various other Communist groups. If any unification attempt were to take place, they could only occur under the RCWP's guide. This uncompromising position would later be challenged by both internal dissent and the evolving political realities. Moreover, RCWP has been deeply involved in political activism, especially at the local level. One of its major early contributions was the formation of the Alliance of Moscow Workers, a body intended to organize workers resistance led by V. Anpilov, who later played a central role in the "Working Russia"

¹⁰²Lowenhardt, J. (2013). Party Politics in Post-communist Russia (1st ed.). Routledge. Pg 135.
<https://www.perlego.com/book/1626905>.

¹⁰³ Urban, J., Solovei, V. (2021). Russia's Communists At The Crossroads (1st ed.). Routledge. Pg. 25-26.
<https://www.perlego.com/book/2527786>.

¹⁰⁴ March, L. (2002). The Communist Party in Post-Soviet Russia. Manchester University Press. Pg. 30.
https://archive.org/details/communistpartyin0000marc_w7a1/page/176/mode/2up.

movement.¹⁰⁵ As the party matured, ideological divergences started to emerge. Disagreements over programmatic direction surfaced during party plenums, with tensions growing between the party's original components and the demands of the more radicalized members, who led the activist's sections. These disagreements resulted in a split, with R. Kosolapov and V. Iakushev, key members of the RCWP Central Committee, expelled. Defying their former party, they created the "Leninist Platform" and aligned themselves with the organizational committee of what would be Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF). Their departure led to the defection of entire RCWP PPOs, including up to 30 percent of the Moscow branch, which significantly weakened its urban base. Further division appeared on the issue of the CPRF. While the RCWP leadership strongly rejected any form of CPRF-led unification, its local branches often defied central directives¹⁰⁶. Many regional organizations participated in the restoration efforts and would send delegates to CPRF conferences, going against the party's official line. This tension between the central committee and grassroots members highlighted the limits of the RCWP's hierarchical authority and the growing appeal of a unified Communist Party. By early 1993, the RCWP found itself increasingly isolated, with its support base growing increasingly fragmented. Their firm opposition to the CPRF unification, their ideological rigidity and their rejection of parliamentary democracy as a bourgeois deviation limited their appeal in a political environment that was now characterized by political compromise and coalition building.

In the same conservative spectrum stood the Union of Communists, formed by former members of the CPSU's Marxist Platform aligned with A. Prigarin.¹⁰⁷ The UC called for the return to a command economy, rejected wage labor and accepted private property only when earned through one's own labor. Furthermore, the party insisted on the recreation of the USSR. The primary goal of the UC, however, wasn't to create a standalone political party, but rather organize nationwide initiative to rebuild the original one. As such, its activities focused mostly on fostering structural reunification rather than building a strong electoral base. Even more, the UC objective of preserving the CPSU can be traced back

¹⁰⁵Lowenhardt, J. (2013). *Party Politics in Post-communist Russia* (1st ed.). Routledge. Pg 131. <https://www.perlego.com/book/1626905>.

¹⁰⁶ Urban, J., Solovei, V. (2021). *Russia's Communists At The Crossroads* (1st ed.). Routledge. Pg. 25-26. <https://www.perlego.com/book/2527786>.

¹⁰⁷ March, L. (2002). *The Communist Party in Post-Soviet Russia*. Manchester University Press. Pg. 29. https://archive.org/details/communistpartyin0000marc_w7a1/page/176/mode/2up.

to before the ban, when it declared its readiness to become the legally recognized successor of the CPSU if the latter collapsed or departed from Communist ideals. On this note, UC organized a Plenum of the CPSU Central Committee, which decided to hold the Twentieth CPSU Conference. In doing this, UC worked closely with the Bolshevik Platform (BP). Even more, the UC would play a pivotal role in the creation of the Union of Communist Parties-CPSU in March 1993, an attempt to reconstruct the CPSU and to challenge the newborn CPRF.¹⁰⁸

Focusing instead on the more moderate neo communist movement, The Russian Party of Communists, created by A. Kriuchkov and B. Slavin, was formerly associated with the Marxist Platform within the CPSU. Originally it took part in the SLP founding conference, but later its leaders opted to create an independent party instead. Highly critical of Stalinism, the party position itself as a middle ground between the SLP and the UC. The RCP distinguished itself from other neo communist parties for their economic program, which called for an updated version of Lenin's NEP. In the system they envisioned, a central planned economy would be augmented by the introduction of some market principles, alongside the introduction of state-regulated private enterprises and private concession of agricultural land.¹⁰⁹ True to their generally moderately reformist view, they had a positive opinion of previous Soviet reformation attempts under Khrushchev and Gorbachev. The party was involved early in the post CPSU process of reunification, having participated at the Congress of Democratic Left-Wing Forces, which aimed to establish a coalition of communists, socialists, and other leftist forces. The RPC distinguished itself from other parties that originated from the Marxist Platform for its pragmatic approach. It was not against strategic alliances and joined Zyuganov's National Salvation Front, an anti-Yeltsin coalition consisting of both communist and nationalist forces. Despite this pragmatic approach, the RPC was selective on the groups it collaborated with. For example, during the first unification talks among Communist parties in early 1993, the RPC refused to participate in further negotiations unless the Union of Communists and the RCWP were also included. In late 1992 the two leaders of the party progressively grew apart, divided by ideological issues as well as what to make

¹⁰⁸ Urban, J., Solovei, V. (2021). *Russia's Communists At The Crossroads* (1st ed.). Routledge. Pg. 24-25. <https://www.perlego.com/book/2527786>.

¹⁰⁹ March, L. (2002). *The Communist Party in Post-Soviet Russia*. Manchester University Press. Pg. 29. https://archive.org/details/communistpartyin0000marc_w7a1/page/176/mode/2up.

of the upcoming CPRF foundational congress. While Kriuchkov wanted to keep the RPC autonomy, Slavin wanted to join the CPRF control it from within. With compromise seemingly impossible, Slavin left the RPC bringing almost two thirds of its members with him.¹¹⁰

On the same moderate current, The Socialist Labor Party (SLP) was formed in the early autumn of 1991 as a moderate communist group. Its creation was led by prominent figures in Soviet politics, with many of being either former Soviet or R.S.F.S.R. deputies, allowing them to leverage their parliamentary connections to rapidly establish the party. Key founders included Anatolii A. Denisov and Roy A. Medvedev and Ivan Rybkin. The SLP's ideological foundation was influenced by Gorbachev's 1991 draft for a new CPSU program, that called for greater political pluralism, parliamentary democracy, mixed economy principles, as well as the introduction of private firms. The party aimed to transfer the post-communist East-Central European model of successor communist parties to the Russian context.¹¹¹ At its founding conference on October 26, 1991, representatives from nearly all the former CPSU's left-wing factions attended, in hopes of influencing its agenda. However, disputes over the party's name, with some members demanding to include the term "communist", fractured the conference. This disagreement led to the walkout of the Communist Initiative Movement and the Prigarin's section of the Marxist Platform, who refused to join. Later, the Kriuchkov group also departed due to dissatisfaction with the SLP's ideological stance, which led to the foundation of more orthodox Marxist-Leninist factions. The SLP was officially registered in November 1991 and actively worked to reach reconciliation with the Yeltsin government. Registration enabled the SLP to legally participate in political activities during the ban, attracting many former CPSU local functionaries in its ranks. Moreover, the SLP's primary advantage over other neo communists' group was its connections to left-wing parliamentary factions, with thirty-one Russian Congress people's deputies as registered members. By the beginning of 1993, the SLP had developed organizational structures across nearly all regions of Russia, with a reported membership of around 100,000. The SLP, however, suffered from internal ideological strife, with many rank and file members holding

¹¹⁰ Urban, J., Solovei, V. (2021). *Russia's Communists At The Crossroads* (1st ed.). Routledge. Pg. 27-28. <https://www.perlego.com/book/2527786>.

¹¹¹ Ivi. Pg. 21

traditional Marxist views. Even more, rank and file hoped to transform the SLP into a true communist successor in the events of Yeltsin's ban on communist party not being lifted. During 1992, the SLP supported the Russian Congress of People's Deputies resistance against Yeltsin's shock therapy. Unlike radical communist factions, the SLP advocated for an agreement among Russian political faction to create a unified reform program, while on the matter of communist unification, SLP leadership advocated for the restoration of the Russian Communist Party (RCP), believing it should happen within a strictly legal approach. By June 1993 most members had left to join the CPRF or create other parties, which led the moderate SLP leadership to reorient the party as a non-communist, center-left organization, renouncing continuity with the CPSU. These changes were formalized at the SLP's fourth congress in February 1994.¹¹²

Of lesser relevance among the neo communists' movements, the All-Union Communist Party of Bolsheviks (ACPB), led by Nina Andreeva, was one of the most ideologically uncompromising successor parties. The ACPB took a hardline stance against coalitions, market reforms, and cooperation with most other communist parties, which accused of revisionism. The ACPB was founded in November 1991 by supporters of N. Andreeva, who had led the "Unity" movement since 1989. Unity was formed as a platform to contest "revisionism" of the Soviet past, mainly Stalinism, and to oppose Gorbachev's reforms. This ideological position carried over into the ACPB, which called for a categorical opposition to the market and to private property. Even more, the party was completely opposed to any attempt at reforming either the "opportunist" Gorbachev's CPSU and the RCP, refusing cooperation with parties that did, and prohibiting its members from doing so. This, however, caused internal divisions. For example, the Kaliningrad section of the ACPB supported the CPSU restoration and chose to leave the party instead of adhering to its non-cooperation line.¹¹³

Lastly, it's worth mentioning a peculiar organization founded by former RCP member Zyuganov. Already famous in the communist circles before the collapse for his

¹¹² Urban, J., Solovei, V. (2021). *Russia's Communists At The Crossroads* (1st ed.). Routledge. Pg. 21. <https://www.perlego.com/book/2527786>.

¹¹³ Ivi. Pg. 23

unconventional nationalistic ideals, Zyuganov lamented the fall of the URSS for the devastation it brought to the Russian State rather than ideological motivation. Zyuganov would take a different route during the prohibition period compared to the other communist group, as he worked to create a broad coalition of forces opposing Yeltsin's Presidency. The coalition, named the National Salvation Front, was predicated on nationalist sentiment. While it proved to be a primary source for communist grassroots activity, it was composed also of right-wing nationalist. As the name suggests, the coalition challenged Yeltsin based on nationalist sentiment rather than communist ideology. The NSF would prove instrumental in helping Zyuganov shape his "red brown" synthesis and the experience gained as its leader would influence his tenure as the leader of the reconstituted Communist Party.¹¹⁴

2.2.2 Spontaneous grassroot activism

It would be wrong, however, to consider those organizations as fully developed parties. In most cases the delimitation between groups and ideologies took place only at the leadership level. Most former CPSU's rank-and-file loyalists were confused by all the differing ideologies, and the high number of organizations, parties and movements only made it harder to understand each one's differences. Even more, the neo-communist organizations lacked a network outside of the major cities they were based in. Therefore, the various ideological and political confrontations among neo communist groups were mostly confined in their respective Central Committees. Generally, rank and file members across the country did not pay much attention to those divisions and acted in a unified manner. This was the case especially with marches and gatherings during important communist anniversaries, that saw the participation of rank and file activists regardless of their affiliations. An example of this was during a street protest taking place in Moscow on November 7th, 1991, organized by RCWP's affiliate Toiling Russia, that saw activists participate coming from virtually all communist groups. Even more, the practice of dual or even triple membership was widespread, which made it almost impossible for most

¹¹⁴ March, L. (2002). *The Communist Party in Post-Soviet Russia*. Manchester University Press. Pg. 26. https://archive.org/details/communistpartyin0000marc_w7a1/page/176/mode/2up.

movements to effectively assess their membership figures, to organize activities and to develop an effective presence at the local level. Moreover, rank and file members often showed resentment towards their communist leaders for their ideological squabbles, and on many occasions, they pressured them for the creation of a unified Communist Party.¹¹⁵

Alongside the activities of neo-communist organizations were the activities of the remnants of the CPSU, that either spontaneously or in an organized manner, kept going their political activities. Despite the ban, many of the CPSU's primary party organizations persisted in their activities in different regions, organizing commemorative events at important anniversaries and continuing their political activities through veterans' groups, trade unions, and factory committees. These efforts were often informal and spontaneous but demonstrated the endurance of the communist networks at the regional level. In some regions, pre-existing CPSU structures continued operating with little interruption. The L'vov regional organization, for instance, remained active in opposition to local nationalist authorities, demonstrating the durability of Soviet-era networks. After the wave of resignation from the CPSU in 1990-91, those who remained were significantly loyal to the Communist Party and its identity. This loyalty never abandoned them, even when affiliating with newly formed parties or remaining formally unaffiliated, which created pressure for new Communist Parties to preserve CPSU. In addition to urban centers, grassroots activism in rural and industrial regions played a key role in maintaining a party presence. In various oblast and autonomous republics, party activists used cultural clubs, trade unions, and collective farm organizations as a cover to spread communist literature, to celebrate Soviet anniversaries, and to hold informal party meetings.¹¹⁶ Even more local activists often organized various public protests of Yeltsin's liberal reforms, linking the economic hardship to the collapse of socialism. This activism would play a central role in preserving ideological continuity and mobilizing disillusioned Russian voters.

As such, the communist movement during the period of prohibition can't be understood as something uniform. The fall of the CPSU left communist lost and disorganized, with

¹¹⁵ Urban, J., Solovei, V. (2021). *Russia's Communists At The Crossroads* (1st ed.). Routledge. Pg. 29. <https://www.perlego.com/book/2527786>.

¹¹⁶ Ermakov, Ia. G., Shavshukova, T. V., & Iakunechkin, V. V. (1994). The Communist Movement in Russia During the Period of Prohibition. *Russian Politics & Law*, 32(4), 39–59. Pg.52. <https://doi.org/10.2753/RUP1061-1940320439>.

its members moving often in completely opposite directions, with different objects that were often mutually exclusives. The high-ranking officials of the CPSU and RCP managed to create their own movements using the platforms that existed within those parties. Having already a group of like-minded individuals, the platforms were seamlessly transformed into neo-communist movements and parties. Conversely rank and file rallied around their local PPOs and kept their political agitation activities as they had under the USSR. Both, however, were significantly limited in what they could realistically hope to achieve. The PPOs had always operated under close supervision of the party, being vertically integrated within the party apparatus, and communication with other PPOs happened through the party. This meant that when the CPSU and RCP were outlawed, the PPOs lacked direction and the ability to communicate with the other PPOs, where thus very limited in their potential political activity. Even more, the way in which they had operated during the union meant that after the fall, rank and file were still looking up to the notable communist figures for guidance. But at the top however, the leadership was divided along ideological lines, and was unable to provide any semblance of direction, both practical and political, lacking any real contact with the PPOs. As such, for the duration of the ban, the communist movement was crippled by its lack of cohesion and unity as much as it had been right before Yeltsin's ban. The communist leaders had the ideas but lacked any meaningful connection with the rank and file activists and were thus left with no means to attract electors and sympathizers. Likewise, the rank and file had the numbers and the resources to potentially mobilize support, but without ideological direction from above they could only offer the same stale Marxist-Leninist discourses. The communist, therefore, could not aspire for a return on the political stage without a single, unified party to lead its activities. Thus, almost immediately after the ban issued by Yeltsin, calls for its annulment arose universally from the communist sphere, eventually leading to a protracted legal case before the newly established Russian Constitutional Court. The trial that followed, often referred to as the CPSU case, was a watershed in post-Soviet Russian law and would be a test of the country's emerging constitutionalism.

2.2.3 The Constitutional Court verdict on Yeltsin's ban on Communist activities

The legal case began when a group of deputies from the Russian Supreme Soviet submitted a petition to the Constitutional Court. They argued that Yeltsin had exceeded his constitutional powers by banning the CPSU and confiscating its property. The petition emphasized the principle of separation of powers and the necessity for any restriction on political activity to be issued by a court, not the executive. In response, People's Deputy Oleg Rumianstev filed a counter-petition asking the Court to declare the CPSU unconstitutional. This development broadened the scope of the trial into a dual legal examination: one on presidential authority and another on the constitutional status of the CPSU. The Court, which had only recently been established, initially lacked jurisdiction under the 1991 law to assess the legality of political parties. A constitutional amendment (Article 165-1), adopted in April 1992, retroactively granted it this power. For the sake of expediency, the court merged the two petitions into a single case. However, legal uncertainty persisted, since the very notion of the Court evaluating political organizations sparked controversy during the hearings.¹¹⁷ The trial began on July 7, 1992, it would involve 46 witnesses, and 16 legal experts over the course of 52 sessions. From the outset, the trial muddled the lines between legal adjudication and political spectacle, with the courtroom often being transformed into a political forum, with witnesses and attorneys making moral arguments alongside the legal ones. The accusers of the CPSU included figures like Mikhail Fedotov, Sergei Shakhrai, and Andrei Makarov. The Party was defended by Valentin Kuptsov and Viktor Zorkiltsev, after high-profile figures like Mikhail Gorbachev and Vladimir Ivashko refused to appear. Gorbachev dismissed the proceedings for their perceived political nature and refused to testify, which Chairman Zorkin denounced as an insult to the Court. During the trial, the Court was often forced into recess to review highly classified documents from the CPSU and KGB archives that were being uncovered autonomously outside of the court by Yeltsin's administration. As the trial had the attention of the nation, the President used the Constitutional Court as a platform to denounce Soviet crimes to further delegitimize communists. Worth mentioning is that during the trial, President Yeltsin issued a highly controversial decree awarding high-ranking judicial class titles to members of the Court. This act, which

¹¹⁷ Henderson, J. (2007). The Russian Constitutional Court and the Communist Party case: Watershed or whitewash? *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 40(1), 1–16. Pg. 7. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48609588>.

occurred during the recess, was publicly criticized, since it was perceived by many as an inappropriate attempt to influence the judiciary.¹¹⁸

The Court had to resolve whether the CPSU could be legally banned and whether the president had the authority to do so. One of the key legal questions was whether the CPSU, whose leading role had been explicitly enshrined in the 1977 Soviet Constitution, could be retroactively declared unconstitutional. The paradox was evident: the CPSU had committed countless abuses and crimes, but these actions were carried out within a system in which the party's authority was embedded in constitutional law. To avoid such paradox, the Court limited its deliberation to events occurring after the Article 6 amendment. Still, significant attention was given to covering CPSU's abuses. Former political prisoners and dissidents testified to the CPSU's role in mass repression. Ligachev, a senior party figure, testified unapologetically that the CPSU had directed all branches of the Soviet state and it should do so again, giving evidence for those arguing for the party's unconstitutionality.

¹¹⁹The Court's decision, published on November 30, 1992, was essentially a legal compromise. It found that the dissolution of the Party's central structures and the ban imposed by Yeltsin were constitutional, but that the suppression of the local primary party organizations was not. It held that the RCP did not exist as an independent legal entity and therefore was not the subject of a lawful ban. On the matter of the CPSU's constitutionality, the Court declared the issue moot, as the Party had ceased to exist in August-September 1991. It also refused to rule on the legality of the party's past actions, citing the absence of legal norms for such a judgment. Three judges dissented. Judge Kononov condemned the Party outright and asserted its criminality. Judge Luchin opposed the president's decrees, viewing them as unconstitutional. Judge Ebzeev offered a lengthy dissent, concluding that while the CPSU had violated constitutional norms, the president lacked the authority to dissolve it. One of the key issues in the aftermath of the ruling was the Court's inability to declare the CPSU both legal and criminal. It was constrained by the reality that the party's supremacy had been legal under the Soviet Constitution. Thus, while evidence of criminal behaviors such as documented approval of torture were presented, the Court could not legally classify the CPSU as criminal

¹¹⁸ Sergey Toymontsev. (2011). Legal but Criminal: The Failure of the "Russian Nuremberg" and the Paradoxes of Post-Soviet Memory. *Comparative Literature Studies*, 48(3), 296–319. <https://doi.org/10.5325/complitstudies.48.3.0296>.

¹¹⁹ Ibidem

without calling into question the legality of the Soviet state itself. This legal impasse shaped the verdict and signaled the limitations of constitutional law in transitional justice.¹²⁰

While the trial did not lead to legal decommunization, it played an important role in shaping post-Soviet political memory. While some experts define it as a failed Russian Nuremberg, it also suggests that the Court's refusal to bypass legal norms in pursuit of political goals marked a step toward establishing the rule of law. The Court's decision did not satisfy democratic hopes for justice, but it reinforced the principle that state power must operate within a legal framework.

