ARE THE COMMUNISTS DYING OUT IN RUSSIA?

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Abstract

According to many observers of Russian politics, advocates of market-oriented reform have time on their side. A number of studies have reported that backing for the Communist Party and opposition to reform is concentrated among the elderly. As this cohort of voters – people who came of age during the Stalinist era and who have suffered disproportionately from Yeltsin-era economic reforms – dies off, one would expect to see a decline in support for the Communists and weaker resistance to further reform measures. The results of elections in 1999 and 2000, however, show that support for the Communists remained relatively steady over the decade of the 1990s. This paper analyzes results from presidential elections in 1991, 1996 and 2000, in order to explain the persistence of Communist Party support.

Introduction

According to many observers of Russian politics, the 1996 presidential election, in which Gennady Zyuganov won 43 percent of the popular vote in the second round against Boris Yeltsin, was in all likelihood the "last hurrah" of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation. As they saw it, support for the party was concentrated among elderly pensioners, while support for political and economic reform was strongest among the younger cohorts of voters. According to Vyacheslav Nikonov, a leading analyst of Russian politics, the Communists were a dying breed: "There is no correlation between living conditions and the communist vote. The correlation is age" (quoted by Lally 1997).

A substantial body of survey data backed up Nikonov's assessment. In interviews conducted in the waning years of the Soviet Union, Finifter and Mickiewicz (1992) report finding that elderly respondents (those over age 60) were far less supportive than those in younger age groups of the basic tenets of political and economic reform. They were less likely to see the value of competitive elections and freedom of speech, less likely to assign responsibility for one's well-being to the individual rather than the state, and less tolerant of income disparities.[1] Miller, Hesli, and Reisinger (1994), similarly, reported that in a series of surveys conducted between 1990 and 1992, elderly Russians were considerably more likely to agree that an orderly society took precedence over individual freedom, that Stalin was not being given enough credit for building socialism, and that political reform in Russia was advancing too rapidly. Similar findings abound, including those of Bahry (1993) and Reisinger et al. (1994).

To most Westerners it seems surprising that elderly Russians are so much more supportive of the Communists, in that it was this generation that directly suffered the calamities wrought by Stalinism. There are two major explanations that are usually given as to why this is, nevertheless, the case. First, during the early, formative years of their life, the currently elderly were subject not only to the horrors of totalitarianism but also to "totalitarian socialization" (Gibson 1996). In the world in which they grew up, it was the Communist Party, unerringly directed by Comrade Stalin, that brought about rapid industrialization, victory in the Great Patriotic War, and Sputnik. This explanation thus posits a

generational effect, as it is understood in cohort analysis. A similar phenomenon in this country is the association of Franklin Roosevelt and the Democratic Party with ending the Great Depression. Voters who entered the electorate at about this time, the "New Deal" Democrats, remained disproportionately supportive of the party over the course of their entire lifetimes (Andersen 1979).

The second major explanation was that elderly pensioners were badly injured by the reforms that ended the Communist regime. In particular, the extremely high rates of inflation that occurred in 1992-94 effectively wiped out their retirement savings. Pensioners also experienced degradation in medical care and other support services. This resulted not only from cuts in direct government expenditures, but also from the desire of newly privatized enterprises to minimize social welfare expenditures on current and former employees. To be sure, retirement in the Soviet Union was never to be confused with that experienced in Ft. Lauderdale, but it did afford a certain modicum of security. With the affluence of the New Russians there has also come the New Poor – the elderly pensioners one sees on the streets of Russian cities, selling off their belongings to help make ends meet (Varoli 1996).

As noted frequently in the Western news media, life expectancy in Russia, which was never all that high to begin with, fell dramatically in the 1990s, particularly among males. Table 1, taken from Hough, Davidheiser, and Lehmann (1996) reports mortality rates for various age cohorts of Russian men and women for the years between 1990 and 1994. As these data indicate, mortality rates for all cohorts rose, but the sharpest increases were among Russian men over the age of 60. Based upon these figures, we can estimate that roughly one fifth of the voters who were pensioners at the time of the 1991 presidential election had died by the time of the 1996 election, and that by 2000 nearly half of the 1991 pensioners were gone.

