

## *The Russian Left Today*

By Boris Kagarlitsky

*Editor's Note: This commentary is part of an FPIF series of essays by non-U.S. analysts. See <http://www.fpif.org/outside/> for more perspectives from Outside the U.S. Security issues such as missile defense and proliferation have taken center stage in U.S.-Russia relations, and will likely be the centerpiece of President Bush's second meeting with Russian president Vladimir Putin on the sidelines of the G-8 summit in Genoa. However, economics and human rights issues are also central to Russian politics, as Boris Kagarlitsky points out in his commentary—the first in a series that will look at Russian politics and U.S.-Russian relations in the decade since the end of the Soviet Union.*

To judge from opinion surveys, newspaper reports, and conversations on the street, Russian society is moving leftward. To judge from the statements of politicians and the relationship of forces within the elite, however, the country is moving decisively to the right.

Disillusionment with the results of privatization is almost universal. More than two-thirds of citizens support the proposal to return oil and gas fields—and the largest industrial corporations along with them—to state ownership. In everyday usage, the words "free market" have the force of almost an obscenity. Even among the intelligentsia and small business operators, people who only recently were strong supporters of neo-liberal ideology, moods have changed. More and more Russians are inclined to describe themselves not just as social democrats, but as socialists. Courses on Marxism are returning to the universities, in response to demand from the students themselves.

At the same time, the government is promising the forced-draft privatization of the few assets that remain in its hands. It is also abolishing progressive taxation, forcing anti-trade union legislation through the Duma, and threatening to carry out a reform of municipal services that would not only compel the already impoverished members of the population to pay the full cost of these provisions, but in effect, to invest money in this sector from their own pockets. If

enacted, these measures will spell ruin for the new middle class that arose during the 1990s, and this, naturally, will cause them to become radicalized. It is this, along with the winds of "anti-globalist" protest blowing in from the West, that explains the changed state of affairs in Russian society. Miners demonstrate, the trade unions of dockers and aviation workers organize successful strikes, and telephone subscribers wage a successful campaign against the introduction of timed calls, forcing the corporations to make concessions. All this is combined with a growing alarm about the future of civil liberties under the administration of Vladimir Putin, and an increasingly powerful discontent at the continuation of the Chechnya war.

Meanwhile, the shift by the regime to the right is meeting scarcely any resistance on the political level. Formally speaking, the opposition in Russia is represented by two organizations—the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, and the "Yabloko" party. The trouble is that the opposition long ago became part of the establishment, and is no less corrupt than the government. While criticizing the "authoritarian tendencies" of the regime, Yabloko gives total support to the Kremlin's social policy, despite the obvious fact that it is this social and economic course that obliges the Kremlin to be authoritarian. Under the conditions of the

oligarchic economy, when the authorities carry out reforms that serve the interests of a tiny minority, and which are condemned by two-thirds of the population, there is no reason to hope for democracy.

The ruling layers are trying to compensate for their unpopular social program by using nationalist rhetoric and by whipping up a racist psychosis closely linked to the war in Chechnya. The “opposition liberals” have wound up in a political trap. From time to time they criticize the consequences, while ignoring (or even applauding) the cause.

The only thing that is now left-wing about the official Communist party is its name. For socialism, the party leaders have substituted the slogan of “great-power patriotism,” and the press organs they control are full of racist and anti-Semitic attacks. Under the leadership of Gennady Zyuganov, the Communist Party of the Russian Federation not only gives fervent support to the genocide in Chechnya, but regularly helps the government to implement its economic policies. It is no accident that representatives of the KPRF were in the first ranks of those who sought the ruinous increase in telephone charges, justifying this on the basis of the need to accumulate funds in national industries. In essence, the actions of the leaders of Russia’s official communist movement would be better suited to members of a fascist party.

The leaders of the Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Russia (FNPR)—the country’s largest trade union federation, surviving from Soviet times—have shown themselves to be not much better. When the government presented its draft for a new labor code abolishing long-established benefits for workers, allowing employers complete freedom to carry

out sackings and compile blacklists, legalizing child labor, and providing for the phasing-in of a twelve-hour workday, the FNPR bitterly criticized the document. For several months the leaders of the trade union federation declared their disagreement with the government. Then, they joined with the government in setting up a conciliation commission, which put forward a “compromise variant” that differed little from the original. The few improvements that were introduced to the draft law were the result of demands put forward by the alternative trade unions, which also took part in the commission.