2.3 The Foundation of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation

2.3.1 The main ideological currents in the eve of the CPRF Founding Congress

The Constitutional Court ruling on the Yeltsin ban on communist activities was met by considerable agitation by the Russian communists. At the local level, CPSU's primary party organization kept operating illegally, with spontaneous political agitation and organizing demonstrations on important Soviet anniversaries. As the news of the ruling arrived, they immediately reestablished their official organizations and began inciting notable communist leaders for the recreation of a Communist Party. In the same manner, the leaders of communist movements open for cooperation immediately began planning for the creation of a congress, as the differing ideas on reunification ceased to be merely ideological exercises and became a matter of central importance. Before giving an account on the foundation of the CPRF, it's important to properly categorize the communists' ideological currents that had been developing, as they would all eventually

¹²⁰ Feofanov, Y., Barry, D. (2019). Politics and Justice in Russia: Major Trials of the Post-Stalin Era (1st ed.). Routledge. Pg. 307-308. <https://www.perlego.com/book/1561108>.

converge into the CPRF and influence its program and its policies. Three primary ideological currents can be identified in the communist movements in post-soviet Russia, and by extension in the would be CPRF. The first current was made up of Orthodox Marxist-Leninists, whose adherents remained committed to traditional Soviet-era communist principles, advocating for a return to the ideological purity of CPSU centralization and economic planning. However, this side wasn't unified into a well-defined current but could be further subdivided into the Extreme Orthodoxy side, represented by neo-Stalinists like Nina Andreeva and neo-Leninists such as Tiulkin and Anpilov, that called for strict state control, authoritarian governance, as well as the reestablishment of Soviet-era economic models, and the Moderate Orthodoxy side, represented by figures such as Prigarin and Kriuchkov, which favored strong state socialism but with marginal concessions to political pluralism and localized economic autonomy.¹²¹ The second current was made of Marxist Reformers which occupied the ideological middle ground, advocating for a planned market economy that kept all major industries firmly under state control while embracing selective market mechanisms to boost efficiency and innovation. Their ideology mirrored the spirit of Gorbachev's perestroika and the Prague Spring of 1968, seeking to democratize socialist governance while preserving its economic principles. Furthermore, the group championed political pluralism, freedom of association, and minority rights within the party, marking a significant departure from the previous CPSU practices. This current was represented by figures such as Zorkaltsev and Kuptsov, who had had been actively promoting policies that would later influence the CPRF's economic and political strategy throughout the 1990s. Finally, the last current was composed of Marxist-Leninist Modernizers, who sought to revitalize Marxist-Leninist theory but maintained a more cautionary approach towards ideological change and intra party democratization. They pushed to keep theoretical work at the forefront of their political activity and sought to undergo a sustained battle against the newly emerged bourgeois class. This current found his expression in Kosolapov. The debate among those currents would influence the political strategy of the CPRF in the following years, since, even if they were to some degree mutually exclusive, all those currents would be

¹²¹ Lowenhardt, J. (2013). *Party Politics in Post-communist Russia* (1st ed.). Routledge. Pg 132. <https://www.perlego.com/book/1626905>.

represented inside the party, and the leadership was forced to appease all of them in its quest for unity.¹²²

2.3.2 The Founding Congress of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation

Going back to the reunification process, the initiative for the foundation of a Russian communist party was launched by former leaders of the disbanded RCP, Zyuganov and Kuptsov, alongside delegates from the Socialist Labor Party, while the Union of Communist and the Russian party of Communist offered only their nominal support without active collaboration.¹²³ It's not surprising that the push for the recreation of a Russian CP came from the SLP as well as former members of the RCP. Although they had different ideological reason behind their efforts, before the fall of the USSR they both supported the idea of the creation a Communist Party in the Russian SSR. The SLP wanted this party to be a successor of the CPSU, in the form of a social democratic party, while former RCP's leaders wanted to create a Russian-powerbase to stop the reform process. Thus, the Initiative committee for the second congress of the RCP's successor party was formed, which immediately started to contact the PPOs all over Russia, which had begun the admissions of former communist members, as well as the leaders of the other communist movements. The goal of the committee put them immediately at odds with the RCWP and their self-proclaimed status as the only legitimate CPSU heir, but their relationship with other neo communist parties, as well as the political nature of the future party, was to be determined at its founding congress.

The Restorative Congress was held on February 13–14, 1993, at Kliaz'ma resort, a secluded and heavily guarded location selected to ensure privacy and control. The secrecy surrounding the event was crucial to its success. Away from the eyes of Yeltsin's government and any potential disruptors, the soon to be CPRF was able to structure its political agenda, consolidate its membership and its organization, and ultimately determine its nature. The congress was attended by 805 delegates, exceeding the planned 695, representing a verified 455,000 members from across the Russian Federation. Such large number of delegates, coupled with the short time between the Court's verdict and

¹²² Bozoki, A., Ishiyama, J. (2020). The Communist Successor Parties of Central and Eastern Europe (1st ed.). Pg. 244-245. <https://www.perlego.com/book/1629284>.

¹²³Urban, J., Solovei, V. (2021). Russia's Communists At The Crossroads (1st ed.). Routledge. Pg. 48-49. <https://www.perlego.com/book/2527786>.

the congress, stand as a testament of the size of the communist network during the prohibition period.¹²⁴ Yeltsin's ban didn't result in the disappearance of communists nor the loss of their network but rather it only forced them into hiding or in reducing their activities. Most of the communists simply waited for the right time to come out in the open, and when the moment arrived, they re-emerged as if nothing had happened. The sheer number of representatives, sent by most of the neo communist organizations, created an environment dominated by diverging ideological positions and practical strategies, something unheard of in the CPSU, even in its last years. After all, each movement had its own interpretation for what caused the demise of the CPSU and as well as their own interpretation on how to reform Marxist-Leninist ideology.

Moreover, the various neo communist party leaders used the platform of the congress for different ends, leading to even more debates during the congress. Some joined the congress with positive intentions, debating to push the future party closer to their political position, while others used it as a platform against the congress itself, using it to advance their own agendas and publicize their own parties and movements. After the session started, the latter made themselves heard immediately. RCWP leader Tiulkin made a speech criticizing the perceived inaction of the congress organizers during the ban. After him, RPC leader Kriuchkov opposed the congress' idea of identifying the party as a direct successor of the Russian communist party and instead argued for the creation of an alliance of all the communist parties, in which each movement would retain its independence. After the opposition made their statements Kuptsov, the former RCP's secretary, brought the discourse back on the matter at hand. His report at the congress matched the moderate reformism he showed during the last years of the USSR. He warned against the bureaucratic drift of the CPSU as well as the extreme dogmatization of democratic centralism. Moreover, he exhorted the various communists to ponder on the failures of the CPSU and of Soviet socialism, inviting them to reflect on what went wrong in the socialist experiment. But his most surprising statement was postponing indefinitely the reestablishment of the CPSU and the USSR, defining those who wished for it adventuring fools. In his closing remarks he called for unity and solidarity among the neo

¹²⁴ Ermakov, Ia. G., Shavshukova, T. V., & Iakunechkin, V. V. (1994). The Communist Movement in Russia During the Period of Prohibition. *Russian Politics & Law*, 32(4), 39–59. Pg.58.
<https://doi.org/10.2753/RUP1061-1940320439>.

communist parties and tried to appease adversarial ones by supporting the practice of dual membership, which was widespread among the rank and file.

At the congress there was also a delegation of representing the communist faction in the Russian congress of people's deputies. Deputy Zorkastev presented the draft statutes of the CPRF, emphasizing the provisions for intra party democratization and the decentralized approach in favor of the local PPO, in order to overcome the previous top-down control in the CPSU, which most communist agreed caused the party to lose touch with the masses and led to its fall. After a brief report from the UC leader Prigarin, who insisted on the recreation for the CPSU, it was the turn of NSF leader Zyuganov to address the congress, followed by his associates Belov and Pletneva.¹²⁵ Zyuganov represented a new current that had been emerging, consisting in a synthesis of communist ideals and Russian nationalism and exceptionalism. He believed that the most pressing matter at hand was the restoration of the Russian State, seeking to replicate what he had done during the prohibition period with the National Salvation Front, by searching for allies among the nationalist and anti-reform movements that opposed Yeltsin. His associates reiterated those concepts, with Belov adding his support for a limited market economy using Lenin's NEP as a precedent. With the day ending, the last two reports were presented by Lukianov and Shenin. The former warned the congress that rank and file members in the various regions were growing tired of the conflict among communist leaders and urged the leadership to set aside their ideological differences and concentrate on the swift creation of a unified Communist Party. The latter, instead, sought support for his personal attempt at reconstructing the CPSU, which would be undercut by the CPRF in the following years.

Thus, the first day of the congress amounted to what was essentially a parade of all the different orientations of the communist movement. The second day of the congress instead focused on more practical issues, mainly the election of the 89-member Central Committee and a 7-member Presidium. The CC elections reportedly were difficult and characterized by prolonged discussion, but ultimately the congress reached an agreement. Without wasting any time, the CC nominated the Presidium and, most importantly, its

¹²⁵ Urban, J., Solovei, V. (2021). *Russia's Communists At The Crossroads* (1st ed.). Routledge. Pg. 50-53. <https://www.perlego.com/book/2527786>.

chairman, which would be the leader of the CPRF. Opposite to what had happened 2 years earlier at the RCP congress, this time Kuptsov withdrew his candidacy in favor Zyuganov, which would be chosen Zyuganov as the chairman of the CPRF by the absolute majority of votes.¹²⁶ The election of Zyuganov is a testament of the pragmatic approach chosen by the newly founded Communist Party. Closely monitored by Yeltsin government and competing with other parties for political influence, the CPRF had to substitute the ideology driven approach of the past with newfound realism. Even though Zyuganov position was in the minority among the other deputy chairmen, his political abilities and vigor, undoubtedly helped his case. Furthermore, the CC realized that Zyuganov's synthesis of nationalism and communism could expand the CPRF electorate from the communists to the pool of the disaffected nationalists, allowing for a broad coalition of anti-Yeltsin forces. For this last point, Zyuganov previous experience in forging alliances with other nationalist forces during the prohibition period worked undoubtedly in his favor.¹²⁷ With the session adjourned at the end of the 14th, the party's worked to synthesize the various contributions to the congress into a Programmatic Declaration that would be published on the second of March, alongside the composition of the CPRF presidium.

2.3.3 Towards a party program

The party's Programmatic Declaration would serve as the foundational document for the reconstituted CPRF. It was divided into six distinct sections that outlined the party's political and economic stance, as well as its organizational principles. Unlike previous Soviet-era manifestos, this document was intended to serve as a provisional framework until a definitive program could be created at the next party congress. The declaration was organized in six sections, each dealing with a specific topic, that were organized as follows. The initial section dealt with the failures of the previous system, delivering a candid critique of the Soviet party-state institutional arrangement and attributing its downfall to critical miscalculations, particularly to the failure in keeping pace with the technological revolutions of the 1960s and 1970s. According to the declaration, this

¹²⁶ March, L. (2002). *The Communist Party in Post-Soviet Russia*. Manchester University Press. Pg. 35. https://archive.org/details/communistpartyin0000marc_w7a1/page/176/mode/2up.

¹²⁷ Ibidem

technological stagnation inhibited the economic potential of socialism, resulting in a loss of competitiveness and economic vitality. Additional criticisms targeted the CPSU's nationalities policy, which was described as deeply flawed, leading to ethnic tensions and regional disparities. Furthermore, the bureaucratization of the Soviets was highlighted as a core issue that limited their political contribution and contributed to widespread corruption. The degeneration of the party elite, whose abuse of power and double standards further alienated the population, led to the CPSU losing its legitimacy which led to the collapse of soviet system. Finally, the section concluded with a harsh critic of Gorbachev and his associates, finding them guilty of betraying the socialist cause. The second section, called "The Fatherland Is in Danger", contained a clear nationalist rhetoric, condemning the economic reforms initiated by the Yeltsin's administration and pointing out their role in impoverishing Russian society and degrading its social fabric. Zyuganov's influence in the composition of this section his clear by its rhetoric, which called for the consolidation of democratic and patriotic forces to counteract what was perceived as an existential threat to the Russian sovereignty and, more importantly, its dignity. This appeal for unity wasn't framed as mere political move but rather as a moral obligation to save the Fatherland from Western economic domination and cultural erosion.¹²⁸ The third section dealt with the core goals and principle of the CPRF, listing among its primary objectives the voluntary transition back to socialism, the defense of fundamental civil liberties such as freedom of speech and political association. Though interestingly, despite embracing these democratic principles, the declaration maintained its allegiance to Marxist-Leninist doctrine, prioritizing the interests of the working class and laborers. This ideological blend represented another attempt to modernize communist doctrine while retaining its core tenets, with the objective of creating a compromise among all the different ideological currents that had flowed into the party. The fourth section detailed the party's economic policies, declaring the CPRF's intention to establish a planned-market economy, described as socially oriented and ecologically sustainable. The CPRF opted for a compromise, rejecting the rigid command economic model of the Soviet past while simultaneously opposing full-scale privatization, particularly in land ownership. Furthermore, there was a further rejection of the Western style economic

¹²⁸ Urban, J., Solovei, V. (2021). *Russia's Communists At The Crossroads* (1st ed.). Routledge. Pg. 55-56. <https://www.perlego.com/book/2527786>.

models based on their perceived role in the cultural and spiritual decline of post-Soviet Russia, attributed to the Western influence and the spread of consumerism. Furthermore, certainly under Zyuganov influence, the section extended an olive branch to the Orthodox Church, respecting its role in keeping those negative influences at bay in post-Soviet Russia. The fifth section detailed the CPRF's official position on the fall of the Soviet Union. While critical of the USSR's collapse, the CPRF refrained from demanding its immediate restoration. Instead, it proposed a gradual reintegration of the former Soviet republics that would be modeled after the European Union rather than previous Soviet centralism. Lastly, the final section detailed the CPRF's organizational structure, advocating for the Leninist principles of democratic centralism, which would be balanced by providing internal mechanisms that allowed for critique and debate. Furthermore, the party introduced measures to prevent the reemergence of bureaucratic centralism and, by encouraging openness in its proceedings and allowing members to form associations, akin to the late CPSU's platforms, that could request a hearing on specific issues. Even more dual membership was permitted, and party members were allowed affiliation with other organizations and movements. Concurrently, individuals from other parties could join the CPRF rank by simply showing a party membership card. This last policy was undoubtedly motivated by practical reasons, as it allowed for a great influx of rank and file members into the CPRF, leading to a remarkable growth in party membership at the expense of the rival communist movements, who lost a significant portion of their members as a result and were left significantly weakened.¹²⁹

¹²⁹Urban, J., Solovei, V. (2021). *Russia's Communists At The Crossroads* (1st ed.). Routledge. Pg. 56-57. <https://www.perlego.com/book/2527786>.

2.4 The communist movement and the 1993 Constitutional Crisis

2.4.1 The origins of the institutional struggle

The 1993 Constitutional Crisis in Russia represents a defining moment in the post-Soviet political landscape. It marked the consolidation of executive power under President Boris Yeltsin and set the stage for a trajectory towards authoritarianism. The crisis was rooted in the inherent contradictions of Russia's semi-presidential institutional framework, which gave rise to a dual executive structure. The coexistence of the President's office and the Chairmanship of the Supreme Soviet created inevitable tensions, that were further exacerbated by diverging political and economic visions for post-Soviet Russia, culminating in a violent conflict in the streets of Moscow. The institutional framework of the Russian Federation was the result of both inherited Soviet legacies and political improvisation. While its Parliament and its Constitution were inherited by the former USSR, its executive presidency was the result of Yeltsin's political and practical necessities. The Inherited Soviet Constitution at the time accounted only for the Congress of People Deputies and the Supreme Soviet, conferring the executive role to the Chairman of the SS, that at the time was Khasbulatov. When Yeltsin introduced the elective Presidency a parallel executive office was introduced, that drew its legitimacy directly from the people rather than the parliament. Therefore, both branches of government enjoyed apparent legitimacy, and in the absence of constitutionally prescribed check and balances or a Constitutional Court with the power to resolve conflict of attribution, the attrition between those two offices grew.¹³⁰ Both officials had powers to issue directives, propose legislation, and command government agencies, leading to constant friction, as Yeltsin and Khasbulatov sought to assert their influence over Russia's economic and political restructuring. This situation was exacerbated by the Congress' granting emergency powers to the President in 1991 to properly address the economic crisis and push forward his reform program. These powers enabled Yeltsin to bypass legislative

¹³⁰ Skach, C. (2021). Russia's constitutional dictatorship: A brief history. *University of Miami International and Comparative Law Review*, 29(1), 192-252. Pg. 198-214.
<https://repository.law.miami.edu/umiclrvol29/iss1/6>.

approval for the introduction of economic reforms aimed at privatization and market liberalization, which had been developed by reformist economists like Yegor Gaidar.

Initially, stability and cooperation between branches was granted by the fact that most deputies showed support for the reform program, but it would prove to be a peace built on rocky foundations. The election for the CPD was held in 1990, with the Soviet Union still existence, meaning that the CPD composition wasn't the result of open pluralist elections, but rather semi-free ones, with CPSU's candidates facing independent ones. This meant that in the two years after the fall of the Union, deputies weren't tied to political parties nor political programs. This freedom meant that deputies were guided by their personal political views and agendas in choosing their stance on the various issues presented. Yeltsin's radical reforms strongly aggravated the already struggling Russian economy. Inflation skyrocketed and the drastic cut in public expenditure led many people to lose their jobs and access to state provided welfare. Thus, the economic reforms soon began facing resistance from the Supreme Soviet, which grew increasingly protective of state enterprises and wary of the rapid pace of privatization. Yeltsin's however kept prioritizing market reforms over democratization, viewing political compromise as a threat to economic transformation. This strategic view increased the friction, as political concessions were seen as hindrances to aggressive market policies. Even more, the abandonment of democratic development was a deliberate move to insulate Yeltsin's administration from the backlash of the unpopular reforms.¹³¹

Starting from the end of 1992 the struggle between the two institutions devolved into open confrontation and would continue for the entirety of 1993. Yeltsin's reliance on decrees to push through economic policies without parliamentary consent led to a breakdown in relations with the Supreme Soviet. Ruslan Khasbulatov, who spearheaded the opposition within the legislature, aligned with conservative factions to block Yeltsin's reforms. By September 1993, the deadlock had reached a critical point, with Yeltsin appointing Gaidar as First Deputy Prime Minister to spearhead economic restructuring. The Supreme Soviet responded with further obstruction, refusing to confirm Gaidar and pushing for Viktor Chernomyrdin, a more moderate figure with ties with the industrial

¹³¹ Skach, C. (2021). Russia's constitutional dictatorship: A brief history. *University of Miami International and Comparative Law Review*, 29(1), 192-252. Pg. 198-214.
<https://repository.law.miami.edu/umiclrvol29/iss1/6>.

sector. The standoff reached its climax when Yeltsin issued Presidential Decree 1400 on September 21, 1993, dissolving the Congress of People's Deputies and the Supreme Soviet. This action, a blatant violation of the Russian Constitution, sparked immediate resistance. The Congress attempted to impeach Yeltsin and installed Vice President Alexander Rutskoi as acting president and barricaded themselves into the Parliament. Yeltsin responded by deploying 2,000 troops to encircle the parliamentary building, leading to a deadlock between the army and the congress supporters that had amassed outside of the White House. Their presence shielded the opposition against possible violent actions from Yeltsin forces. Yet, when the crowd was encouraged by its leaders to force the blockade to storm the mayor's office and take control of some broadcasting stations, the protection against the army's intervention was removed. Thus, the confrontation ended with army tanks shelling the White House in Moscow on October 4, 1993, with the opposition leaders, including Rutskoi, arrested.¹³²

2.4.2 The reaction of the Communist movement

Given the parliament direct opposition to Yeltsin, the various communist parties immediately sided with Khasbulatov, Rutskoi and their Deputies. Yet, the nature of their support varied from movement to movement, based on the communist current they adhered to. True to their orthodox Marxist-Leninism, the RCWP and his subordinate organizations, Toiling Russia and Toiling Moscow, saw the crisis as the perfect chance to replicate the events of 1917 and launch a proletarian revolution that would spread from Moscow to all Russia. As such they joined the Congress' side, actively participating in the defense of the "White House" and in the subsequent clashes with government forces for the control of the Ostankino TV station and the Ministry of Defense building. Alongside the RCWP stood Shenin's UCP-CPSU, it too committed to spark a nationwide uprising. Yet, the UCP hoped to achieve that by addressing the Russian population directly, calling for a series of measures that essentially amounted to a reformation of the

¹³² Skach, C. (2021). Russia's constitutional dictatorship: A brief history. *University of Miami International and Comparative Law Review*, 29(1), 192-252. Pg. 198-214.
<https://repository.law.miami.edu/umiclrvol29/iss1/6>.

USSR and the Soviet system, rather than resorting to violence.¹³³ With the city of Moscow completely cut off by the rest of Russia under Yeltsin's order, and lacking any actual organization behind its leadership, the UCP approach proved to be unsuccessful. Moreover, the radical communist parties and the Congress's deputies drastically overestimated the popular support they could reasonably expect. While Yeltsin's actions gave them the sympathy of the general population and legitimized their cause, they couldn't expect actual support when the situation exploded. Surprisingly, Andreyeva's All Union Communist Party- Bolshevik refrained from active participation in the crisis. The ACPB reduced both factions as nothing more than manifestation of the bourgeoisie, limiting itself to call for nationwide strikes and demonstrations against the post-Soviet regime.¹³⁴

The CPRF, instead, followed a safer approach. In the months prior, when the hostilities were still limited to political discussion, Zyuganov released a statement warning against the dangers of political extremism and called for a political compromise between the competing sides. The compromise, however, would prove to be impossible given the circumstances. If Yeltsin were to make any concession to the parliament, he would have given them the moral victory and would have been forced to back down, recognize the authority of the Parliament and be forced to hold new elections. Conversely, the Parliament could not accept Yeltsin demands without having its power reduced. When the crisis exploded in late September, the CPRF recognized Rutskoi as the legitimate president and declared their support for the parliamentary forces. Yet, those statements were not followed by mass mobilization of their members nor were public demonstrations or strikes organized in their support. Even more, when the confrontation reached its boiling point, it's reported that Zyuganov himself warned Khasbulatov about the dangers of an armed confrontation and pushed for a peaceful resolution of the crisis.¹³⁵

After the palace was stormed, Yeltsin issued a new ban on 28 opposition parties and organizations that supported the Congress. Among them, ultra nationalist right-wing parties were also present. The banned parties were divided into categories, based on their

¹³³ Urban, J., Solovei, V. (2021). *Russia's Communists At The Crossroads* (1st ed.). Routledge. Pg. 83-84. <https://www.perlego.com/book/2527786>.