Table 1. Mortality Rates in Russia per 1,000 Population, by Age and Gender, 1990-94

Age	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994
Men					
40-44	7.6	8.0	9.8	13.3	15.2
45-49	11.7	11.6	13.8	17.8	20.8
50-54	16.1	16.6	19.4	26.3	29.1
55-59	23.4	23.3	25.3	31.3	38.2
60-64	34.2	34.6	36.9	46.3	61.0
65-69	48.0	47.3	49.4	59.4	64.0
Women					
40-44	2.4	2.6	2.8	3.7	4.2
45-49	3.8	3.8	4.2	6.4	8.2
50-54	5.4	6.6	8.1	7.9	8.0
55-59	8.6	8.6	9.1	10.9	12.3
60-64	13.5	13.6	14.4	16.7	18.4
65-69	22.0	22.0	22.6	26.6	27.1

Source: *Rossiiskii statisticheskii ezhegodnik* (Moscow: Groskomstat, 1996), p. 33. (Reprinted in Hough, et al., p. 94.)

The supporters of market-oriented reform thus seem to have time on their side. The transition to a more market-oriented economy may have cost millions of casualties among the elderly, but there are fewer of them today than there were yesterday, and there will be fewer tomorrow than there are today. In a recent prognosis on the future of Russian politics, former Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott (1997) put it this way:

> Perhaps the most significant and hopeful statistic I've seen: although 65% of those Russians over the age of 65 think things got worse over the last year, 60% of those under 35 think things got better. So among the positive trends underway in Russia is perhaps the most basic of all, the one represented by the actuarial tables.

The persistence of Communist support

If the "dying out of the communists" scenario is valid, we should have observed a significant decline in support for the communist party in 1999 and for their leader Zyuganov in 2000. As indicated previously, only about half of those Russians receiving pensions in 1991 lived long enough to see Boris Yelstin leave office and to participate in the 1999-2000 election cycle.

Table 2. Distribution of Russian population by age and gender 1989-1999
(in thousands of people)

	1989			1999		
Age	Total	Males	Females	Total	Males	Females
0-6	16814	8559	8254	9646	4950	4696
7-15	19181	9729	9451	20688	10551	10137
Males 16-59 Females 16-54	83746	43440	40306	85547	43999	41547
Males 60- Females 55-	27195	6945	20249	30444	9109	21335
45-49	7954	3760	4187	11137	5335	5802
50-54	9593	4453	5139	6997	3264	3733
55-59	8399	3719	4679	7094	3091	
60-64	8360	3239	5120	8105	3391	
65-69	4510	1367	3142	6609	2529	4080
70-74	2652	1011	2641	5935	1903	4031
75-79	3333	819	2513	2812	682	2130
80-84	1769	364	1405	1635	345	1289
85 -	890	143	746	1343	256	1086

Source: *Sotsialno-ekonomicheskoe polozhenie Rossii 1999* (Moscow: Groskomstat, 2000), p. 28.

The results of these elections, however, reveal that overall support for the Communists persisted at previous levels. In December of 1999, approximately 30% of voters cast their ballots for the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF) and its closest allies ("Communists for the USSR", "Stalin's Block" etc), which was actually a bit higher than the 28 % they garnered in the December 1995 elections. Similarly, Zyuganov received 30.2% of the popular vote in March of 2000, compared to the 32% he won in the first round of the 1996 presidential elections.

Contrary to many expectations, then, it does not appear that Russian Communists are going the way of the dinosaurs. Questions about the nature, source, and the future of support for the Communist

Party thus remain quite open. In order to account for the stable level of Communist support across a decade in which many expected the party to inexorably decline, we are led fairly naturally to two competing hypotheses:

- *H1: Support for the Communist Party is evenly distributed across various age cohorts.*

- *H2: Russian voters become more supportive of Communist Party as they move into retirement age. The correlation between age and support for the Communists is thus a "life cycle" effect and not a "cohort" effect.*

The first hypothesis holds that the correlation between age and Communist support that was observed in many previous studies is actually not present, or at least no longer present. It implies that Russian voters cast their ballots one way or another depending upon any number of factors, e.g., their approval or disapproval of the incumbent president, their evaluation of the consequences of market reforms, events in Chechnya, but not factors that covary strongly with age. Contrary to Talbott's speculation, this hypothesis also implies that support for continuing market reforms depends upon the extent to which reforms are actually successful in improving conditions in general, and not just in redistributing resources to the young from the old.