The situation might have seemed altogether tragic, but there was another side to the coin. The open corruption of the official opposition led to the rise of alternative movements on its left flank. This is better illustrated using the example of the trade unions. Alternative unions already have a long history in Russia. Arising after the miners’ strike of 1989, when the Soviet Union still existed, most of them came under the influence of anticommunist ideas. The only exception was the trade union “Defense of Labor,” established by radical left activists. The experience of the 1990s once again showed that liberal ideology was incompatible with the goals of the Labor movement. After a string of failures, scandals, defeats and disappointments, the alternative trade union movement started moving to the left. Meanwhile, Defense of Labor was in the privileged position of not having to change its ideas and strategy. In the late 1990s the leadership of this trade union federation was assumed by Oleg Shein, who in 1999 was also elected by voters in the city of Astrakhan to the position of deputy to the State Duma. Although Defense of Labor was still relatively

small, a process began in which other alternative unions united around it. A Russian trade union congress held on 6 June 2000 not only attracted representatives from 90% of the alternative organizations, but also a number of members of FNPR unions who were in opposition to their leaders. The congress voted to support its own draft Labor code, drawn up by Shein. On 19 June, demonstrations and strikes in support of Shein’s draft took place throughout the country. Although the number of participants did not exceed 200,000 people, this could be considered a turning-point for the Labor movement; the apathy and demoralization of earlier years had been replaced by a readiness for action.

The idea of a united workers’ party hung in the air at the June trade union congress. Workers in Russia no longer consider the KPRF their party, and expect nothing good from the authorities. Until recently, left activists were still hoping for a split or a leadership change in the KPRF. Quite possibly, something of the kind will happen sooner or later, but the wait now seems too long. Most importantly, under Putin the KPRF has definitively abandoned its role as an opposition, and has become one of the props of the regime.

Throughout the 1990s, efforts by the fractious left groups to unite invariably ended in failure. The situation only changed in 1999 with the appearance of the Movement for a Workers Party (DRP), which was joined by most of the leaders of Defense of Labor. Even after unifying in the DRP, however, many groups persisted in making sectarian attacks on one another, not to speak of the attacks they made on the leftists who remained outside the unification process. For members of the left,

overcoming sectarianism is now becoming a question of life or death. The need to establish a broad left organization is being felt at every step, but the left itself often lacks the experience, the knowledge, and the personnel to make use of the opportunities that are opening up.

The future of the left in Russia depends to a considerable extent on the development of the anti-war movement. Here as well, striking changes have occurred. The small size of the demonstrations and pickets held by human rights defenders might seem to offer graphic confirmation of the regime's thesis that the people are united in supporting the war. Meanwhile, the many thousands of members of the Caucasus diaspora, as well as of Russia's Muslim minorities, have been conspicuously absent from these demonstrations. The reason is simple. As pointed out by Ahmad Shabazov, one of the ideologues of the Movement for Civil Rights founded by Moscow Chechens, these human rights groups have been more interested in Western grants than in the real situation in Chechnya, and have been unwilling to see the links between Russia's social problems and the war.

With the appearance on the political scene of the Movement for Civil Rights and of the Chechen coalition "Third Force," the situation has changed radically. Russian society has witnessed a new Chechen movement that is secular, internationalist, and

progressive. The slogan of national independence for Chechnya has been shifted to the background; the primary place is now taken by slogans focusing on equal rights and the solidarity of all the oppressed. Meanwhile, the Movement for Civil Rights aims to become not just a movement of people of Caucasus nationality, who in Russia are subject to mockery and humiliation on a daily basis, but also a body open to all citizens with an interest in national and social equality. Unlike Islamic nationalists who oppose everything Russian, the ideologues of the Movement for Human Rights maintain that the "Chechen question" cannot be settled until the "worker question" is resolved. The practical result of this ideological shift has been agreement on united actions between the Movement for a Workers Party and the Movement for Civil Rights. Most likely this will only be the initial phase in the establishment of a broad left-democratic coalition.

The history of the left, of course, includes numerous coalitions that have not achieved their goals, as well as movements that have had brilliant beginnings, but which later have ignominiously collapsed. Nevertheless, the atmosphere in Russia is changing. The coming months will be a testing time not only for coalitions arising on the left flank of politics, but also for the regime. The economic upturn is losing momentum, and the Russian elite is haunted by the specter of a new economic cri-

sis. This crisis is looming both within the country, and outside it.

A country with a hundred and fifty million people cannot exist solely on the income from sales of oil and gas. In the neocolonial economy created by the Russian oligarchs, not only the standard of living but also the very survival of many Russian citizens depends on the fluctuations in the price of oil on world markets. Changes are about to happen, and the elites feel this no less keenly than the left activists. For this very reason, the authorities are anxious to settle the question by strengthening their machine of repression, by putting pressure on the media, and through racist and chauvinist demagoguery. This is their method of "consolidation." The left puts forward its own method, based on the principles of democracy and solidarity. A collision is inevitable.

In Russia today we are seeing only the first stage in the creation of a new democratic movement. A great deal remains unclear, but one thing is obvious: this will be a movement of the left, or it will not exist at all.

*(Boris Kagarlitsky  
<goboka@online.ru> is a senior  
researcher fellow at the Institute for  
Comparative Political Studies,  
Academy of Sciences in Moscow.  
This was reprinted with permission  
from the Transnational Institute,  
online at [www.tni.org](http://www.tni.org).)*