¹³⁴ Ibidem.

¹³⁵ March, L. (2002). *The Communist Party in Post-Soviet Russia*. Manchester University Press. Pg. 37. https://archive.org/details/communistpartyin0000marc_w7a1/page/176/mode/2up.

degree of support to the CPD. The first category encompassed those parties that had participated actively in hostilities as organizations: the RCWP, the UCP-CPSU and other right wing nationalist parties. The second category encompassed parties who didn't participate directly in the confrontation but rather had members taking an active role in the crisis by their individual initiative, with the CPRF being an example of this latter case. The ban which extended to the parties' official newspaper and publications, proved to be only temporary in nature, having the objective of impairing the opposition's ability to conduct an effective political campaign for the upcoming elections for the newly created State Duma.¹³⁶ Yet, as we will see in the next chapter, the CPRF was still able to secure a relative success in its first election. The aftermath of the crisis allowed Yeltsin to unilaterally draft a new constitution, which was put into a controversial plebiscite in December 1993. This constitution substantially expanded presidential authority, granting Yeltsin broad decree powers, control over regional governments, and the ability to dissolve the State Duma. In this pivotal moment the roots of personalist authoritarianism were laid, dismantling the principles of checks and balances in favor of executive dominance, ensuring that future political conflicts would be resolved through executive fiat rather than legislative negotiation.

Conclusions

By the end of this second chapter, it has been possible to establish a direct link between the Communist party of the Russian Federation and its roots within the power struggles of the collapsing CPSU apparatus. By turning to the Russian SSR in his challenge against Gorbachev, Yeltsin created the conditions, as well as the political necessity, for the creation of the Communist party of the Russian SSR, which plant the seeds for the future creation of the CPRF. In his lifespan of just a year, the RCP acted as a forum in which the Russian hardliners could come together, establish a network, effectively independent from the CPSU, of party members and primary party organization that would prove vital in the future reunification effort. It's no coincidence that a large majority of the key figures within the CPRF held key position within the RCP's apparatus. While it certainly possible

¹³⁶ Bozoki, A., & Ishiyama, J. (2020). *The Communist Successor Parties of Central and Eastern Europe* (1st ed.). Routledge. Pg. 248. <https://www.perlego.com/book/1629284>.

that a Communist Party could have risen in the Russian Federation even without the existence of a RCP, there is a concrete possibility that such return could have taken a lot more time. Also, when taking into consideration what contributed to the reemergence of a Communist Party in Russia, one can't ignore the role essential role played by former members of the CPSU still loyal to communist ideology. By continuing to operate during a time when all seemed lost and preserving the resources and networks, they allowed for a quick reconstitution of a Communist Party and, most importantly, gave this new organization the means to operate quickly and effectively on the Russian territory, providing it with an edge over other political organizations. As seen in the chapter, it is due to the personal initiative of such individuals that the ban could be successfully appealed to the Constitutional Court. The results of this effort will be analyzed in the next chapter, detailing the electoral results of the CPRF in the following years.

Chapter 3: From Victory to Defeat, The CPRF performance in its first two electoral cycles.

Introduction

This third chapter will extensively analyze the CPRF's ascent from the immediate aftermath of the 1993 constitutional crisis until the 1996 presidential campaign, with special attention to the party's electorate as well as the factors that influenced the different outcomes of the elections. By studying the CPRF conduct in his first two election cycles, it will be possible to delineate the strategies put in place by the party leadership in its bid to challenge Yeltsin's regime. Moreover, special consideration will be reserved in analyzing the party's internal attempts at producing a cohesive program acceptable by all its internal ideological currents and the consequences that this appeasement strategy had on the outcome of the elections, particularly the 1996 presidential election.

3.1 The legislative elections of 1993

3.1.1 The political and institutional landscape on the eve of the elections

The first legislative election of the Russian Federation hadn't been announced under good auspices. Only a month prior, the showdown between the Congress of People's Deputies and Yeltsin had led to armed clashes in the streets of Moscow and hundreds of casualties. Similarly, two years after the dissolution of the USSR the dreams of prosperity and modernity had not materialized, leaving place to a reality of numerous social and economic hardships. With these conditions, the '93 elections would naturally be affected

by a great number of factors, from its Soviet past and Yeltsin's led reforms. The most obvious influence on the election came from the October crisis, of which the election was a direct result. Having dissolved the CPD, Yeltsin and his close advisors worked on the draft of a new constitution, which would only become available to the public in mid-November, just a couple weeks before the elections. The new Constitution wasn't drafted by a constituent assembly nor was it the result of political negotiations, and so the resulting institutional framework was strongly influenced by Yeltsin's desire to assert his control over the government, as well as the political practices that had been crystallized since December '91. The new Constitution was therefore heavily sided toward the president office, setting a presidential system that gave considerable power to the president vis-à-vis the other branches. This arrangement was nothing more than an institutionalization of what had happened since August '91, with Yeltsin's attributing himself substantial powers that were often inferred rather than the result of a well-codified set of rules.¹³⁷ The draft of the constitution however wasn't yet law, as it had to be approved by referendum, which Yeltsin decided to set on the same date as the elections for the State Duma, the 12th of December. This decision would influence the outcome of the legislative election, and therefore the democratization process. First, in the absence of an approved constitution, the provisions detailing the conduct of the election, the electoral system and the composition of the State Duma were determined by Yeltsin through ordinary law.¹³⁸ This naturally undermined the legal basis for the Russian government as well as alienating huge swaths of the public. Moreover, the president outright forbade public discussion on the draft of the constitution during the political campaigns, with some presidential aides stating that any criticism of the draft would result in the exclusion from the elections.¹³⁹

However, aside from the dubious institutional and legal framework, many other unsolved issues arose and became evident during this time. As mentioned in the previous chapters, Yeltsin's democratization process was sidelined in favor of a series of sweeping economic reforms, stemming from the conviction that a liberalization of the economic sphere would

¹³⁷Murray, D. (2018). *A Democracy Of Despots* (1st ed.). Routledge. Pg. 156.

<https://www.perlego.com/book/1597924>.

¹³⁸ Sakwa, R. (1995). The Russian Elections of December 1993. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 47(2), 195–227.

Pg.195. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/152608>

¹³⁹ Ivi. Pg 197.

then naturally result in a modernization of society¹⁴⁰. After two years, however, it became painfully clear that this would not be the case. The Russian GDP fell drastically and the inequalities between the general population and the new transformed nomenklatura grew increasingly. If during the Soviet Union a worker envied the apparatchik privileges, he did so while having a roof on his head, a stable income and a strong social security net. Now, he looked at those same individuals and their privileges while he himself lived in unprecedented squalor and hardship. It is estimated that in the period between 1991-1994 the average life expectancy in Russia fell by 6 years, a shocking figure¹⁴¹. Moreover, the sudden shift from a command economy to a market one was accompanied by a drastic cut to welfare expenditure, meaning that the brunt of privatization was felt by the weakest social strata. The priority that the reformers gave to the economic restructuring over the social reforms made the population instinctively associate the democratization process with the hardship of the economic reforms, with considerable effect for the future democratization of Russia¹⁴². Moreover, the sidelining of social and political reform had profound effect on the formation of a party system in the country. For example, in the wake of the election, political parties and similar associations were still regulated by the 1990 USSR law on public associations.¹⁴³ In addition, numerous legacies from the Soviet period compounded themselves to considerably hinder the natural development of political parties. First, parties usually develop from already existing groups of interests that have organized themselves in either formal or informal association, such as trade union, cooperatives, religious groups etc. As we've discussed in the first chapter, the Leninist system made it a point to control civic society by forcing all those associations under party control, as it was for trade unions, and to dissolve the ones that did not fit with the Leninist model, such as religious associations or cooperatives. The liberalization of society during the apex of perestroika allowed the resurgence of all kinds of associations, but the fall of the USSR soon after, coupled with the harsh economic crisis and the lack of interest by Yeltsin's government to invest in social reforms, all contributed

¹⁴⁰ Lentini, P. (1995). *Elections and Political Order in Russia*. Budapest: Central European University Press. Pg 235. <https://www.perlego.com/book/3227789>.

¹⁴¹ Brainerd, E. Mortality in Russia Since the Fall of the Soviet Union. *Comp Econ Stud* 63, 557–576 (2021). Pg 558. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41294-021-00169-w>.

¹⁴² Lentini, P. (1995). *Elections and Political Order in Russia*. Budapest: Central European University Press. Pg. 232. <https://www.perlego.com/book/3227789>.

¹⁴³ Ivi. Pg. 63.

to considerably limiting the development of a strong base from which parties could emerge¹⁴⁴. The Russian Federation, therefore, lacked the developed civil society necessary to sprout parties from the ground up, as it had happened for example with the Solidarnosc movement, and so most of them were either created by or around notable individuals from the Soviet past or the Russian present. Secondly, the countless movements and political associations of the late 80s failed to transform themselves into proper parties in the aftermath of the USSR disintegration. Said movements lacked clear political programs and structured organizations, as they instead operated in an “insurgent” manner, united by their common goal of challenging the CPSU monopoly and clamoring for the end of the Soviet system. That objective called for the use of insurgency and agitations tactics to turn the population against the CPSU, and those movements operated accordingly. When the CPSU was successfully removed from power, in the absence of a common enemy and with the question of how to rebuild Russia arising, the variety of diverging opinions and aspirations led to the downfall of those movements. In addition, with the CPSU gone, the heterogenous constituency of those movements suddenly was broken among countless diverging interests and grievances¹⁴⁵.

A further limitation to the emergence of parties was the peculiar functioning and arrangement of the institution of the Russian Federation in the time span between the August '91 and October '93. Both the Presidency and the Congress of People's Deputies had been inherited by the USSR and had remained in power until October '93 almost unchanged. Most of the key political figures were already holding governmental positions and therefore lacked the need to create parties and organizations to channel support from the masses. This created a situation where the government was removed from the population, since the latter lacked any meaningful ways to influence the former, especially since both the deputies and the president were not elected on the basis of a structured political program, but rather as a statement for or against the CPSU. One mustn't look farther than Yeltsin himself to paint a clear picture of those two years, with the president outright refusing to create a presidential party of reformers. Had both presidential and legislative elections been called as soon as the CPSU was ousted, and had the time for a

¹⁴⁴ Ivi. Pg. 182.

¹⁴⁵ Lentini, P. (1995). *Elections and Political Order in Russia*. Budapest: Central European University Press. Pg. 171-172. <https://www.perlego.com/book/3227789>.

proper campaign been reserved, one can speculate that in such scenario a party system could have emerged in a more proper way, as the population would have realistically still been under the democratization “high” and therefore could have been more active in the process of party formation. Moreover, the reforms could have been conducted under an undeniable popular mandate, rather than be seen as something removed from popular control. Instead, the way in which the first years of the transition were conducted resulted in a diffuse loss of confidence in the regime and in democracy itself, leading most of the population to be disinterested in politics and democratic participation. This, compounded with the natural distrust of parties after 70 years of CPSU monopoly, reinforced the already occurring trend of party formation being an almost exclusive elite’s affair.¹⁴⁶

The short time span between the election’s announcement and the election themselves, coupled with the 5% threshold to access the Duma and the 100 000 signatures required for party registration, forced political organizations in a scramble to form political blocs and alliances. Those blocs were often loosely tied together, consisting of nothing more than a long list of renowned and well-known individuals, often with opposing political views, lacking a structured organization behind them as well as a grassroots presence at the local level. Possessing only loosely cohesive programs, they often lacked a clear political identity, with their candidates often not being members of the organization they represented¹⁴⁷. Of the 37 parties and 2000 organizations present in Russia by September ‘93, the government recognized the right of 91 of those to participate in the elections. When, by November 6th, the deadlines for registration elapsed, only 13 “electoral associations” remained.¹⁴⁸ The Communist Party of the Russian Federation immediately stood out as the largest and most organized party. Having held its foundational congress earlier in February, the CPRF, although still trying to find its footing and take stock of itself, had an advantage on most of its rivals, exception made for the ultra-nationalist LDPR, founded in 1989.¹⁴⁹

In the immediate aftermath of the of URSS’s collapse, communist functionaries and activists managed to keep possession of most of the CPSU material resources, which

¹⁴⁶ Ivi. Pg. 183

¹⁴⁷ Sakwa, R. (1995). The Russian Elections of December 1993. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 47(2), 195–227. Pg. 207. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/152608>.

¹⁴⁸ Ivi. Pg. 199

¹⁴⁹ Ivi. Pg. 205

would then be inherited by the CPRF. Moreover, the Constitutional Court verdict proved incredibly favorable for the CPRF. The court ruled in favor of the legality of the CPSU's primary party organization, which kept operating illegally during the ban. We saw in the previous chapter how most of the divisions among the communists during the prohibition period were mostly confined to leadership, with the rank-and-file members clamoring for the reconstitution of a Communist Party. As such, when the leadership of the future CPRF led the unification attempts, it gained immediately the support of the PPOs, obtaining a network of local organization almost overnight¹⁵⁰. It's therefore of no surprise that the CPRF managed to secure almost 200 000 signatures against the 100 000 required for registration, even after joining the campaign with some delay, as a result of Yeltsin's temporary ban after the events of October.¹⁵¹ Standing as further proof of the CPRF's tight organization and discipline was the almost complete absence, contrary to the other parties and blocs, of candidates coming from outside the party ranks, going against the general trend.¹⁵²

3.1.2 The CPRF's campaign

As for the campaign itself, Zyuganov chose to remain true to the line followed for the entirety of 1993. The CPRF reiterated its denouncement of the radical fringes of the communist movement, mainly the RCWP and UIC-CPSU, who refused any form of compromise with the regime and called for the boycott of the elections and the constitutional referendum. Zyuganov and the rest of the CPRF leadership opted instead for a more pragmatic approach, playing within the institutional framework, with the goal of preventing the newly created State Duma and Federation Assembly to become a center of support for Yeltsin's policies.¹⁵³ The split wasn't born out of a simple disagreement in political strategies, however. The CPRF shift towards more nationalistic and apparently social democratic position created an ideological rift that grew wider in the following years and would devolve into a bitter confrontation between the two groups, as well as strenuous debates within the CPRF itself place behind closed doors. Due to the short time

¹⁵⁰ MALFLIET, K. (2011). The Communist Party of the Russian Federation: not Communist per se. *Revue d'études Comparatives Est-Ouest*, 42(1), 37–63. Pg.44. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/27026032>.

¹⁵¹ Sakwa, R. (1995). The Russian Elections of December 1993. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 47(2), 195–227. Pg.204. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/152608>.

¹⁵² Ivi. Pg.207.

¹⁵³ Urban, J., Solovei, V. (2021). *Russia's Communists At The Crossroads* (1st ed.). Routledge. Pg 107. <https://www.perlego.com/book/2527786>.

available to prepare for a proper political campaign and the lack of a properly synthesized ideology from all the various internal currents of the party, the CPRF electoral program was mostly based around general propositions. Thus, the campaign was based around the slogan “Resistance to violence and illegality” and was accompanied by a three-step plan detailing the ambitions and objectives of the CPRF¹⁵⁴. Firstly, it aimed at restoring legality by annulling President Yeltsin’s September–October decrees (above all Decree No. 1400 of 21 September 1993, which had dissolved the old legislature) and the reestablishment of a strong legal basis for the relations between the three branches of government. Secondly, they pushed for the election of a genuinely representative parliament and a government in the interest of the people, with the objective of stabilizing the economic and political situation. Lastly, they proposed the drafting and the immediate enactment of a new Constitution. Zyuganov portrayed this sequence as an answer against the breakdown of the state, promising that the refurbished Duma would serve as a school of government and to feel the country’s pulse.¹⁵⁵

Analyzing this 3-step program, it becomes apparent how it simultaneously served the purpose of reassuring the reformers that the CPRF intended to follow the principles of political pluralism while simultaneously reassuring the anti-reformers of their commitment to stopping the reform process. Undoubtedly, the need to reassure the reformers was due to the CPRF perceived danger of another Yeltsin’s crackdown, as it was in 1991 and, on a smaller scale, immediately after October. Economically, the party program followed the same general principles, pledging to embark on an immediate withdrawal from shock therapy in favor of a socially oriented market. Key enterprises and natural monopolies were to once again be placed under state’s guidance and unrestricted price liberalization would be halted immediately. Moreover, ad hoc states of emergency would be introduced to combat the ever-growing crime, corruption and speculation of essential goods. When it came to land policy, party leaders retreated to the previous Soviet practice of considering land as “national all-communal property” that should remain under state stewardship, so that agrarian wealth would serve society. This position made them natural allies of the Agrarian Party, which sought to maintain the

¹⁵⁴ March, L. (2002). *The Communist Party in Post-Soviet Russia*. Manchester University Press. Pg. 173. https://archive.org/details/communistpartyin0000marc_w7a1/page/176/mode/2up.

¹⁵⁵ Lentini, P. (1995). *Elections and Political Order in Russia*. Budapest: Central European University Press. Pg 274-275. <https://www.perlego.com/book/3227789>.

collectivized state farms as the base for the agricultural sector in the countryside.¹⁵⁶ These economic promises were imbued in a rhetoric of protection of the rights and dignity of workers, pensioners and collective-farm members. Moreover, the program called for wages, stipends and pensions to be indexed to inflation and for public services, especially education and health, to be once again funded extensively.¹⁵⁷ Every socioeconomic pledge was entwined with a strong state-patriotic narrative, with the party linking social rights to patriotic duty, so that defenders of welfare were simultaneously cast as defenders of the motherland, a fusion that Zyuganov said would forge a broad communist-patriotic bloc against Yeltsin's "anti-people course". Regarding the role of Russia, the program stressed that it was "not simply a state but rather a civilization"; hence defending territorial integrity, the Orthodox-Slavonic cultural core and a Eurasian great-power vocation was inseparable from defending social guarantees. The CPRF promised to resist NATO expansion and to rebuild voluntary unions with "kindred peoples" across the ex-Soviet space, arguing that a renewed sense of surrounded fortress would unite Russians more effectively than any Western reassurance.¹⁵⁸

When the ballots closed, the results were mixed. Regarding the Constitution, the quorum necessary for the vote, 50 percent of the registered voters, was barely reached with 54.8 percent of the voters showing up to vote for the new Constitution.¹⁵⁹ The bickering and lack of cooperation between the CPRF and the radical parties did not allow for a rational campaign to mobilize voters against the constitution, with too few voting against it (the CPRF line) and not enough voters boycotting the election (the radical line).¹⁶⁰ The new constitution therefore passed with 58 percent votes in favor, signaling a decline in Yeltsin popularity, especially given the ever-declining voter turnout in general and voter support for the president since 1991. If, however, the Constitution represented a victory for Yeltsin, the legislative elections saw a victory for the opposition forces. The top three

¹⁵⁶ Sakwa, R. (1995). The Russian Elections of December 1993. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 47(2), 195–227. Pg.205. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/152608>.

¹⁵⁷ Lentini, P. (1995). *Elections and Political Order in Russia*. Budapest: Central European University Press. Pg 274-275. <https://www.perlego.com/book/3227789>.

¹⁵⁸Urban, J., & Solovei, V. (2021). *Russia's Communists At The Crossroads* (1st ed.). Routledge. Pg 107. <https://www.perlego.com/book/2527786>.

¹⁵⁹ Sakwa, R. (1995). The Russian Elections of December 1993. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 47(2), 195–227. Pg. 211. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/152608>.

¹⁶⁰ March, L. (2002). *The Communist Party in Post-Soviet Russia*. Manchester University Press. Pg. 174. https://archive.org/details/communistpartyin0000marc_w7a1/page/176/mode/2up.

parties were the ultra-nationalist LDPR, with a 22,92 percent of the votes, the Choice of Russia reformist block led by Gaidar, with a 15.51 percent, and Zyuganov's CPRF, gaining 12,40 percent of the votes. The CPRF's ally, the Agrarian party, followed with 8 percent of the votes. Given the circumstances under which the CPRF was forced to run, with almost no presence in the national media and with less time to organize the campaign compared to its competitors, the 42 seats gained in the Parliament were nothing short of miraculous and stand as a testament to the organizational prowess of the CPRF and their resources.¹⁶¹

3.1.3 Defining the CPRF's electorate

When it comes to describing the electorate that supported the CPRF in the ballots, we can resort to the surveys held by the Glasow-Moscow Initiative and the Russian official polling organization. Two identical nationwide samples make it possible to track the characteristics of the CPRF voters, as well as both their short and long term trends. In the first phase of the survey, carried out from November 24th to December 3rd, interviewers asked how respondents intended to vote. In the second phase, conducted from December 13th to 26th, they asked those same individuals what party they had voted for in the polling booth. Immediately evident from the survey is, on average, the higher age of the CPRF voters. Among citizens younger than 30 years old, the party managed to attract only 1 percent of voters in both waves. Conversely, among pensioners, support climbed five points, from 13 percent of pensioners before the campaign to 18 percent after, and that single subgroup supplied well over half of the CPRF's aggregate advance. In the middle-aged population (30-54) the shift was weaker, one percentage point from 6% to 7%, and among people aged 55 and over, but still employed there was no variation, with 1% in both waves, showing that the campaign resonated mainly with those living on fixed pensions and incomes, who saw them eroded by four-figure inflation.¹⁶²

¹⁶¹ Urban, J., Solovei, V. (2021). *Russia's Communists At The Crossroads* (1st ed.). Routledge. Pg 108. <https://www.perlego.com/book/2527786>.

¹⁶² Wyman, M., White, S., Miller, B., & Heywood, P. (1995). Public Opinion, Parties and Voters in the December 1993 Russian Elections. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 47(4), 591–614. Pg 599. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/153234>.

It's also worth analyzing the connection between the CPRF electorate and education. Voters with only elementary education doubled their Communist preference from 7% to 12%, while those whose highest degree was a secondary-school diploma increased from 5% to 7%; by contrast, those who had a college education remained at stable 10% in both interviews. If we look at the occupation of the respondents, we can confirm the correlation between growing economic crisis and CPRF. Clerical workers voters increased from 3% to 10%, while teachers and doctor's votes increased only slightly from 4% to 6%. Individuals with managerial positions instead slipped from 9% to 8%, suggesting that the ongoing privatization might play a role in moving them towards more market-oriented positions. Conversely skilled and unskilled laborers remained flat at about 7%, suggesting that ideological loyalty rather than protest vote might be behind their preference at the ballot. Engineers instead deserted the party, falling from 5% to 2%¹⁶³. Shifting the focus to a spatial dimension, the CPRF attracted 9% of rural villagers and residents of towns with less than 100 000 inhabitants, 9% of residents from towns between 100 000 and 1mln inhabitants, and lastly a lower 7% of voters in the very large cities. Those figures confirm the organizational edge that the CPRF enjoyed outside of the largest urban centers, while documenting an urban core rooted mainly among elderly apartment-block residents¹⁶⁴. The Glasgow survey also records the historic influx of voters into the CPRF ranks. When respondents were asked to recall their 1991 presidential choice, 5% of former Yeltsin voters had shifted their support to the CPRF. At first glance the 5% figure might not seem much, but that still translated into a meaningful influx due to the sheer size of the Yeltsin' bloc at the time. In regards to the other presidential candidates, 16% of Nikolai Ryzhkov's 1991 supporters and a striking 30 % of General Albert Makashov's hard-liner voters moved to the CPRF; 10% of Aman Tuleev's 1991 electorate made the same journey; even among people who had not voted in 1991, 2% now had chosen Communist; and 5% of those unable to recall their 1991 vote did likewise¹⁶⁵.

The Glasgow Initiative also helps us to better understand the way in which the CPRF's voters feel about the ongoing reforms. In the post-election wave only 28% of self-declared

¹⁶³ Wyman, M., White, S., Miller, B., & Heywood, P. (1995). Public Opinion, Parties and Voters in the December 1993 Russian Elections. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 47(4), 591–614. Pg 599. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/153234>.

¹⁶⁴ Ibidem.

¹⁶⁵ Ivi. Pg. 595

CPRF voters said a market economy was “right for Russia”; a majority, 54%, branded it “wrong”, whereas generally among all Russians 51% had answered that a market economy was right for the country. That skepticism translated into concrete policy preferences: 87% of CPRF voters wanted the state to regulate basic prices, 73% preferred state-owned car plants, and 88% insisted that the government, rather than private insurers, must provide health care. Class resentment surfaced in the CPRF’s voter over the “new rich”: a mere 4% admired them; 54% disliked them; a further 21% demanded for them to be “be jailed”.¹⁶⁶ Between the two survey waves the share of CPRF supporters calling unemployment “unacceptable under any circumstances” rose from 63% to 77%, a 14-point jump unique to this electorate and timed exactly to the first wave of factory lay-offs and wage arrears. Questions regarding the political system reveal ambivalence rather than outright rejection of the new system. Immediately after voting 42% of CPRF supporters said the idea of democracy is acceptable, with a national average of 48%. 11% of voters instead supported democracy without any alternative and 26% favored a one-party or no-party system, evoking Soviet institutional memory. Attitudes to executive power moved sharply during the campaign: endorsement of a strong leader “not restricted by law” climbed from 7% to 26%, and the share of individuals willing to let the government override the Duma rose four points, from 12% to 16%. Interestingly, distrust of the electoral process fell. Before the vote only 16% of would-be Communists predicted a free and fair election, but after participating in the political contest 58% concluded that it had indeed met that standard, a 42-point swing that shows procedural legitimacy could coexist with programmatic opposition.¹⁶⁷

The simultaneous constitutional referendum widened the gap between Communists and the Kremlin: merely 32% of CPRF voters reported ticking “Yes” to Boris Yeltsin’s draft of the Constitution, the lowest approval among the electorate any major party. On nation-state questions the bloc took a firm nationalist line: 72% agreed that post-1991 reforms were turning Russia into “a colony of the West,” and 54% said parts of neighboring states “should belong to Russia.” Willingness to threaten force for the defense of ethnic Russians abroad more than doubled, from 17% before the campaign to 31% after, possibly

¹⁶⁶ Wyman, M., White, S., Miller, B., & Heywood, P. (1995). Public Opinion, Parties and Voters in the December 1993 Russian Elections. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 47(4), 591–614. Pg. 603,605,607.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/153234>.

¹⁶⁷ *ibidem*

tying social grievance to muscular foreign policy. Yet not every prejudice hardened: opposition to Jewish public meetings fell from 63% to 48%, an 18-point drop that hints at such attitudes softening once voters were exposed to a pluralist campaign.¹⁶⁸

3.2 The CPRF between the two elections

3.2.1 The Communist Faction in the Duma

The elections of 1993 were an undeniable successful beginning for the CPRF. The party gained confidence in its ability to compete successfully in pluralist elections, as well as gaining some needed experience in political competition. Having gained seats in the Parliament, the communist faction had access to the state's resources allocated for the Duma's representatives, which amounted to additional personnel form of deputies' aides, as well as access to government funding, which the CPRF was in dire need of. In this regard the party's deputies were considerably loyal to the party and its electoral program, taking advantage of the resources given to them to help the CPRF extend its branches in the Federation and generally remained true to their role as institutionalized opposition¹⁶⁹. In this regard, helped by the election of Agrarian Party member Rybkin as Chairman of the Duma, they took advantage of every opportunity to try and limit presidential power and his decrees. Studies analyzing trends of factions in the first Duma show the communist faction to be the one of the most cohesive and disciplined in voting as well as having the lowest rate of absenteeism.¹⁷⁰ The Leninist culture and its core tenets of cohesion and democratic centralism undoubtedly influenced the performance of the

¹⁶⁸ Ibidem

¹⁶⁹ Remington, T. F., & Smith, S. S. (1995). The Development of Parliamentary Parties in Russia. *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, 20(4), 457–489. Pg. 481. <https://doi.org/10.2307/440189>.

¹⁷⁰Ivi. Pg. 477-480.

CPRF faction in the State Duma, allowing the red deputies to make the best of their numbers.

3.2.2 The Ideological Struggle

The same level of unity however wasn't mirrored by the CPRF, behind the public showing of unity and cohesion typical of a communist party, the years 1994-95 were characterized by a substantial conflict between the various ideological currents of the party. Right after its foundation in 1993, intra party discussions were somewhat limited due to the practical necessities of the time. The party needed to be created, the various leadership positions had to be filled and ties with the surviving CPSU's PPO had to be established. As such the issue of deciding which of the different post-soviet communist currents the party should adopt became of secondary importance vis-a vis the survival of the party itself, particularly with the power struggle between Yeltsin and the old congress erupting and the subsequent election. After the vote, with the party having found its footing, negotiating and drafting an official party program became a matter of central importance. In doing so, the contradictions and factionalism within the party emerged, as they had during the founding congress. Yet, in typical communist fashion, this confrontation did not happen publicly, but rather behind closed doors, leaving clues in the ever-changing language of the various declarations and different published drafts of the party programs.

The roots of this contention can be traced to different factors, but mainly it derives from ideological problems that arose within the CPSU during the final years of Perestroika. As the CPSU opened itself to internal debates on how to rejuvenate Leninism and in the Soviet system, and thus different ideological currents developed. The problem however was that the party and the Union collapsed before a new official party line could be selected and implemented. As such when the CPRF was founded, the communist movement was still split into those currents, which had their own respective reasoning as to what had gone wrong in the system. This situation was worsened by the fact that the CPRF was not created unilaterally by a close-knit group of like-minded communists but rather was formed as an aggregation of different ideological leaders who, in turn, brought their own supporters into its ranks. Thus, since its inception, the CPRF was defined by ideological uncertainty, hidden under an uneasy compromise born out of political necessity. This situation was worsened by two other factors: the uncompromising position

of the rank and file, and the need to expand the electoral base. The CPRF's rank and file members were mostly inherited from the defunct CPSU, being mostly composed of members who had remained in the old party during its fall and kept operating illegally during the ban. But in the old system ideological debate was a matter reserved only to the highest echelon of the party, to be conducted behind closed doors, while the low-level members were trained and groomed to embrace the official party ideology as it was taught. Moreover, the year and a half spent underground in the aftermath of the fall filtered those who lacked ideological ardor. Therefore, the CPRF's ideological debates as well as the compromises it was making with the new regime were met by growing uneasiness in the rank and file, which became a force against ideological change, remaining fixed on extremely orthodox positions. But the party was looking to broaden its electoral base, and thus it could not remain tied to the old stale dialectic of class struggle and dictatorship of the proletariat if it wanted to maximize its appeal. This attempt to juggle ideological purity and the practicality of political competitions led to the coexistence of two distinct ideologies, one public, influenced by Zyuganov's nationalist-communist synthesis and Kuptsov's group of Marxists reformers, that accepted the competition in a multiparty system and was aimed at the creation of a broad nationalist coalition in opposition to the reforms process, and an internal party ideology, still loyal to the Marxist-Leninist tenets, that would serve the purpose giving cohesion and a direction to party members¹⁷¹. It is this dual nature that, for example, made the CPRF participate in the 1993 election, while simultaneously calling them and the regime illegitimate. This situation was fueled by the absence of an official party ideologist, both as a position within the central committee and as an informal role. The CPRF, having committed itself to genuinely increase intra-party democracy, tried to break with the past by bringing the development of ideology in the hand of party members, giving the whole party the role of "collective ideologist", which fueled further confrontation between the various communist camps within the CPRF.¹⁷²

As said earlier, the years 1994-95 would be characterized by a tug war between the Zyuganov synthesis and the more traditional Marxist-Leninist, which would manifest

¹⁷¹ March, L. (2002). *The Communist Party in Post-Soviet Russia*. Manchester University Press. Pg. 66. https://archive.org/details/communistpartyin0000marc_w7a1/page/176/mode/2up.

¹⁷² Ivi. Pg 78-79.

itself in the Zyuganov's inspired draft program of October 1994, that would be followed by retreat to a more traditional Marxist-Leninism in the official program approved in the end of January 1995. But before we delve into an account of how this confrontation played out; it is proper to briefly recall the two different positions. Since the days of the Russian SSR Communist Party Zyuganov saw nationalism as the basis for communist renewal. In his view the socialism and the soviet state were the maximum expression of the Russian civilization and the spirit of its people. Antithetical to the western individualism, the naturally communal "Orthodox-Slavic" civilization saw its natural realization in the Soviet statehood and the values it promoted. Moreover, Zyuganov claimed that the fall of the Soviet Union was orchestrated by the West, acting through the traitors Gorbachev and the other architects of Perestroika. Stealing a play from Stalin's playbook, the idea of capitalist encirclement resurfaced alongside the idea that Russia could only thrive if it reclaimed, peacefully, the former USSR space. Finally, having placed socialism in a subordinate position vis-a-vis the Russian Nation, Zyuganov sought collaboration with other nationalist forces¹⁷³. On the opposite side stood the Marxist-Leninists, a much broader camp consisting of both strenuous traditionalists and reformers, all of which were instead dedicated to the development of Marxist-Leninist theory within the boundaries of its doctrine, rather than its complete transformation. In their views, and not without reason, Zyuganov's theses between the relation of the Russian state and socialism were borderline heretical since, according to Marxism, the state was a mere instrument to allow the dominant class to continue exploiting the proletariat. Claiming that socialism was somehow the natural evolution of the Russian statehood was simply unacceptable. During the first half of 1994 it seemed that the Zyuganov line was taking root. At the march CPRF plenum he and his close ally Belov reiterated their nationalist position, their intention to promote a coalition of "patriotic forces" and their support for a mixed economy, citing as examples the period of the NEP and the Kosygin reforms, as well as the ongoing economic liberalization in China.¹⁷⁴The theses published as the basis for the future party program closely reflected the nationalist's position and their strategy to maximize appeal, with staple concepts such as "Marxist-Leninism" and "Democratic

¹⁷³ March, L. (2002). *The Communist Party in Post-Soviet Russia*. Manchester University Press. Pg. 71-72. https://archive.org/details/communistpartyin0000marc_w7a1/page/176/mode/2up.

¹⁷⁴ Urban, J., & Solovei, V. (2021). *Russia's Communists At The Crossroads* (1st ed.). Routledge. Pg 123-124. <https://www.perlego.com/book/2527786>.

Centralism” not appearing anywhere in the text¹⁷⁵. A month later, at the April All Russian conference of the CPRF, the orthodox and the traditionalist fringes began to push back. Although we don’t know for certain what transpired behind the usual closed doors, we can get a glimpse of the internal debates by looking at the party’s official newspapers. Pravda, closer to traditionalist position, reported lack of enthusiasm for the nationalist line and their openness to collaboration with the Yeltsin’s regime; likewise, the Sovetskaya Rossiya, instead closer to the nationalist line, reported enthusiasm for the Zyuganov line.¹⁷⁶

Apparently, no faction managed to impose its vision on its opponents, thus once again the CPRF reverted to compromise, with the terminology been reworked to make sure that all CPRF fringes were reflected in the draft program, which would be put on halt until the Central Committee plenum of October. It is worth mentioning that at the All-Union Conference concrete efforts, under the guide of Kuptsov, were made to tighten party discipline and to rejuvenate the aging rank and file. He called for an end to the re-registration of CPSU’s former members into the CPRF starting June of the same year and for the introduction of more stringent requirements for those wishing to join. Furthermore Kuptsov stressed that the party needed to start making the necessary arrangements for the upcoming 1995 legislative elections, urging local committees to better coordinate their electoral efforts and urging the party leadership to build bridges with soviet sympathizers among the economic elite.¹⁷⁷ In a similar fashion Zyuganov, displaying an autonomy that would not be well received within the CPRF, announced the “Accord in the Name of Russia”, an initiative that brought together numerous renowned figures standing against the Yeltsin regime, with names such Ruskoi, Yeltsin’s rival in the October crisis of two years prior, appearing among the members. The initiative, launched in May among considerable interest, was short lived and ended up amounting to nothing more than a test to show the feasibility of Zyuganov’s broad coalition strategy.¹⁷⁸ Finally in October, the plenum of the party’s Central Committee developed a completed draft program that was to be submitted to the primary party organizations for evaluation, showing in yet another

¹⁷⁵ Ivi. Pg.125

¹⁷⁶ Ivi. Pg. 126

¹⁷⁷ Urban, J., & Solovei, V. (2021). Russia’s Communists At The Crossroads (1st ed.). Routledge. Pg. 127. <https://www.perlego.com/book/2527786>.

¹⁷⁸ Ivi pg. 130

occasion the progress the party was making in bridging the gap between the leadership and the rank and file that had characterized the CPSU. Unlike the reworked theses of April, the draft contained a specific section which detailed at length Zyuganov's ideology, using a very peculiar terminology never seen before in communist document, such as the concept of sobornost (collectivism) from 19th century Russia and dukhovnos (spirituality). Yet, against expectations, in the final approved version of the program at the CPRF third congress held in January '95, all of Zyuganov ideological contributions, had been either removed from the text or completely rewritten to lose their nationalist undertones. All that remained of Zyuganov contributions were the views shared by the Marxist majority: the denouncement of the destruction of the Soviet historical heritage and the attribution of its dissolution to the work of western backed traitors within the CPSU. In a surprising reversal, the program approved by the Congress was a clear return to orthodox Marxist-Leninist positions, with a clear rejection of everything even remotely capitalist¹⁷⁹. But what caused this sudden reversal? After all the orthodox Marxist had been the minority amongst the different CPRF currents at the upper echelons of the party, and the short time between the CC plenum and the Congress makes this retreat to the left even more peculiar. To answer that question we must for a moment pay attention to what was happening in the background, outside of the closed door where those matters were discussed. In October the ruble had utterly collapsed, worsening the already disastrous inflation and limiting the ability of the Russian Federation to repay its debts and access new lines of international credit. Two months later, the Chechen republic seceded from the Federation kickstarting the First Chechen conflict, whose conduct would be disastrous for Yeltsin, with military blunders following one after the other, decimating the conscripted army sent to bring the rebel region under the fold. It appeared that there was no bottom to the pit that Russia had fallen into, in an unbroken chain of crisis. As such, the President and the reformers were slowly losing their legitimacy, as the ongoing crisis made the extreme left position increasingly appealing, to the point where the extremist RCWP had become appealing and would manage to surpass Gaidar pro-reform bloc in the December '95 elections. But attributing the left retreat to a simple tactic to obtain a broader consensus among the population is an unconvincing explanation, especially given

¹⁷⁹ March, L. (2001). For Victory? The Crises and Dilemmas of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 53(2), 263–290. Pg. 271.
https://archive.org/details/communistpartyin0000marc_w7a1/page/176/mode/2up.

the short time in which the reversal took place. The return to orthodoxy is instead a direct consequence of the CPRF's genuine attempts to establish a true and effective intra party democracy, to break with the CPSU's past. As mentioned, the final draft program was subject to review of the party's rank and file which, as we've established, had for the majority remained entrenched in their orthodox Marxist-Leninist positions. Reports reached the Central Committee that local PPOs had been rejecting the Zyuganov's influenced October draft, as well as complaining about the perceived conciliatory attitude of the CPRF's Duma factions with the regime. It is therefore most probable that the left retreat was caused in response to the backlash received from the rank and file members.¹⁸⁰

Under this light, the party program passed in 1995 must be seen as another clear demonstration of the dual nature of the party, which by that point had been telling the public and its members two completely different things. The party program represented how majority of the members viewed the party and its missions, it was the official ideology of its members. Zyuganov line was instead how the party would be presenting itself to the Russian public and the other parties, representing the public ideology of the party. Naturally the latter almost never acknowledged the existence of the former and when it did, it did so in very vague manner.¹⁸¹ With the coming elections, the CPRF could not allow itself to lose its most precious resources in the form of hundreds of thousands devoted members, who would be essential to agitate and mobilize the population against Yeltsin's regime. Moreover, the orthodox program would shield the CPRF against the accuses of collaborationism and ideological deviationism launched from the most extremist communist movements, such as Nina Andreyeva's ACPB or the RCWP. Still, the third party Congress confirmed the CPRF's trust in Zyuganov's leadership, as he was once again elected for chairmanship of the party and would become the main communist candidate for the upcoming Presidential elections. It goes without saying that the ideological differences within the party were all but resolved, quite the contrary in fact, and their resolution was once again postponed and would not be resolved until the beginning of the new millennium. Unfortunately, however, this unwillingness to resolve

¹⁸⁰ Urban, J., & Solovei, V. (2021). *Russia's Communists At The Crossroads* (1st ed.). Routledge. Pg. 140. <https://www.perlego.com/book/2527786>.

¹⁸¹ March, L. (2001). For Victory? The Crises and Dilemmas of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 53(2), 263–290. Pg. 271. https://archive.org/details/communistpartyin0000marc_w7a1/page/176/mode/2up.

the matter once and for all would be the downfall of the CPRF in its challenge against the Yeltsin presidency.

3.3 From dominance to loss: the 1995 and 1996 elections

3.3.1 The 1995 Legislative Election

As anticipated earlier, the year of 1995 would be devoted to the preparation for the upcoming legislative elections of December and the presidential elections in June of the following year. To some degree the legislative elections would equate to some kind of presidential primary, as expectedly the party who would gain most votes could realistically be expected to field the most appealing candidate or mobilize considerable support for a Yeltsin looking to be reelected. On the road to the legislative election the CPRF was already poised to do well in the ballots. For starters no other party had managed to close the gap in terms of organization and territorial presence, as the parties who had amassed a large following in the previous election had failed to devote themselves to the creation of a party apparatus comparable to the one of the CPRF. Furthermore, among the various political parties, the communists were coming out of the first Duma having gained considerable legitimacy. Their disciplined parliamentary opposition had not gone unnoticed, having been strenuous critics of Yeltsin budget plan and his rapprochement with NATO.¹⁸² Conversely, the pro-reform parties were losing popularity by virtue of their support for the president's policies. As stated earlier, 1995 brought even more crises and challenges, which brought down Yeltsin popularity to single digits figure, impacting on its supporters as well. As December approached the CPRF reworked extensively on its "public ideology" to maximize its appeal outside of its established electorate, opting to develop a Nationalist-Populist rhetoric to take advantages of unpopularity of the

¹⁸² Urban, J., & Solovei, V. (2021). *Russia's Communists At The Crossroads* (1st ed.). Routledge. Pg. 110. <https://www.perlego.com/book/2527786>.

reforms. The result of those efforts was the electoral program released to the public in September, under the name of “Our Soviet Homeland”. The use of the term Soviet wasn’t accidental, as the program lacked any reference to “Marxism”, “Leninism” and even socialism, but rather a carefully devised plan to evoke different sentiments based on the reader¹⁸³. The communist electors would naturally associate the word Soviet with Leninism and Socialism, conversely disaffected non-communists’ electors that had been grown disillusioned with the democratization would associate the word with the social security of the past, while nationalists could recall its status as a great power and its international standing¹⁸⁴. The program went on to make a long list of promises, such as the establishment of a powerful welfare system, a crack down on crimes and corruption, extensive public funding to education and science and the establishment of a mixed economy with heavy state controls¹⁸⁵. On the day of the ballots, positive trends for the overall democratization process in Russia were evident, as the number of parties and blocs had doubled compared to the previous election and the turnout reached a very positive 64 percent. It appeared that the public was leaving behind the cynical disinterest that had characterized the early post-soviet years in favor of a more positive view of the whole democratic process. Moreover, the national media had risen to the occasion, hosting political debates and challenging candidates during interviews, where two years prior the media had simply served to broadcast long electoral speeches of the various candidates, in a manner non dissimilar to the USSR’s media. Those novelties, however, were not so readily available for the CPRF as they were for the other political movement. Aside from the legal minimum allotted media exposure given to every party, the CPRF, as Zyuganov repeatedly stated, lacked any meaningful presence in the national media. Without the financial resources to buy exposure, the party had to resort to the old methods of rank-and-file activism in which it had accumulated plenty of experience¹⁸⁶. Thanks to those efforts, the CPRF managed to easily clear the 5% limit for the party lists to access the State Duma. For most of its opponents, however the limit was insurmountable, too

¹⁸³ Ivi 162

¹⁸⁴ March, L. (2002). *The Communist Party in Post-Soviet Russia*. Manchester University Press. Pg. 175. https://archive.org/details/communistpartyin0000marc_w7a1/page/176/mode/2up.

¹⁸⁵ Tesche, J. (1995). Economic platforms of the major parties in the 1995. *Comparative Economic Studies* (Association for Comparative Economic Studies), 37(3), 109. Pg 111. <https://doi.org/10.1057/ces.1995.37>.

¹⁸⁶ White, S., Wyman, M., & Oates, S. (1997). Parties and Voters in the 1995 Russian Duma Election. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 49(5), 767–798. Pg. 777. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/153485>.

stubborn to join into blocs, they often run alone and competed for the same share of the electorate, making it harder to gain the votes necessary to access the Duma¹⁸⁷. Of the 40 plus parties that competed at the ballots, only other three had managed to clear the 5% hurdle: the LDPR, Yabloko, Russia's Choice. The communist party dominated, conquering 22.3% of the vote, twice the amount compared to the LDPR, who followed in second place. The low number of parties clearing the 5% requirement accentuated the communist result, that translated into an astonishing 157 seats out of 450 in the State Duma¹⁸⁸. The success of the CPRF can be attributed to a wide range of factors. The first thing that deserved consideration was the inability of the other political forces, mainly the liberal and reformist camps, to merge into bigger, more structured parties, that could realistically collect enough votes to clear the minimum percentage. Instead, the parties were still revolving around individual figures, lacking any meaningful organization. This is, again, particularly true for the liberal forces, which were not aided by the stubborn refusal of Yeltsin to create an official party of reformers. Had those forces unified, they could have amassed enough seats in the Duma to even the score with the CPRF¹⁸⁹. Conversely, the ability of the CPRF to conduct a thoroughly planned and executed electoral campaign should not be understated, having subtracted a substantial amount of nationalist and anti-reform votes from the LDPR and the Agrarian party.¹⁹⁰ The less Marxist sounding electoral program had served its purpose, capturing a sizeable percentage of the LDPR voters and absorbing almost completely the Agrarian Party's electorate, to the point where AP had been reduced to an extension of the CPRF organizational structure. The most extreme fringes of the CPRF communist voters left the party for the more militant and orthodox RCWP, which came close to clear the 5% barrier. Overall, the opening amounted to a net positive for CPRF and was made possible by the loyalty of its electoral base, which gave Zyuganov the necessary reassurance to make moves aimed at the rest of the opposition voters. The expansion of the anti-reform votes, which combined represented almost 52% of the total, made Zyuganov believe that it was

¹⁸⁷ Rose, R., Tikhomirov, E., & Mishler, W. (1997). Understanding Multi-Party Choice: The 1995 Duma Election. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 49(5), 799–823. Pg 819. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/153486>.

¹⁸⁸ Urban, J., & Solovei, V. (2021). *Russia's Communists At The Crossroads* (1st ed.). Routledge. Pg. 165. <https://www.perlego.com/book/2527786>.

¹⁸⁹ March, L. (2002). *The Communist Party in Post-Soviet Russia*. Manchester University Press. Pg. 179. https://archive.org/details/communistpartyin0000marc_w7a1/page/176/mode/2up.

¹⁹⁰ *ibidem*

possible to conquer the presidency by catering to the anti-reform voter rather than trying to expand his base to the centrist and the undecided. This decision would have profound effect in the upcoming Presidential Elections.¹⁹¹

3.3.2 The Presidential Election

As said earlier, the legislative elections acted as something akin to a national presidential primary. Under that interpretation, it became clear that Zyuganov had risen to be the main challenger to Yeltsin. The decline of the pro-government support, combined with the rise of anti-reform sentiments and the apparent inability of the reformers to create a united front in support of the president generated the feeling that a victory for the opposition forces was almost inevitable. Zyuganov himself did not waste any time in preparing for the upcoming confrontation and devoted himself to the creation of the Bloc of Nationalist Patriotic Forces that he had advocated and attempted numerous times since 1992. This time, however, he had the necessary political influence to materialize it, as well as the proper justification for its creation, both vis-a-vis the CPRF and the other political movements. The winner takes all nature of the presidential election called for the creation of a broader coalition and even the most uncompromising fringes of the communist movement, both inside and outside the CPRF, had to concede that a presidential candidate could not be the expression of a single party. True to the new democratic mechanism of the CPRF, Zyuganov didn't automatically assume that he was the party's official presidential candidate, delegating instead that decision to the internal organs of the party. He was anticipated, however, by an independent initiative group led by Podberezkin, president of the nationalist think-tank RAU, which proclaimed Zyuganov to be their presidential candidate¹⁹². This nomination represented another argument in support of Zyuganov popularity and, not many days later, the CPRF's CC officially supported Zyuganov as the party's candidate, with the decision becoming final at the February party congress. The long-term experience that Zyuganov had in creating broad national fronts

¹⁹¹ Ivi pg 180

¹⁹² Flikke, G. (1999). Patriotic Left-Centrism: The Zigzags of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 51(2), 275–298. Pg 285. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/153612>.

had come into play, and he was able to bring together a wide range of anti-reforms movements and figures, that were otherwise competing amongst themselves, to support its campaign. The resulting “Bloc of Nationalist Patriotic Forces of Russia” brought together respected figures such as Rutskoi and former PM of the Soviet Union Ryzkov, alongside the extremist Anpilov’s RCWP. The union between communists and nationalists that Zyuganov had struggled for since 1991 had finally been achieved.¹⁹³ With the CPRF’s local organizations providing the necessary territorial presence, Zyuganov launched its presidential campaign.

The electoral program was no different from what the CPRF had used in its campaign six months prior, if only with an even more pronounced nationalist and populist rhetoric. More than a coherent list of policies, the whole campaign was based on a critic of the entire Yeltsin’s tenure. He was labeled as a traitor, whose policies had been a direct attack on the Russian people, going as far as accusing him of genocide. With more than half of citizens under the poverty line, Zyuganov accused the regime of selling out Russia to the West and of profiting while doing so, pointing out to the rampant corruption among government officials. His denouncement extended to the West and his agents in the IMF and World Bank, who Zyuganov accused of wanting to transform Russia in a source of cheap raw materials. Conversely, Zyuganov quietly put his communists aside and instead portrayed himself as a moderate force that would bring stability in the Federation and the re-establishment of a strong welfare system that would support the ailing masses, forgotten by the Yeltsinite elites in the big cities.¹⁹⁴ His economic program, published three weeks before the vote among heavy criticism, called for a mixed economy, subsidies to the agriculture, protectionist policies for heavy industry and the commitment to generate financial investments from domestic capital.¹⁹⁵

Politically, Yeltsin was initially on the defensive. The dissolution of the Union, ongoing socioeconomical crisis and the current war in Chechnia were, after all, a direct consequence of his policies. He was put in an uncomfortable position, having to sell to the public solutions to problems he had created. Moreover, he could not promise the

¹⁹³ McFaul, M. (1997). Russia's 1996 presidential election: The end of polarized politics. Hoover Institution Press. Pg. 37. <https://archive.org/details/russias1996presi00mcf/a>.

¹⁹⁴ Ivi. Pg. 40.

¹⁹⁵ Urban, J., & Solovei, V. (2021). Russia’s Communists At The Crossroads (1st ed.). Routledge. Pg. 171. <https://www.perlego.com/book/2527786>.

reversal of his reform without eroding his electoral base. His solution was, ultimately, to shift the focus of the election from the presidential office, to turning the vote into a referendum on communism. This sudden shift in focus proved instrumental in preventing the CPRF from gaining the votes of the centrist electors and of the undecided. With full control of the national television and other media channels, Yeltsin was able to generate a fear for the return of the communist dictatorship.¹⁹⁶ The crimes and mass killings of the soviet were once more brought up into public discussion, as they were during the days of glasnost, with anti-Soviet documentaries and movies flooding the tv networks. For their part, Zyuganov and the opposition bloc indirectly gave credit to the fear of a return to Soviet communism. Zyuganov had indeed purged his speeches and commentary of any Marxist or communist talking point, but ultimately, he could not bring himself to renounce its communist roots and reject the perceived achievements of previous Soviet leaders. When asked by the press to clarify some of his most radical positions, or when some of his old statements were brought up by the media, he never renounced them and kept an ambiguous position regarding his communist allegiance, in fear of losing the support of the radicals. When, on an interview, was asked to comment on the Stalin purges, he awkwardly attempted to redirect the conversation on English slave labor camps in Africa and stating that people languished the gulags compared to what they were currently experiencing under Yeltsin.¹⁹⁷ The more conservatives' figures in his coalition, for their part, did nothing to give credit to Zyuganov's moderate line, using instead the spotlight given by the election to conduct their little political campaigns. Instead, it seemed at times that the anti-reform coalition was hell-bent on giving substance to the fear of the restoration of communism. In March '96 the CPRF decided to sponsor a bill in the Duma for the denouncement of the Belovezha accords.¹⁹⁸ Later Varennikov, a CPRF deputy in the Duma, alluded to the existence of a secret party maximalist program to restore true communist rule, while RCWP leader Anpilov proudly announced that Zyuganov promised him to the chairmanship of the state television, and that under his guide he would ban all western and "Jew" programs.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁶ MALFLIET, K. (2011). The Communist Party of the Russian Federation: not Communist per se. *Revue d'études Comparatives Est-Ouest*, 42(1), 37–63. Pg.47. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27026032>.

¹⁹⁷ Depoy, E. (1996). Boris Yeltsin and the 1996 Russian Presidential Election. *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 26(4), 1140–1164. Pg 1154. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27551676>.

¹⁹⁸ *ibidem*

¹⁹⁹ *ibidem*

Yeltsin strategy of “communist referendum” ultimately proved successful in convincing enough of the centrist voters that the economic crisis was preferable to the possibility of Soviet restoration. In the first round of the elections, with over 70% turnout, Yeltsin came first with 35% of the votes, followed by Zyuganov with 32%, while the three minor candidates in Lebed, Yavlinski and Zhirinovski obtained 14%, 7% and 5% respectively. On the second round, the centrist vote flowed towards Yeltsin which propelled him at a final 53%, while Zyuganov lagged at 40%. Contrary to what was feared before the vote, the CPRF accepted the result of the election, complaining only for the unfairness of the media coverage. Zyuganov returned triumphantly at the head of the party, having proved that the CPRF was still a force to be reckoned with in Russia. Still the result of the election offers a good insight of the reality of the Communist Party in Russia, as well as its future potential.

3.4 Why did the CPRF fail?

The Communist party of the Russian Federation is a party built on the idea that the Soviet Union was the greatest nation to ever exists. For the Marxist majority within the party, it was so for the ideology that it followed, and for the nationalist it was so because the social and institutional order it created was the maximum manifestation of the Russian Civilization. As such, what CPRF can offer to its actual and potential electorate is a return to the order that was, of which the party is a living reminder. All its members had been in the CPSU. Almost its entire apparatus, from the primary party cells spread all over Russia, to its news outlet, to its equipment is inherited from the CPSU. All of this makes the CPRF an outlier in post-soviet Russia, where politics are the manifestation of individual will rather than a codified program or a specific constituency. The link with the Soviet Union gave them an idea to orbit around, it gave them the necessary resources and skills to effectively run and manage a complex political organization, but most importantly, it gave them something that no other political force in Russia has, a clear and loyal electoral base. This electoral base is made up of individuals which, for very different reasons, can

only look at the past and what they have lost. Pensioners who had worked a lifetime under the previous system only to spend their retirement in crippling poverty. Farmers who for four generations knew only the collective farms and completely lacked the skills necessary to create their private agricultural enterprises, let alone compete in the international markets. Workers from the hundreds of cities in the Russian territory built around one singular factory or mine, that had since shut its chimneys and left most of the town without any employment. Engineers and scientists who had worked at one of the USSR's countless research bureaus, which had seen their funding cut and its projects cancelled. The geography of the CPRF's electoral base perfectly encapsulates that, with most voters being in the regions where the development of the economy and the infrastructure was guided by the need of the Gosplan planners and their quotas. In those regions, more than the others, the fall of the Soviet Union meant the loss of their employer and all their social guarantees. Comparing the regions of Siberia and the Far East, which supported Yeltsin, to the CPRF dominated Red Belt, we see that both regions were developed in the same fashion. Yet the regions who ended up supporting Yeltsin had their economy based on the extraction of raw material, which since the 70s had been exporting abroad in return for capital. While undoubtedly traumatic, the fall of the Soviet Union did not result in the mines being closed, but instead they were privatized and kept productive. Conversely, in the industrialized Red Belt, the fall of the USSR meant the closure of the factories, which relied exclusively on the State as an investor, coordinator and client.²⁰⁰

Having therefore a clearly defined core of electors meant that the CPRF was bound to do well in parliamentary elections, where the margins and the percentages required to gain power are not particularly high, naturally rewarding parties with a stable electoral base. In surveys, the CPRF voter is shown to be generally loyal to the party and its program, rather than its political leaders. Thanks to the inherited network of local organizations and rank and file activists, immediately after its creation the CPRF could easily get in touch with and foster its natural electorate. This is the reason why in the 1993 elections, despite only having a 3-week campaign, the CPRF managed to gain 15% of the votes, for it didn't need to persuade or gain any electors as they were already there, waiting to be shepherd

²⁰⁰ Bortnikov, N. S., Volkov, A. V., Galyamov, A. L., & others. (2023). Problems of the development of the mineral and raw-material base of high-tech industry in Russia. *Geology of Ore Deposits*, 65(5), 397–411. <https://doi.org/10.1134/S1075701523050033>

towards the ballot. Likewise, this positioned well to benefit from an eventual loss of voters from other parties, while being safe from that themselves. What happened to the LDPR at the 1995 legislative election could not have happened to the CPRF, as there were no alternative parties for the CPRF's electorate to turn to. That wasn't the case for the LDPR for example, who were not ideologically bound to the party and could move elsewhere among the anti-reform parties if they became disaffected with the LDPR. The same thing happened with the Agrarian party voters, who weren't ideologically tied to the party and naturally flowed to the CPRF when they became dissatisfied with the APR. As such the CPRF realistically would start every election with a guaranteed 10 to 15 percent of the votes and could only add voters to that minimum figure, which is precisely what made them so dominant at the 1995 elections. This close relationship between ideology, identity and electoral base however was a double-edged sword that blocked any meaningful growth of the party, as the security of an assured electoral base came at the cost of political flexibility and limited the possibility of expanding its electorate aside from the occasional influx of votes, as happened with the LDPR ones. In other words, the party could never lose big, but it could never win big, making it unfit to successfully compete in the winner takes all framework of the presidential elections.

When looking at the reasons why Zyuganov failed to secure the presidency in 1996, it becomes evident that the answer lies in the same characteristic that made them dominant at the legislative ones. The CPRF leadership was too focused on its own political base to meaningfully understand the trends of the Russian electorate. Zyuganov and the CPRF's leadership failed to understand that the relation they had with their own electorate was the exception in Russian politics, and that other parties had a much more fluid electoral base. Thus, when they saw the results of the '95 election they mistakenly believed that it was the result of a communist reawakening in the country, rather than a failure of the other parties to secure the loyalty of their potential voters. This misinterpretation shaped Zyuganov's strategy in the '96 elections, making him believe that he could win by gaining the votes of these newly awakened "communists" and of the anti-reform nationalist.²⁰¹ However, it turned out that there were no more communist votes to gain, aside from those he already had, and most importantly among the anti-reform voters there

²⁰¹ March, L. (2002). *The Communist Party in Post-Soviet Russia*. Manchester University Press. Pg. 185. https://archive.org/details/communistpartyin0000marc_w7a1/page/176/mode/2up.

were many who hated the Soviet Union and its ideology more than they hated Yeltsin and his reforms. As such, his decision to ignore the centrist electors left those votes open to be persuaded by Yeltsin and his bloc. Moreover, the success of the two legislative elections made Zyuganov believe that the tried and tested method of rank and file mobilization would be effective in this occasion as well, which resulted in a lack of interest for the media outlets and other more modern mobilization techniques. While it is true that it was impossible for Zyuganov to access the national media, the local television emitters and radio stations were realistically available to his block and could potentially have increased the percentage of his supporters in the first rounds.²⁰²

Lastly, it's important to underline the role that ideology had in limiting Zyuganov's and the CPRF ability to be politically flexible. The central role that ideology had in the CPRF meant that its development was in immediate priority, as important as fostering its electorate. But Marxist ideology wasn't in its best shape during the final days of the Soviet Union, and thus the CPRF was loyally adhering to an ideology that needed to be reworked. However, the founding fathers of Marxism-Leninism gave no indication as to how to do that, nor did the party had the necessary energy to achieve what the ideologues of the CPSU failed to do in the 80s. Therefore, the ideology they inherited came with factionalism and mutually exclusive ideological solutions. As such, unity in the CPRF was bounded to the constant quest for compromise which, aside from the opportunist moderate posturing, prevented the party from developing a political program fit for the post-Soviet reality. The only avenue possible for this ideological compromise was to look back at the Soviet past, instead of developing a road for the future, which was eventually used against them in 1996 election. Moreover, CPRF could not embrace fully one of its three main currents, as it would have resulted in the other currents splitting from the party, breaking apart its organization and, most importantly, resulting in the breakup of its electoral base. Under those conditions the CPRF, no matter its size and relevance, was bound to represent a very specific constituency that, while giving it guaranteed access to the Duma, prevented it to become a true national party that could mobilize an entire nation to support its presidential candidate. Moreover, the Soviet idea alienated the party from the newborn capitalist interest groups that, with the privatization, had managed to gain

²⁰² McFaul, M. (1997). *Russia's 1996 presidential election: The end of polarized politics*. Hoover Institution Press. Pg. 46. <https://archive.org/details/russias1996presi00mcfa>.

control of the economic and political resources of Russia. The prospect of nationalization and a state's lead economy naturally failed to resonate among the elites, which mobilized their resources in support of Yeltsin campaign.

Conclusion

In analyzing the electoral performance of the CPRF across its first two electoral cycles, it becomes clear that the party's dual identity, rooted in Soviet legacies and adapted to the post-Soviet political order, was both its greatest strength and its most critical weakness. The CPRF successfully consolidated an enduring and loyal electorate, which allowed it to dominate the legislative arena in 1993 and 1995. Yet, the same structural reliance on a narrowly defined constituency, combined with internal ideological divisions and a lack of flexibility in appealing to centrist voters, prevented it from translating parliamentary success into presidential victory in 1996. Ultimately, the CPRF's experience in these formative years underscores the paradox of its position: a party powerful enough to shape parliamentary opposition but constrained in its capacity to challenge Yeltsin for national leadership.

Chapter 4: From anti-system party to a managed opposition

Introduction

This fourth and final chapter will detail the progressive loss of relevance of the CPRF within the Russian political system. After having reached its peak in popularity in 1995, and after forcing Yeltsin to go in the second electoral round in 1996, the CPRF progressively lost ground and, unable to adapt or evolve, was relegated to its own electoral niche, unable to arrange an effective bid for power. After detailing the harsh ideological struggles taking place within the party from 1997 to 1999, where the traditionalist wing of the party attempted to pushback against Zyuganov's line, the chapter will delve into a reconstruction of the functioning of Putin's regime, explaining how the CPRF has adapted in order to fit within Putin's system, regardless of its apparent role as an opposition party.

4.1 The CPRF's internal struggles during Yeltsin second term

Following the 1995 parliamentary elections and the 1996 presidential contest, the Communist Party of the Russian Federation had emerged as the largest political party in the Russian Federation. It possessed the most extensive organizational infrastructure and the most stable electoral base in the post-Soviet political landscape. The party's success in the 1995 legislative elections confirmed its dominant position in the State Duma, backed by a disciplined and ideologically committed electorate that had demonstrated its capacity to deliver continued parliamentary representation across electoral cycles. However, the CPRF's electoral and organizational strength did not translate into corresponding political influence, due to the nature of the post-Soviet political system. The institutional framework of the Russian Federation after the 1993 constitutional crisis had established a presidential system in which the parliament was structurally and

politically subordinate to the executive. The president held decisive powers over legislation, budgeting, government appointments, and, most importantly, over the dissolution of parliament. Even a well-organized and numerous Duma faction could exercise only limited influence in this context. So, the CPRF, though dominant in the legislature, operated in a political environment where the executive could bypass parliamentary constraints, therefore limiting the ability of the communists to implement their program or shape national policy.²⁰³ The limitations of the CPRF's position became particularly evident during the 1996 presidential elections. Zyuganov had advanced to the second round but was ultimately defeated by Boris Yeltsin. This loss revealed a fundamental strategic weakness. The CPRF was unable to expand its appeal beyond its core base, which was insufficient to secure executive power, and as the vote turned into a referendum on communism, the party's Soviet legacy turned away potential new constituencies.²⁰⁴

The 1996 defeat not only reinforced the existing institutional constraints on the party but also initiated a phase of internal uncertainty and strategic confusion. After Yeltsin secured its mandate, Russia was bound to go further along the road of reform, progressively reapproaching politically and economically with the West, leaving behind the USSR and closing the door on any possible attempts at its restoration, one the rare chance that such restoration could have been feasible at the time. The Soviet legacy, apparently, could offer no future to the CPRF apart from its existing electorate, which was bound to diminish as time passed due to age and the fading memory of the USSR, and an assured presence in the State Duma that, as we've established, was subordinate to the presidency. After 1996 however, the CPRF parliamentary faction became a source of further conflict within the party, as the moderate leadership became accustomed to their role in the Legislative and faced growing pressure from its radical fringes to remain true to its Marxist-Leninist roots, which the party still formally adhered to in the party's internal documents and discourses.²⁰⁵

²⁰³ Bozoki, A., Ishiyama, J. (2020). *The Communist Successor Parties of Central and Eastern Europe* (1st ed.). Routledge. Pg 248. <https://www.perlego.com/book/1629284>.

²⁰⁴ MALFLIET, K. (2011). The Communist Party of the Russian Federation: not Communist per se. *Revue d'études Comparatives Est-Ouest*, 42(1), 37–63. Pg.47. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27026032>.

²⁰⁵ March, L. (2001). For Victory? The Crises and Dilemmas of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 53(2), 263–290. Pg. 272-273. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/826348>.

The CPRF had long positioned itself as a party of systemic resistance, framing the post-Soviet regime as illegitimate and unconstitutional. Its electoral rhetoric in 1993 and 1995 rejected the foundational principles of the 1993 Constitution and presented itself as an anti-system political movement. The party's behavior within the Duma, however, consistently contradicted this stance. The CPRF occupied important committee positions, took part in legislative negotiations, and participated in formal inter-party coordination. Moreover, the party supported Chernomyrdin tenure as Prime Minister and authorized their independent ally Tuleev to join its government as minister of CIS cooperation. On the same note, it supported all the government budget laws from 1996 onward. It became a fixture of parliamentary life. This duality, denouncing the system publicly while operating within it, produced an increasingly visible contradiction between the party's ideological claims and its behavior within the State Duma, which wasn't lost on the party radicals as well as the more orthodox voters. Over time, the CPRF's participation in Duma proceedings had become the routine, with the party contributing to the regular functioning of parliamentary institutions as Zyuganov changed its outlook in favor of a systemic opposition.²⁰⁶ This rapprochement with the regime came at the cost of its credibility as a revolutionary force, while the size and influence of the CPRF faction made it a necessary component of legislative procedures. The party's participation in the Duma had become normalized. While it continued to position itself as the heirs of the CPSU and the Union, its practical role increasingly resembled that of a systemic opposition party. The aftermath of the 1996 election underscored this transition. By accepting the results of the presidential contest and refraining from radical protest actions such as a no-confidence vote, the CPRF signaled its acceptance of the current framework of constitutional politics.²⁰⁷ This acceptance, however, was not uniformly shared within the party. While the leadership was progressively adapting to its parliamentary role, many rank and file members and core supporters remained committed to the re-establishment of the Soviet Union. This disconnect became a source of internal tension, and alienated segments of the traditional communist base, with the ultra-orthodox Marxist-Leninist RCWP coming dangerously close to clearing the 5% hurdle, signaling dissatisfaction with the CPRF's

²⁰⁶ March, L. (2002). *The Communist Party in post-Soviet Russia*. Manchester University Press. Pg.235. https://archive.org/details/communistpartyin0000marc_w7a1.

²⁰⁷ March, L. (2001). For Victory? The Crises and Dilemmas of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 53(2). Pg 273. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/826348>.

new direction.²⁰⁸ This development alarmed the leadership, which viewed itself as the principal representative of the communist electorate and sought to prevent the emergence of a viable left-wing alternative. Moreover, the CPRF's position within the Duma after 1995 reinforced this dilemma. The size of its faction made it too significant to avoid responsibility, yet insufficient to dominate the legislature or control policy outcomes. The party was stuck in a tactical impasse. It could initiate laws and resist key appointments, but to be successful the CPRF needed to bargain with other parties, resulting in a more active participation in parliamentary life. Furthermore, the party faction in the Duma refrained from attempting a vote of no confidence since, under the 1993 constitution, such motion was tied to the dissolution of the Duma, which would allow Yeltsin to rule by decree until new elections could be held.²⁰⁹ Naturally, the CPRF leadership was unwilling to risk such a move.²¹⁰

Meanwhile, the party had become increasingly reliant on the material and organizational resources it obtained through Duma participation. Funding, staffing, public visibility, and institutional access were all tied to its parliamentary status. As a result, the leadership was compelled to maintain its position within the Duma, even at the cost of strategic concessions, which led to further divisions and strife within the CPRF.²¹¹ Radicals within the party advocated principled resistance, using the Duma primarily as a platform for ideological messaging. Conversely, the moderates emphasized constructive engagement and legislative pragmatism. The party kept being held between two mutually exclusive imperatives. On the one hand, it needed to preserve its traditional base by retaining a recognizable ideological profile. On the other hand, it still sought to become a mass party with broader national appeal. This strategic ambiguity led to repeated shifts in posture and rhetoric, as the leadership attempted to reconcile its revolutionary heritage with the realities of parliamentary politics. The CPRF's adaptability was constrained by the need to satisfy both its orthodox supporters and its ambitions for national power.

²⁰⁸ Urban, J., Solovei, V. (2021). *Russia's Communists At The Crossroads* (1st ed.). Routledge. Pg. 147. <https://www.perlego.com/book/2527786>.

²⁰⁹ *Russian Constitution*, Article 117.

²¹⁰ March, L. (2001). For Victory? The Crises and Dilemmas of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 53(2). Pg. 274. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/826348>.

²¹¹ Bozoki, A., Ishiyama, J. (2020). *The Communist Successor Parties of Central and Eastern Europe* (1st ed.). Routledge. Pg 255. <https://www.perlego.com/book/1629284>.

These internal divisions were amplified by the CPRF's growing involvement in regional politics. The 1996–1997 wave of gubernatorial elections saw the party support wide range of candidates, many of whom lacked a clear ideological alignment with the party. Reversing the trend seen until that moment, the CPRF began backing technocratic and managerial figures such as Vadim Gustov in Leningrad and Leonid Gorbenko in Kaliningrad, prioritizing administrative influence over ideological affinity. In regions like Saratov, the party declined to campaign vigorously, choosing instead to negotiate with local elites. This newfound pragmatism was also accompanied by deliberate attempts to position CPRF members within local administrations. Even in traditionally “Red Belt” areas such as Smolensk, the party sought agreements with local industrial and financial interests. However, this strategy often failed to produce stable alliances. In several cases, those apolitical figures elected with the CPRF's support later turned on the party and instead aligned with the Federal government. This took place especially in poorer regions, heavily reliant on subsidies from the center, where once-radical figures such as Aleksandr Rutskoi in Kursk reversed course and adopted loyalist positions.²¹²

This new accommodating strategy however had a cost and soon the CPRF's increasing entanglement with the state provoked resistance from within. Party members and regional organizations began to express dissatisfaction with the leadership's approach. The radical party members were becoming increasingly uneasy with the ongoing political and ideological compromises and in 1997 60 of the party's 89 regional organizations called for an end to parliamentary cooperation, even if it resulted in the dissolution of the Duma. Moreover, the new more permissive rules regarding factionalism and erosion of democratic centralism in favor of internal debate gave radical members the opportunity to express their dissatisfaction.²¹³ In 1998 internal critics formally organized the Leninist-Stalinist platform, calling for a return to orthodox Marxism-Leninism and the sacking of the leaders that had brought forward the political compromise, including Zyuganov and Podberezkin. Even though this internal opposition lacked the strength to displace the leadership, it nonetheless forced the party into a series of rhetorical reversals. Under pressure from radicals, the leadership reasserted its hardline credentials, even as it

²¹²March, L. (2001). For Victory? The Crises and Dilemmas of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 53(2). Pg. 274. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/826348>.

²¹³ Urban, J., Solovei, V. (2021). *Russia's Communists At The Crossroads* (1st ed.). Routledge. Pg. 57. <https://www.perlego.com/book/2527786>.

continued to function as a parliamentary actor. But for all intents and purposes the Party's leadership resisted this demand, recognizing the strategic importance of parliamentary resources and the limited efficacy of direct confrontation.²¹⁴

Years of unresolved ideological debates, political compromises and incoherent position put ever growing pressure on internal discipline which, by 1997, began to break down and potential challenges to Zyuganov's leadership emerged from both the moderate and radical wings of the party. Viktor Ilyukhin gave voice to the radical camp, while Gennadii Seleznev, representing the moderates, even hinted at a presidential run. Factionalism was increasing, with rising numbers of defections and expulsions, Zyuganov's authority was increasingly contested, as the party's political coherence began to deteriorate. An example of the party's declining coherence and discipline took place in July 1998 when, on the eve of the August financial crisis, CPRF deputy Yurii Maslyukov, joined the newly appointed Kirienko's government, despite the Presidium's unanimous vote against such a move the previous day. Disciplinary action was preempted by the fall of Kirienko's government, and the CPRF approved of him joining Primakov's government soon after September 1998, as one of two first deputy prime ministers with broad responsibilities for trade and industry.²¹⁵ This incident, coupled with the antisemitic statements of CPRF deputy Albert Makashov, promptly condemned by Zyuganov, reinforced the ongoing perception of internal fragmentation and ideological confusion. Some radicals warned that the CPRF risked "dying as an opposition organization" if it failed to reassert its political identity.²¹⁶

On paper, at the beginning of 1998, the CPRF had the perfect chance to reverse this trend. The Russian federation was entering its worst year of the decade, as the surplus production of raw materials worldwide made the price of such commodities plummet, particularly the price of crude oil, which deprived Russia, heavily reliant on oil exports, of a sizeable portion of its income.²¹⁷ Furthermore, as the bureaucratic inefficiencies kept tax revenues low and erratic, the state was forced to finance its activities with debt, by

²¹⁴March, L. (2001). For Victory? The Crises and Dilemmas of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 53(2). Pg. 274. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/826348>.

²¹⁵ Bozoki, A., Ishiyama, J. (2020). *The Communist Successor Parties of Central and Eastern Europe* (1st ed.). Routledge. Pg 256. <https://www.perlego.com/book/1629284>.

²¹⁶ March, L. (2001). For Victory? The Crises and Dilemmas of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 53(2), pg. 274. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/826348>.

²¹⁷ Medvedev, R. (2002). *La Russia Post Sovietica. Un viaggio nell'era Eltsin*. Giulio Einaudi editore, Torino. Pg. 324-325.

issuing short-term obligations at obscene interest rates, which were covered by the issuing of new short-term obligations in a continuous cycle.²¹⁸ In an effort to combat inflation and provide confidence for international investors, the ruble was fixed to the US dollar, requiring constant expenditure of dollars by the Russian central bank to keep the value fixed. The reduction of the oil earnings and the subsequent retreat of foreign investors from the Russian financial markets, having lost faith in the country's economy, left the state on the verge of bankruptcy and with no resources to finance its activities, to pay for salaries and unable to repay the interests on its short-term obligations. Loans in dollars from the IMF and the United States were made available and were promptly employed by the Russian Central Bank to keep the current exchange rate of the ruble vis-à-vis the dollar. However, in their retreat foreign investors were quickly selling their ruble assets which, coupled with international speculation, put the Ruble under immense devaluation pressure. With the dollar reserves of the Central Bank running out, the government was forced to devalue the ruble, which made the already high inflation skyrocket. Furthermore, the state had run out of funds and could not pay back the interest on its obligations, which resulted in the bankruptcy of various Russian banks, which had held a sizeable amount of such obligations in their books, and had used them as collateral to fund their operations abroad.²¹⁹

The rampant inflation, the unpaid pensions and constant delays on salaries naturally made Yeltsin increasingly unpopular, which emboldened the opposition forces to take a more confrontational approach. Yeltsin candidate as prime minister was rejected two times, forcing the president to change the proposed candidate. Worried that a failure to create a new government would bring the Federation to anarchy, the CPRF leadership reverted once again to constructive behavior, offering cautious support for the Primakov government, which would enjoy high popularity among the Russian public for its policies against corruption and monopolies. This support was carefully calibrated as the party sought to benefit from association with popular policies without assuming full responsibility for the government's actions. However, the crisis of legitimacy within the

²¹⁸ Desai, P. (2000). Why Did the Ruble Collapse in August 1998? *The American Economic Review*, 90(2), 48–52. Pg. 49. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/117190>.

²¹⁹ Medvedev, R. (2002). *La Russia Post Sovietica. Un viaggio nell'era Eltsin*. Giulio Einaudi editore, Torino. Pg. 348-350.

party continued.²²⁰ The party's association with the Primakov cabinet further revealed the limitations of the CPRF parliamentary leverage. When Yeltsin dismissed Primakov in May 1999, fearful of his growing popularity, the CPRF proved unable to act and one of its long-standing goals, Yeltsin's impeachment, was not realized. Despite its public commitments, the party failed to mount an effective response and lost the perfect opportunity to increase its popularity. When Yeltsin, already under scrutiny for his alleged alcoholism, ousted the popular Primakov, the CPRF could have capitalized on the situation by initiating a no-confidence vote, appearing as a defender of the wronged prime minister. With this opportunity wasted and with growing factionalism, at the end of the decade the CPRF approached the 1999 parliamentary elections with its internal divisions unresolved, its ideological coherence weakened, and its strategic position undermined. Although it remained the largest opposition force in Russia, its role had become defined less by its ability to challenge the regime and more by its contradictory position as both critic and component of the political system it opposed.

The rift between the nationalist-moderate leadership of Zyuganov and Kuptsov and the orthodox members at the middle and lower level of the party was growing wider. But regardless of the internal strife and the apparent risk of a split between the CPRF, neither of the two contenders had the courage to make such a move. The top leadership knew all too well that if they lost the rank and file, they'd lose touch with their electorate, and with it, access to the Duma. Conversely the rank and file knew that their only chance to influence politics was through a strong unified party, something that they had loudly advocated for during the ban. After all, the failure of the RCWP to clear the 5% hurdle had shown them the perils of being a small organization.²²¹ As such, both factions were aware that unity was paramount if the communist wanted to keep their influence. Moreover, in the eyes of the electorate, the CPRF had cemented itself as the CPSU heir, something that a splinter party or even a multitude of CPRF's successor parties would undoubtedly lack. As such, on the eve of the '99-'00 electoral cycles, the CPRF hadn't managed to properly address its weaknesses and internal issues. Internally, the party leadership still resorted to compromises and strategic retreats to keep the radicals

²²⁰ March, L. (2001). For Victory? The Crises and Dilemmas of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 53(2). Pg. 275. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/826348>.

²²¹ Urban, J. & Solovei, V. (2021). *Russia's Communists At The Crossroads* (1st ed.). Routledge. Pg. 165. <https://www.perlego.com/book/2527786>.

somewhat in check. This however kept forcing the CPRF into oscillating between left-centrist parliamentary cooperation and anti-system rhetoric to mobilize voters against the regime. Even more, during the party's congresses in 1997 and 1998, no attempts were made to try and create a coherent program that integrated all the various ideological currents effectively, on the contrary the issue was deliberately ignored.²²² The coexistence of the nationalist, orthodox Marxist-Leninist and Marxist-Leninist reformers was paralyzing the party. The Upper echelons of the party were dominated by nationalist and reformist positions respectively and had been welcoming to the party's participation in the democratic system, the evolution towards a responsible opposition within the system and the acceptance of a certain degree of market economy and political pluralism. At the middle to low level of the party, and among the electorate as well, orthodox positions were widespread.²²³ Since its inception, the party's leadership always had to contend with the orthodoxy at lower echelons, over issues such as the CPRF's weak parliamentary opposition and its opening towards market ideals. Up until 1997, the leadership had managed to keep the peace with strategic retreats, as in the 1995 program, and by adopting a more orthodox position in its party internal ideology.²²⁴ Yet when the Russian economy failed completely at the end of 1997 and in 1998 the radicals, as seen earlier, went on the offensive. The collapse of the market and the inability of the leadership to leverage their Duma presence to fight Yeltsin gave an argument to the grassroots radicals for rejecting the strategy employed up to that point.

Yet, aside from the internal resistance, Zyuganov strategy was being refuted by the lack of meaningful accomplishments. The nationalist narrative had failed to yield any meaningful results in expanding its core electorate, as the only nationalist voters left were strongly non-communists and with no intention of supporting the CPRF. But most importantly, Zyuganov's nationalist discourse could be easily stolen or used more effectively by another party or by another charismatic leader, possibly developing a nationalist rhetoric with limited callbacks to the USSR.²²⁵ Likewise, the left-centrist

²²² MALFLIET, K. (2011). The Communist Party of the Russian Federation: not Communist per se. *Revue d'études Comparatives Est-Ouest*, 42(1), 37–63. Pg 53. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27026032>.

²²³ March, L. (2001). For Victory? The Crises and Dilemmas of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 53(2). Pg. 274. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/826348>.

²²⁴ March, L. (2002). *The Communist Party in post-Soviet Russia*. Manchester University Press. Pg. 85-86. https://archive.org/details/communistpartyin0000marc_w7a1/page/178/mode/2up.

²²⁵ Ivi. Pg. 224.

strategy had the same issues in terms of potential expansion of the electorate, with the added weight, however, of alienating the rank and file. While definitively transforming into a left-centrist party could potentially give the CPRF enough traction to win a presidential election, it required several sacrifices to be made, that the leadership wasn't ready to make. First, the CPRF had to leave behind its communist legacy and its ties to the Soviet Union to convince the public of its transformation and secondly, it would have to abandon its core electorate, and the safety net it provided, and instead create a new electoral base, effectively starting from zero. As it became clear, the leadership wasn't ready to take such a risk and, as we'll see in the next paragraph, its refusal to do so would force the party into corner, condemning them to become nothing more than a permanent parliamentary opposition.

4.2 The 1999 Duma election and the 2000 presidential election.

4.2.1 The Legislative election

With the 20th century ending, Russia was preparing to enter its third electoral cycle. The political landscape was dramatically different from the previous elections. Russia had surpassed the two-camp politics of the previous years, where the discourse was polarized between the reformist and those who sought to reestablish the fallen system. Economic and political liberalism had won, that was apparent, and with a financial crisis in 1998 followed by the start of the second Chechen war in mid'99 the needs of the electorate had shifted. People were now looking for stability, safety and some degree of prosperity, with young people calling for practical solutions to the economic disarray while older voters asked for the expansion of social welfare. In this new phase of Russian politics, practical solutions had supplanted ideological mobilization.

In the eve of the legislative elections, the CPRF main priorities were the reestablishment of the party's internal discipline, which had been lacking in 1998, and ensuring once again its dominant position among the left opposition groups. To this effort new negotiations between the party, the NPSR (the National bloc supporting Zyuganov in '96) and other CPRF allies were held, but their outcome was influenced by the restlessness of the CPRF radicals, which forced Zyuganov to take distances from some of his advisors, such as nationalist theorist Podberedzkin, and to sideline the patriotic bloc, both not well regarded by the party radicals. At first Zyuganov tried to find yet another compromise, deciding to have each individual party in the NPSR run individually for the election while still under the umbrella of the Patriotic-Bloc.²²⁶ This compromise however was short lived, and in July 1999 the CPRF decided to run alone and established its own electoral bloc under the name "For Victory!". It was becoming apparent how Zyuganov's capacity to influence the party's external posturing was weakening and the Bloc of National-Patriotic forces he had long strived for was left gutted as a result.²²⁷ Yet the electoral campaign of the CPRF shows that, once again, Zyuganov retreats were the result of yet another compromise, as the program and slogans were considerably more moderate. The party's headline slogan "Order in the Country, Prosperity in the Home" shows a deliberate softening from the more overtly ideological "Russia, Labour, Popular Power, Socialism" used in 1995, to meet the new expectations of voters.²²⁸

Programmatically, the CPRF clearly showed its ultimate transformation as party integrated in political institutions. Gone were the days of denunciation of the regime illegitimacy and the pledges to restore the USSR, replaced by more moderate propositions. The previous stance on removing the presidential office was limited to a pledge to reduce presidential powers, a stance reinforced by the faction's proposed constitutional amendments during the campaign, and the idea of a Slavic union was put in place of earlier commitments to restore the USSR.²²⁹ The same thing happened in the party's economic policy, presented in a separate program from young economist Glaz'ev,

²²⁶ March, L. (2002). *The Communist Party in Post-Soviet Russia*. Manchester University Press. Pp. 211-212. https://archive.org/details/communistpartyin0000marc_w7a1/page/178/mode/2up.

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²²⁸ MALFLIET, K. (2011). The Communist Party of the Russian Federation: not Communist per se. *Revue d'études Comparatives Est-Ouest*, 42(1), 37–63. Pg 47. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27026032>.

²²⁹ March, L. (2002). *The Communist Party in Post-Soviet Russia*. Manchester University Press. Pg. 213. https://archive.org/details/communistpartyin0000marc_w7a1/page/178/mode/2up.

which combined a Keynesian, state-led recovery strategy, including state control of the “commanding heights” of the economy and a managed money issue, with pragmatic acceptance of private ownership, guarantees for property and investor rights, and support for small and medium-sized businesses. This was described as a “socially oriented socialist market economy.”²³⁰ The campaign tone consistently stressed peaceful, legal change and positioned the CPRF as the only serious, constructive opposition force capable of reviving domestic industry. The purge of the Leninist platform and Kuptsov’s effort to reassert internal discipline seemed to have paid off, as the party managed to move towards a more social democratic discourse, in his political posturing as well as in his electoral program.²³¹ Moreover, Kuptsov refreshingly honest criticism of the failures of the ’96 campaigns led to the CPRF investing in new means of political mobilization. While the party still resorted to its network of rank and file and PPOs for political campaigns, using leaflets, mail, door to door campaigning and the sort, the ’99 marked the beginning of the use of modern media for the party. Aside from the allotted time in national television, CPRF sank its available funds into campaign ads in four national television and thirty regionalized clips, expanding its electoral campaign, although it still lagged behind compared to other parties in total use of the media.²³² Moreover, this time around, the media had adopted a neutral stance towards the CPRF, with the newly founded OVR party being the subject of a smear campaign in its place,²³³ showing how the CPRF was being accepted by the regime as an official opposition. Another important difference from the past elections has to do with the candidates on the CPRF electoral list. Where before the party was the exception, having exclusively CPRF members in its lists, now the party had almost 40 percent of its candidates having absolutely no ties with the party, often being businessmen or local elites.²³⁴

After the election, the CPRF retained its place as the first party in the Duma, having increased its vote share from 22.3% of 1995 to 24.3%, with the total rising from 15.4

²³⁰ Colton, T., McFaul, M. (2003). *Popular Choice and Managed Democracy*. Brookings Institution Press. Pg 128. <https://www.perlego.com/book/742810>.

²³¹ Bozoki, A., Ishiyama, J. (2020). *The Communist Successor Parties of Central and Eastern Europe* (1st ed.). Routledge. Pg 259. <https://www.perlego.com/book/1629284>.

²³² Ivi. Pg. 114.

²³³ Hesli, V. L., & Reisinger, W. M. (Eds.). (2003). *The 1999–2000 Elections in Russia: Their Impact and Legacy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Pg 45. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511550355>.

²³⁴ March, L. (2001). For Victory? The Crises and Dilemmas of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 53(2), pg. 278. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/826348>.

million to 16.2 million votes. Moreover, it had achieved stronger results in single-mandate districts, holding 65 such seats by March 2000, 49 of them won under the communist banner. This reflected some success in the party's flexible regional policy.²³⁵ As mentioned before, the CPRF's campaigns relied more on non-party figures, such as Glaz'ev, and attracted a small degree of support from non-communists, though its base weakened among voters under 30 and remained strongest among the over 55s and the socially excluded, while entrepreneurial backing for Zyuganov stayed limited. Preliminary results indicated that the party gained some voters from Yeltsin's 1996 supporters but lost others to moderate nationalist party of Edinstvo and OVR. The CPRF improved its party list vote in 62 of 88 federal subjects, making gains in areas beyond its traditional strongholds such as St Petersburg, Perm', Murmansk, and Primorsky Krai, and claimed advances in the Far East, Siberia, the North, and the North Caucasus, although often from low starting points. In only five regions it matched or exceeded the total leftist vote of 1995, with most gains coming from other leftist parties like the APR, "Power to the People!" and radical communists. Rather than new supporters, the CPRF expanded at the expense of other similar parties, showing that the Communist Party was still inexorably tied to their base constituency. The party lost ground in "Red Belt" areas it had previously dominated, including Kemerovo, Rostov, Volgograd, and Voronezh, mainly to OVR and Edinstvo. The total leftist vote nationwide dropped from 32% in 1995 to 28% in 1999. Party leaders interpreted the outcome positively, as evidence of consolidated support within the opposition and the blocking of potential rivals, yet the rapid rise of Edinstvo was unforeseen.²³⁶ The outcome left the party largely confined to its established electoral niche, and surveys conducted before and after the election confirm this. The CPRF voters tended to be the most consistent in their support across all the elections, and the increase in votes came at the expenses of allied parties such as APR. The Communist Party, once again, won the elections thanks to the same loyal electorate that had been at his side since the beginning. On average, 68 percent of CPRF voters have decided their vote a month before the elections and for every five Russian voters identifying with a party, two of them identified with the CPRF, showing how the party foundation was a

²³⁵ Bozoki, A., Ishiyama, J. (2020). *The Communist Successor Parties of Central and Eastern Europe* (1st ed.). Routledge. Pg. 253. <https://www.perlego.com/book/1629284>.

²³⁶ March, L. (2001). For Victory? The Crises and Dilemmas of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 53(2). Pg. 279. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/826348>.

dedicated and loyal electorate which, as time passed, was progressively aging from election to election.²³⁷ Once again, the peculiarity of the CPRF in the Russian political landscape, where parties lacked a clear constituency, gave them an edge in parliamentary elections. Yet 1999 would mark the last great electoral success, as a new actor was appearing on the Russian political stage, one that would definitively put an end to the CPRF's political ambitions, Vladimir Putin.

4.2.2 The 2000 presidential election: The Ascent of Putin

Vladimir Putin's ascent to the presidency in the 2000 election was the product of a carefully managed succession engineered by Boris Yeltsin and his allied oligarchs. They selected Putin as a successor who could protect their interests from prosecution and protect them from the potential rise of populist movements. Yeltsin's resignation on December 31, 1999, advanced the election from June to March, which allowed Putin to run while being acting president, giving him full access to the state's resources as well as the visibility of incumbency. This shortened campaign period proved advantageous, preventing his popularity from declining before the vote.²³⁸ At the end of 1999, his approval rating reached an extraordinary 72%. A defining episode of Putin's rise was his handling of the Chechen incursion into Dagestan and the subsequent military campaign. His decisive response reinforced his image as a leader capable of providing security and stability, something that the Russian electorate wished for above all else, especially during a period of such uncertainty. Public support for the war remained steady at roughly 60% throughout the campaign, even as casualties mounted, cementing his reputation as a strong and resolute figure. Beyond Chechnya, his youth and energy offered a generational change after Yeltsin's decline, and for some voters it evoked the generational renewal seen with Gorbachev's rise. Likewise, Putin's lack of a long public record allowed the electorate to project onto him their hopes and expectations for the future. He deliberately avoided the publication of a detailed program as well as taking any form of political stance. His very limited "campaign" sought to appeal to a broad and diverse electorate

²³⁷ Colton, T., McFaul, M. (2003). *Popular Choice and Managed Democracy*. Brookings Institution Press. Pg 121. <https://www.perlego.com/book/742810>.

²³⁸ White, S. (2000). Russia, Elections, Democracy. *Government and Opposition*, 35(3), 302–324. Pg. 312-313. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1477-7053.00030>.

without alienating specific constituencies, which made him perfectly in tune with the de-ideologized politics of the post-soviet Russia. Moreover, he took a peculiar stance regarding the presidential election, purposefully giving the impression of almost being forced to take part in it as a form of civic duty. In his “open letter to the people of Russia” he stated numerous times how he had no intention to create a political program nor to engage in an electoral campaign, as he was too busy attending to his duties as interim president for the good of the Russians.²³⁹ This aura of a “super partes” clean man was further reinforced by his stance regarding the party Unity, a formation created by governors to support initially Yeltsin, and later Putin. When still a prime minister, the latter claimed that he supported Unity, but he did so as a private citizen rather than as a PM, claiming that as a premier he should not have political preferences. The general aura of inevitability and competency that surrounded him, coupled with the lack of any real political alternative outside of the aging Zyuganov and Zhirinovskiy resulted in most of the elites, parties and governors, even communist ones, to immediately support his candidacy.²⁴⁰ Moreover, his past as a KGB officer, compounded with the absence of a party tied to him, helped cement this image as an apolitical competent administrator. This strategy contributed to his national appeal, transcending age, income, and geographic divisions. He performed equally well in rural and urban areas, winning 84 out of 89 regions. His victory in the first round, with 52.9% of the vote, narrowly avoided a runoff and was achieved against a fragmented opposition that failed to mount a serious challenge.

For their part, the CPRF electoral campaign was a far cry from the one of four years earlier. The party had changed, from the ideological opposition to the regime to a more cooperative cooperation, not at all below making opportunistic moves to protect their position. The deal struck with Unity, the party of the elite, after the legislative election to keep the former prime minister from becoming chairman of the Duma clearly shows how the party had adapted to his reality.²⁴¹ Zyuganov and the party leadership were aware that the chance of winning the presidential elections were almost non-existent. Given that

²³⁹ Colton, T., McFaul, M. (2003). *Popular Choice and Managed Democracy*. Brookings Institution Press. Pg 176. <https://www.perlego.com/book/742810>.

²⁴⁰ Ivi 133

²⁴¹ Hesli, V. L., & Reisinger, W. M. (Eds.). (2003). *The 1999–2000 Elections in Russia: Their Impact and Legacy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Pg 246. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511550355>.

Yeltsin popularity had reached rock bottom and that his personal vices had come out in public, it might have been possible for the CPRF to win against him, but the arrival of Putin on the political scene, whose apolitical stance gave nothing to the CPRF to debate over or criticize, the anticipated elections and the support of Unity and OVR for Putin, bringing almost 50 percent of voters, made Zyuganov run for second place.²⁴² The general secretary was aware of that and changed the party's objectives. Zyuganov main goal was to cement the role of the CPRF as the main opposition party, especially vis-à-vis new parties such as OVR. On the same line, Zyuganov sought to use the vote to protect his position in the CPRF against the growing rivals inside the party, expecting that a strong showing would cement his position, and hoped to force Putin into a second round, hoping that it would be the base for a future victory in the next presidential election. On the party's political program, it generally amounted to what had already been proposed for the Duma election, yet some efforts were made in making a campaign less based on criticism but rather more focused on policies and proposal. This was an attempt by Zyuganov to rebrand itself as a competent leader with clear ideas, as the polls showed that few aside of his existing voters believed in his abilities to govern the country effectively.²⁴³

The Kremlin had an interest in ensuring Zyuganov's participation in the presidential race, viewing him as a manageable opponent. In the election itself, Zyuganov secured 29.2% of the vote, winning in only four regions, a significant decline from his 1996 performance when he placed first in 25 regions. CPRF officials alleged electoral fraud, claiming Putin had not surpassed the 50% threshold, but they did not pursue these accusations vigorously. Many observers suggested that Zyuganov sought cooperation with Putin in a coalition arrangement, interpreting the CPRF's performance as a mandate for inclusion in the new government. On election night, Putin praised Zyuganov and the communists, acknowledging that their strong showing reflected public dissatisfaction with the status quo, a conciliatory stance that Yeltsin would not have adopted. Despite this, Putin was unlikely to place communists in major government posts, preferring an ideologically unified administration. Nonetheless, cooperation between Putin and the CPRF was

²⁴² Colton, T., McFaul, M. (2003). *Popular Choice and Managed Democracy*. Brookings Institution Press. Pg 173. <https://www.perlego.com/book/742810>.

²⁴³ Ivi. Pg 132.

expected on shared priorities, including continuing the war in Chechnya, supporting the military-industrial complex and intelligence services, and consolidating a stronger central state. Putin's nationalist orientation brought his worldview closer to that of several CPRF leaders, making such collaboration feasible. For Zyuganov personally, the election results, about five percentage points higher than the CPRF's December 1999 parliamentary showing, secured his leadership of the party for the foreseeable future. The Kremlin's effort to weaken the CPRF's hold on its core electorate by promoting alternative candidates, such as Siberian governor Aman Tuleev, proved ineffective outside Tuleev's home region of Kemerovo. The CPRF thus retained its role as the principal opposition force, even as it remained unable to overcome the structural and political advantages enjoyed by Putin and the Kremlin.

4.3 The CPRF In Putin's regime: does the Party have a future?

4.3.1 United Russia and the Functioning of Putin's regime

Putin's victory in 2000 election ushered the Russian Federation into its current era, where the president, using a complex system of patronage, control and small degree of social uplift has managed to rule Russia for the last 25 years.²⁴⁴ Putin's rise was followed by a peculiar arrangement, where the regime, undeniably authoritarian, has taken the form of a pseudo democracy, where the autocrat uses a designated party of power to assert his influence and his control.²⁴⁵ In this arrangement, the Communist party of the Russian Federation has become an integral part of Putin regime, yet, before analyzing how it has integrated with Putin's system, it's necessary to give a detailed account of how the system works and how it exercises its power.

The beginning of this party-based authoritarianism system came with the creation of United Russia (UR) in 2001 through the merger of earlier pro-Kremlin formations and

²⁴⁴ Sakwa, R. (2014). *Putin Redux* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://www.perlego.com/book/1556097>.

²⁴⁵ Hale, H. (2010). Eurasian politics as hybrid regimes: The case of Putin's Russia. *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 1(1), 33–41. Pg.40 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.euras.2009.11.00>.

parliamentary groups, mainly Unity and Fatherland All Russia.²⁴⁶ This was more than a brand change. The new party was conceived with the task of becoming the main funnel through which elites would aggregate, careers would be advanced, and benefits would flow. At the same time, the institutional architecture preserved the primacy of the president. The executive set the political course and authored many initial drafts of important legislation, all the while sending its representatives to take part in United Russia faction meetings to ensure alignment with its general policy.²⁴⁷ The role of United Russia as the dominant party was cemented with the introduction of strategical legislation, mainly the 2001 Law on Political Parties and its subsequent amendments, raising organizational barriers by requiring nationwide registration and large membership (e.g., over 50,000 members). Moreover, electoral blocs were banned in 2005, and party-nominated candidates were exempted from signature collection under 2002 amendments, privileging party brands over individualized runs. Electoral law at the regional level was changed in favor of proportional representation, with regions required to fill at least half their assembly seats by proportional representation and encouraged to adopt a 7 percent threshold to access the local parliaments. This was replicated at the federal level, with the State Duma shifting to fully proportional representation in 2005 and eliminating the single-member districts that had previously offered independent candidates with a local constituency a viable gateway to the Duma.²⁴⁸ Taken together, these new legislations were clearly aimed at preventing the rise of other national parties, ensuring the dominant role of United Russia and therefore drastically increasing the value of party affiliation and made operating outside of UR particularly difficult.

At the regional level, one of the Kremlin's most pressing tasks was to bring governors and local administrations into United Russia's orbit, with the speed of the integration process being determined by the number of resources each governor had at his disposal. Governors in regions heavily dependent on Federal subsidies were quick to affiliate or join the party, while those with strong personal mandates, long-established tenures, and

²⁴⁶ Gel'Man, V. (2008). Party Politics in Russia: From Competition to Hierarchy. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 60(6), 913–930. Pg. 918. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20451566>.

²⁴⁷ Reuter, O. J. (2017). *The Origins of Dominant Parties: Building Authoritarian Institutions in Post-Soviet Russia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Pg.162. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316761649>.

²⁴⁸ Ivi 194

developed regional economies did so more slowly.²⁴⁹ Over the early to mid-2000s, as the Federal center strengthened and the party accumulated institutional power, it used an incentive system of favorable placement on electoral lists, legislative leadership posts, and support in regional assemblies and city councils, coupled with privileged access to Federal funding streams. These included the oil-financed “National Projects”, which in 2006 Putin explicitly described to United Russia deputies as “United Russia’s projects,” developed with their input and entrusted to the party for implementation. Special party commissions oversaw the allocation of these funds, and loyalty and electoral performance played a key role in determining which regions benefited. From 2005, United Russia also launched its own “Party Projects”, with 43 of them taking place at the Federal level and about 400 at the regional one by 2014, channeling Federal budget resources into infrastructure and social programs such as schools, hospitals, roads, and cultural facilities. At the same time, the costs of remaining outside the dominant party, or defecting from it, increased sharply as party discipline tightened and sanctioning capacity increased.²⁵⁰

The system did not abolish elections or parliaments; on the contrary it re-purposed them to achieve its political objectives. Elections continued to be held but were widely regarded as unfair, featuring systematic use of state’s resources, one-sided media coverage, administrative pressure and intimidation, and fraud. Within this “electoral authoritarian” shell, United Russia’s legislative dominance and territorial reach turned elections into instruments to reward loyalty while simultaneously deterring any potential opposition bids. This system didn’t rest on coercion of voters but rather on behind the scenes monitoring and by orchestrating competition between candidates.²⁵¹ The 2003 State Duma election marked the emergence of a dominant legislative position. United Russia won 37.6 percent of the list vote, but through deals in single-member districts and rule management inside the chamber, that translated into more than two-thirds of all available seats, a super-majority that enabled it to refashion the legislature’s internal procedures. From then on, the Duma was rearranged around the party’s leadership and its parliamentary faction, with standing committees, chaired prevalently by United Russia,

²⁴⁹ REUTER, O. J. (2010). The Politics of Dominant Party Formation: United Russia and Russia’s Governors. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 62(2), 293–327. Pg 315-318. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316761649>.

²⁵⁰ Ivi. Pg.168

²⁵¹ Gel’Man, V. (2008). Party Politics in Russia: From Competition to Hierarchy. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 60(6), 913–930. Pg. 915. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20451566>.

slowly becoming the central entities through which policy flowed. Most importantly however, the informal legislative bargaining between the various factions in the Duma was replaced by closed Presidium meetings of the United Russia faction. Held weekly when the Duma was in session, these meetings became the place where ministries, deputies, and outside interests negotiated to shape bills and legislation to reflect the party's priorities before they would reach the floor to be voted. When looking at bills initiated by deputies in the Fifth Duma, only 4.5 percent of such bills passed without a United Russia co-sponsor, clearly showing how the route to influence ran through the UR faction and its committees.²⁵²

By the 2007–2008 electoral cycle, the effects of such architecture were fully visible. In the December 2007 Duma election, United Russia won 64.3 percent of the vote and 315 of 450 seats. 65 of 85 regional chief executives and several cabinet ministers ran on the United Russia list led by the national leader, while the upper house was chaired by the head of a pro-Kremlin satellite party.²⁵³ The accumulation of posts and branches made United Russia the principal ladder for careers and access to policymaking posts and offices. By the late 2000s, United Russia had a consistent super-majority in the State Duma and consistent majorities in an overwhelming number of regional assemblies. Moreover, it held most regional executive posts and had a large presence in municipal administration, including eight of the ten largest cities. Its membership surpassed one and a half million, and it claimed nearly sixty thousand territorial branches. Discipline mechanisms made these numbers even more effective. Voting against the faction line in the Duma was a violation of faction rules, and several regions introduced compulsory roll call voting to police discipline. Moreover, mandate rules introduced in the 2000s prevented deputies from switching factions at national and regional levels, under the threat of losing their seat. Sanctions extended beyond the legislature, however. Party members who ran against sanctioned candidates were subject to expulsion and loss of access to the legislative and lobbying channels, which were completely dominated by the party; mayors who backed non-party candidates risked losing support from party

²⁵² Reuter, O. J. (2017). *The Origins of Dominant Parties: Building Authoritarian Institutions in Post-Soviet Russia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Pg. 160. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316761649>

²⁵³ Gel'Man, V. (2008). Party Politics in Russia: From Competition to Hierarchy. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 60(6), 913–930. Pg. 913. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20451566>.

councilors at the command of the party.²⁵⁴ But the enforcing of discipline and cohesion want's limited to just rules, and explicit campaigns of disciplinary enforcement were launched in 2008–2009, with United Russia expelling around four percent of its members by February 2008 in a purge targeting members who had run against party nominees, supported rival lists, or discredited the party.²⁵⁵ New legislation soon tied executive appointments to party majorities, most notably a law effective July 1, 2009 that gave the party with a majority in a regional assembly, United Russia in most regions, the formal right to submit gubernatorial nominees to the president, first applied on August 20, 2009; in practical terms this incorporated gubernatorial selection into party routines and extended the party's leverage over regional executive careers²⁵⁶. Within this consolidated framework United Russia emerged as the primary intermediary for spoils, lobbying, and careers: because bargaining runs through the Duma faction's Presidium and because standing committees (largely chaired by UR) control policy details, ministries and firms, interest groups approach these party forums to obtain favorable policies. Thus, Putin developed is a robust, institutionalized, party-based authoritarian regime in which United Russia functions simultaneously as an instrument and an arena. It is simultaneously the executor of the president's will by transforming his policies into legislation while simultaneously acting as a forum in which elite bargains are struck, monitored, and enforced. It is the "brand" that promotes and foster loyalty towards the president and the organizational infrastructure that binds center and periphery through incentives and rules.

In this authoritarian system the CPRF is still regarded as the main opposition, however due to the nature of the regime its possibilities as an opposition are considerably limited. First, it's important to underline how the CPRF is allowed to be the official opposition by the regime, which uses it as a controlled sparring partner to legitimize the dominant party of United Russia. By having an opposition party to "compete" with at the elections, United Russia can bring forward the narrative of having won the vote in a competitive election. Secondly, by having a designated "party of the disaffected", the protest vote is directed toward a party, and thus it can be actively monitored and controlled by the

²⁵⁴ Reuter, O. J. (2017). *The Origins of Dominant Parties: Building Authoritarian Institutions in Post-Soviet Russia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Pg. 196. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316761649>.

²⁵⁵ Ivi. Pg. 178-179.

²⁵⁶ Ivi. Pg. 298.

regime. In this manner, protest votes flow within an official channel that limits its potential damaging effects for the regime. Lastly, since the CPRF is the only party in Russia possessing a clearly defined electorate, by co-opting the party in the regime, the Kremlin ensures himself control over a sizeable constituency of around 15 mln voters, which would otherwise spill into countless different parties that would be considerably harder to control and keep track of. In this sense, by being the exception in Russian post-Soviet politics due to their loyal and well-defined electorate, the CPRF ensured its survival by cooptation.

4.3.2 The CPRF as a managed opposition

On the CPRF side, the relationship between the Kremlin and the CPRF after the 2000s evolved into a moving balance between co-optation and open pushbacks. In this scenario, the CPRF is going through a “dual commitment” dilemma. On one hand the party must stay useful to the system, playing into the status quo, yet it still must speak for voters who want real opposition.²⁵⁷ A single day shows the tension well. On 25 September 2021, around four hundred CPRF activists protested alleged fraud in Moscow and other cities and were detained; while those protest were taking place however, Zyuganov met President Vladimir Putin and pledged for further cooperation.²⁵⁸ This drama plays out inside the “dominant party” system described earlier, where elections continue, but they are held to reward loyalty and secure the status quo. The regime keeps a party of power, manages access to resources, and separates “systemic” opposition, which are allowed to compete, from “non-systemic” actors, which are kept out. Moreover, the CPRF is forced to play along, as its only chance to achieve its political objectives is to be present in the Duma to initiate legislation or participate in the drafting of bills, through cooperation with the dominant party. The CPRF is different from other loyal-opposition parties because it remains programmatic and organizationally strong, with a clear electorate and a strong political identity that had been built over the course of decades. Its nature makes simple co-optation harder and gives a reason to the frequent swings in its relations with the Kremlin. Two recent episodes show how the party’s stance strained cooperation. In 2018,

²⁵⁷ Bondarenko, O. (2023). Between loyalty and opposition: The Communist Party of Russia and the growing intra-party cleavage. *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 56(4), 143–165. Pg. 6. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316761649>.

²⁵⁸ Ivi. Pg. 1.

during the pension reform, 41 of the CPRF's 42 deputies voted against the bill on second reading, and the party helped organize mass protests. In March 2020, it was the only parliamentary party to abstain on the main constitutional bill and then campaigned against the amendments before the national vote, drawing the president's ire. These moves marked the CPRF as a less reliable partner.²⁵⁹

The regime adjusted. Since 2018, getting on the ballot has become harder for CPRF gubernatorial hopefuls: in 2019–2021, ten of forty-three were stopped by the municipal filter. Pressure rose on “red” officeholders and notable figures: Irkutsk governor Sergei Levchenko resigned in 2019 after his son's arrest, and Pavel Grudinin was barred from the 2021 Duma race. Repression also hit the grassroots: ahead of the 2021 elections, local CPRF activists in multiple regions were detained or fined. Media treatment tracked this tougher line.²⁶⁰ During the 2021 campaign, federal TV largely covered the CPRF negatively. The party also stood out for opposing compulsory vaccination and QR-codes during the pandemic, underscoring its willingness to mobilize when the leadership judged the costs acceptable.²⁶¹ Another force reshaping the relationship is Alexei Navalny's “Smart Voting.” Because the CPRF fields many candidates and has a broad network, it became the main beneficiary of this initiative. In Moscow's 2019 city race, 33 of 45 Smart-Voting recipients (73%) were communists. In 2020 regional contests, an estimated 136 of 239 endorsed candidates (57%) were from the CPRF. In the 2021 Duma single-member districts, 61% of endorsements (137 of 225) went to CPRF candidates.²⁶² Post-election data show a jump in youth support. At the same time, Navalny-linked regional networks set up branches across much of the country and “routinely cross political alignments,” bringing non-systemic actors into closer local contact with CPRF structures.

²⁵⁹ Bondarenko, O. (2023). Between loyalty and opposition: The Communist Party of Russia and the growing intra-party cleavage. *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 56(4), 143–165. Pg. 2. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316761649>.

²⁶⁰ Ivi. Pg. 22.

²⁶¹ Blackburn, M., & Hutcheson, D. S. (2025). Pragmatism and protest: Russia's communist party through COVID-19 and beyond. *European Political Science*, 24(1), 24–34. Pg. 27. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41304-024-00486-5>.

²⁶² Bondarenko, O. (2023). Between loyalty and opposition: The Communist Party of Russia and the growing intra-party cleavage. *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 56(4), 143–165. Pg. 23. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316761649>.

As had happened before during the Yeltsin era, this contrast between the within system opposition strategy and the anti-system hopes of its voters creates a series of internal tensions which the party's leadership must constantly monitor, in order to maintain its dominant role within the party and to avoid a possible crackdown by the regime. In an interview the author of this thesis had with a middle rank member of the CPRF, the contradiction between the party leadership and the rank and file as well as, more generally, the dual commitment strategy is in full display. According to the interviewed the party leadership, in the form of Zyuganov and the party's Central Committee, had grown increasingly accustomed to the privileges and the political security they enjoy by collaborating with the regime. To maintain this relationship, the Central Committee itself is often trying to sabotage the spontaneous attempts of the rank and file, which has remained fundamentally Marxist Leninist, to conduct protests and street demonstrations. The fact that the upper echelons of the party itself are stifling its own grassroots activities shows the level upon which Putin's co-optation has worked vis-a-vis Zyuganov and the CC's members, fearful of losing their privileged status as well as their limited influence in the Duma. Moreover, in the interview it has emerged how Zyuganov's line has been universally accepted by the party's CC, which affects the way in which promotion happens within the party. The internal apparatus is very careful to prevent any radical or orthodox party members to ascend above the middle level of the party, and the few radicals who have managed to reach the CC had to either embrace the CC's line on cooperating with the regime or being purged with the help of the Kremlin.²⁶³ Recently one of such purges took place, when radical leader party member Valery Rashkin, already famous for his criticism towards United Russia in 2009, had been the object of a prosecution for illegal poaching, allegedly to remove him from the CC after his refusal to tone down his radical positions.²⁶⁴

Against this bleak backdrop, the political possibilities of the CPRF are considerably limited. With most of its political talking points being either co-opted or rendered useless by the evolution of the Russian Federation under Putin, who pursued a series of domestic

²⁶³ Interview the Author of the thesis had with a CPRF member. The interviewed asked to remain anonymous due to the current political situation in Russia.

²⁶⁴ Roth, A. (2021, October 29). Russian MP denies illegal hunting after shot elk found in car. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/oct/29/russian-mp-denies-hunting-after-shot-elk-found-in-car>.

and foreign policies to restore the Russian institution image in the country and abroad. Moreover, with Putin also progressively appropriating the Soviet past in his political discourses, the CPRF is slowly losing its monopoly on Soviet memory. As such, for most of its modern electorate, support is slowly being granted by the pursuit of social democratic policies rather than its communist legacy.²⁶⁵ Yet, the CPRF cannot transform definitively into a true social democratic party for two main reasons: Firstly, doing so would alienate a considerable part of its membership, still adhering to the tenets of Marxism-Leninism, and secondly such transformation to be true and effective would put the party increasingly at odds with the regime, as it would inevitably result into an harsh critics of the inequalities in Russia and the pursuit of egalitarian policies, which is not possible on such a scale unless the Oligarch establishment be dismantled. In conclusion the party seems set on the to remain on its current niche, furthering in its integration with the regime, especially after the beginning of the SMO in Ukraine, which the CPRF leadership fully supports.²⁶⁶ Unless something drastically changes in the Russian political and institutional landscape, the chances of the CPRF to change or evolve are low, and even in the case of the aforementioned drastic changes, there is no guarantees that the party will be able to rise to the occasion.

Conclusion

This last chapter has once again confirmed how the CPRF ideological and organizational ties with the USSR were both the key to its continued existence for over 30 years while, at the same time, they were the source of the party's failures at gaining political power within the Russian Federation. In 90s post-Soviet Russia the political landscape gave opportunity for two potential kind of party to win it all: 1) a party of the privatization elites, able to gain power by using its network of supporters within the state apparatus and the economy 2) a anti-system populist party that could channel the widespread dissatisfaction of the de-politicized political masses in a bid for the presidency. By virtue

²⁶⁵ Interview the author of the thesis had CPRF member. The interviewed asked to remain anonymous due to the current political situation in Russia.

²⁶⁶ Ismailov, A. (2024, September). CPRF: Does the “party of the past” have a future? *Russian Election Monitor*. <https://www.russian-election-monitor.org/cprf-does-the-party-of-the-past-have-a-future.html>

of its Soviet political legacy, the CPRF lacked the ability to transform into either one of those possible parties of power. Moreover, the party's inability to select, even at the cost of losing a percentage of its members, a well-defined political program limited its ability to maneuver effectively the post-soviet political system. In an attempt to satisfy all the factions within the party and within its voters, the party was unable to innovate and was stuck cultivating its already existing electorate that, as seen in the various political cycles, had a hard ceiling that could not be overcome. With the arrival of Putin in the political scene, the limitations of its URSS legacies transformed into a lifeboat that enabled its survival within Putin's regime. Yet this survival appears to be bittersweet, as the CPRF is once again excluded from the policymaking process and cannot realistically exert any influence in the direction of the Russian Federation.

Conclusions

The central contribution of this thesis is to integrate ideological legacies (Chapter 1), constitutional settlement (Chapter 2), organizational rebuilding and programmatic duality (Chapter 3), and dominant-party mechanics (Chapter 4) into a unified causal account of adaptation without alteration. The CPRF's story is one of conversion: organizational strength transformed into systemic utility. As long as political institutions continue to translate votes into seats, and seats into managed bargaining, the CPRF will remain what the system requires it to be, an opposition that endures, an opposition that legitimates, and an opposition whose influence is tightly mediated by institutions calibrated to contain it.

This trajectory illustrates a paradox. On the one hand, the CPRF has consistently failed to achieve its stated goal of overturning or fundamentally altering the post-Soviet order. On the other hand, it has been uniquely successful in embedding itself within that very order. Its capacity to convert Soviet-era organizational infrastructure into post-Soviet electoral strength enabled the CPRF to outpace all other opposition forces in the 1990s. Its ideological duality, retaining a Marxist-Leninist core for members while articulating a broader nationalist-populist appeal to the electorate, allowed it to mobilize support across diverse constituencies. Yet these very strengths also bound the CPRF to a logic of systemic usefulness: it became too large and disciplined to be eliminated outright, but too dependent on institutional rules and electoral channels to pose a genuine existential challenge to the regime. By the 2000s, under Putin, the CPRF's place within the political system crystallized into that of a "systemic opposition." Its role was not to alternate in power but to provide controlled competition, absorbing protest votes, structuring parliamentary debate, and lending legitimacy to electoral rituals. The Kremlin's calibrated use of both repression and co-optation ensured that the party could neither dominate the political field nor collapse into irrelevance. The CPRF's organizational strength was thereby converted into a mechanism of regime stabilization: it functioned as a safety valve for dissent while simultaneously reinforcing the boundaries of permissible politics.

This outcome underscores the broader logic of party-based authoritarianism in Russia. Opposition is permitted not as a prelude to alternation, but as an instrument of

governance. The CPRF exemplifies this dynamic. It legitimizes the system by demonstrating that opposition exists; it stabilizes the system by channeling discontent into predictable institutional forms; and it endures precisely because its endurance serves the interests of the dominant power. In this sense, the CPRF's story is not simply one of survival but of transformation: from an anti-system opposition rooted in Soviet legacies to a managed opposition embedded in Putin's dominant-party regime.

Appendix A: a brief interview with a young member of the CPRF

During my online research for sources for this thesis I had the fortune of coming across a young member of the CPRF. On the social network “Reddit”, I came across a public post in the “Ask a Russian” page that asked Russians to share their opinions on the Communist Party of the Russian federation. One comment stood out, were this anonymous individual introduced himself as *“the head of the district executive committee of the CPRF”* and posted the following comment: *“The top of the party has completely rotted. Zyuganov and company squeezed out all the reformers and progressive party members from the Central Committee of the CPRF with the help of the authorities (the Rashkin case). But in the lower echelons of the CPRF, especially in the territorial departments, there are a lot of communists (in the literal sense of the word), and the most important thing is the youth, the future (I myself am 24 years old). In the executive committees of districts and cities, the so-called Old Guard (Zyuganovshchina) with the support of United Russia, the so-called Progressives (young communists and other radical leftists - they are massively represented in the lower echelons of the CPRF and are climbing "to the top") and careerists who don't care about anything are fighting and intriguing against each other. Unfortunately, the ultra-leftists in the CPRF allowed Rashkin to be defeated in the Central Committee, so it is very difficult for us to "attack" politically - the Central Committee consists of Zyuganov's reactionaries and is too strong. But the Central Committee cannot suppress grassroots organizations, and it does not try to, the main thing for them is to hold on to the upper echelons of power. In short, the status quo for now. We do not know how to fight Zyuganovshchina, they have clung to the Central Committee. And the ultra-leftists in the CPRF have no influential figures (Rashkin and Levchenko were kicked out of the Central Committee, Bondarenko is questionable)*

P.S. Zyuganov's death will not change anything; he will be replaced by the even more pro-government Afonin.

The only way out is to extinguish the entire reactionary Old Guard, but for now this is impossible.”

The extensive knowledge of the CPRF internal mechanism showed by this individual and the fact that his account was supported by what had transpired from my research led to me ask if he was willing to answer some questions and share his opinion on the CPRF. He agreed, giving his consent for the release of the interview, but asking to remain anonymous, over concerns for his safety. Naturally, given the context of the interview, the exchange was handled in an informal manner. Here follows the transcript of the interview excluding the passages not directly relevant to this thesis:

Author: *“so as I understand you are a party member, right? as a member of the CPRF what do you think are its genuine political possibilities? do you think it could ever be a party of power? do you think it will keep his role as an institutionalize opposition indefinitely? thank you and feel free to expand on this topic however you might see fit”*

Party member: *Yes, I am a party member. Regarding the possibility of the CPRF becoming the ruling party in Russia, I can say the following. The CPRF is ideologically fragmented. The first group is progressive ultra-left party activists who sincerely oppose the ruling United Russia (they mainly occupy regional positions, and this is almost the entire grassroots movement of the CPRF). This is the real opposition (for example, this was Rashkin, this is Bondarenko, this is Levchenko).*

The second group is the Zyuganovites. The name speaks for itself. This is a group of party activists united around Gennady Zyuganov and the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, who advocate social democratic positions and compromise with United Russia. The entire Central Committee of the party is made up of people loyal to Zyuganov. You probably know that Rashkin was expelled from the Central Committee of the party precisely because of his political position.

The Zyuganovites and the Progressives (let's call them that) are related in the party as 30/70, but the Zyuganovites hold the entire Central Committee and key positions in the party, while the Progressives hold the grassroots organizations. As long as Zyuganovites control the Central Committee, the CPRF has no chance of competing with United Russia. The Zyuganovites cannot control the grassroots organizations of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, but they can prevent the opposition from breaking into the Central Committee and seizing control of the party. All opposition rallies and actions by communists encounter the main resistance not from Putin, but from the CPRF Central

Committee, which is trying to "pacify" the grassroots opposition. That's it, in short. In general, the Russian Federation has a rather interesting political system, but we can talk about it for a long time."

Author: *"Do you think it would be possible for the grassroots activists to control the CC after Zyuganov's death? Moreover, will the grassroots remain under the CPRF when Zyuganov dies or will they scatter and form various organization at the grassroots level? this last tidbit about Zyuganov stifling the grassroots rather than Putin is kind of shocking, I would have never guessed so"*

Party Member: *Replying to my comment "Well, maybe I expressed myself incorrectly. The CC itself tries to "drain" the protests (reduce the protest force by disorganizing rallies or raising secondary political issues at them) of the CPRF activists and for this gets perks from Putin. When it doesn't work, then the ruling regime gets involved, but after 2012 this is rare. Zyuganov does his job well"*

then going back to the questions I just asked "It's hard to say. Afonin will most likely become the new head of the party, and he is a supporter of Zyuganov's old line. The grassroots party members will be pressured in the same way. So the question here is not about changes in the CPRF after Zyuganov's departure (there will be no changes), but whether the opposition in the party will have enough strength to demolish Afonin and the CC. I find it difficult to answer this question, we do not have obvious leaders of the intra-party opposition (Rashkin was kicked out of the CC, Bondarenko is not a big enough figure)"

Author: *"ok so Zyuganov's line has been entrenched and is not tied to his figure anymore, interesting. so what is the objective of the CC. they collaborate with putin in exchange for what? status only? or is there a more mutual partnership in which the CPRF gets something, such as support for CPRS' inspired legislations and so on?"*

Party member: *"Of course, a whole group of party figures are on subsidies from Putin, not just Zyuganov. Little depends on him anymore; he is more of an "honorary" chairman of the CPRF"*

"To be honest, I don't know, I'm the head of the regional branch, I don't sit in the Central Committee and they don't reveal their secrets to me. Although, in addition to personal

bonuses, the Zyuganovites received carte blanche from the authorities for the CPRF to do everything that is not prohibited by law. The CPRF is essentially the only serious opposition to the regime. We criticize the authorities on all secondary issues from pensions to health care and regional issues (Putin cannot be touched, he is a saint, and the SMO of course)

In short, Zyuganov seriously humiliated himself before the authorities, but bargained for the status of legal opposition. This can be perceived in different ways. My subjective opinion is that this is a betrayal of the Party.”

Author: *“can I ask you then why are you a member of the party given what you have been telling me? also how would you characterize you political though?”*

Party member: *“Well, I remain a party member because I have a fairly high party position and I can do something within my region, and secondly, because if the leftists scatter to different small parties, then the government will simply crush us all (it has already done this). There are many good people in the CPRF who are charged with ultra-left ideas, as I have already said. We just need more persistence, organization, and sooner or later we will defeat the Zyuganovites. As for my political views, I am a Marxist-Leninist”*

Author: *“Couple last questions, how prevalent is the Marxist-Leninist current in the Party, both at the grassroots and at the top? also do you think that other party members share your views? and lastly what do the CPRF electors think about this situation you described? do they also feel betrayed by Zyuganov? and if so can you try and guess why they keep voting for the CPRF if they feel betrayed? also during the elections, has Putin regime interfered with the CPRF political campaigns?”*

Party member: *“The CPRF voters are mainly concerned only with the left-wing policy of the party - they are supporters of social economy, the state's care for the people and other left-wing ideas. The voters are not very concerned with the internal party squabbles, although some are of course unhappy with the CPRF's passivity (mainly the younger generation, which is more radical)*

On the interference of the Putin regime in the CPRF campaigns There are some gross cases. For example, a mechanic from a factory decided to run for mayor of the city from

the CPRF, but at the same time the director of the factory is a member of "United Russia". The CPRF candidate was pressured to withdraw from the elections, threatening to fire him and that "no labor inspection will save you". There are many such cases of gross pressure from the state on members of the CPRF, if the regime feels threatened. Mostly, this all happens in local elections (mayors, regional legislative bodies, governors)''

Author: *"I'd like to use this interview in the thesis, but to do that I need your explicit consent. Do you give your consent to use your testimony in the thesis? The thesis would not be published anywhere, it is only the last step for me to graduate*

obviously do not feel obligated, if for any reason you don't want to give me your consent it is perfectly fine and I still thank you for your testimony''

Party Member: *"Yes, of course, I agree. Unfortunately, I can't tell you my first and last name and my position in the Communist Party of the Russian Federation I hope you understand''*

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