The second hypothesis, in contrast, holds that we should continue to observe a correlation between age and support for the CPRF. This correlation, however, is due to the ongoing success of the Communists in attracting the support of "new" older voters, and not the fading legacy of the Stalinist generation. If this is the case, it would presumably be because Russian pensioners find the policies favored by the Communists, e.g., higher levels of state-sponsored benefits and price controls on consumer goods, preferable to the policies favored by their opponents. Contrary to the cohort effect posited by the "dying out of the Communists" scenario, a "life cycle" effect of this nature means that support for the Communists among pensioners is constantly being replenished by the influx of new pensioners (Converse 1976; Mason and Fienberg 1985). If present, we would continue to observe a strong correlation between age and vote choice, with no drop off in overall support for the Communists.

Analysis

In order to examine these hypotheses we have undertaken an analysis that compares the size and nature of the "pensioner" vote in the 1991, 1996 and 2000 presidential elections. This analysis is based upon voting returns and demographic data, aggregated at the *rayon* level[2], and consists of two major parts: comparison of 1991/1996 (part 1) and 1996/2000 (part 2) returns. Although we do not have observations from all rayons, we do have, as shown in Table 3, an entirely adequate and representative sample of 1,436 rayons distributed across all major economic and political subdivisions of the country.

Table 3. Regional Breakdown of Rayon-Level Sample

Central		Volga	
Moscow	33	Astrakhan	10
Briansk	31	Volgograd	38
Vladmir	26	Penza	32
Vanovo	26	Samara	34
Kaluga	26	Saratov	47
Kostroma	24	Ulianovsk	23
Orel	26	Kalmikia Republic	14
Riazan	27		
Smolensk	26	**Volga-Viatka**	
Tver	38		
Tula	17	Kirovsk	35
Yaroslavl	18	Mari-El Republic	17
		Mordovia Republic	23
Central-"Black Soil"		Chuvashia Republic	25
Belgorod	26	**Northern Caucasus**	
Voronezh	37		
Kursk	30	Adygeiya Republic	8
Lipetsk	19	Karachaevo-Cherkess Repbulic	9
		Rostov	52
Northwestern		Kab. Balkar. Republic	11
		North-Ossetia	8
St. Petersburgh Region	17	Ingushetia Republic	1
Pskov	26		
		Ural	
Northern		Kurgan	24
		Orenburg	45
Arkhangelsk	23	Perm	35
Vologda	28	Komi-Perm Autonomous Region	6
Murmansk	14	Sverdlovsk	54
Karelia Republic	18	Chelyabinsk	29
Komi Republic	19	Bashkiria	6

The most obvious way in which to test our hypotheses would be to regress change (between 1991 and 1996, and, then between 1996 and 2000) in the percentage of votes going to the Communist candidate upon change in the percentage of pensioners in each rayon. The relative performance of the Communists would be expected to decline in those rayons that lost the largest number of pensioners. This turned out not to be feasible, because in most rayons the percentage of pensioners changed very little over this ten-year period. It is hard to explain variance in the dependent variable with an independent variable that has little variance.

There is, however, another estimation strategy available. As indicated earlier, by our estimates roughly one-fifth of those who were pensioners in 1991 were gone by 1996 and about one-halve were gone by the year 2000. To the extent they were replaced by individuals from a younger, less Stalinist cohort, we would expect support for the Communists in this category of voters to be diluted. We can thus estimate an equation of the following form:

$$\frac{y^1}{y^2} = \alpha\left(\frac{1}{1}\right) + B_1\left(\frac{X^1}{X^2}\right) + (B_2 - B_1)\left(\frac{0}{X^2}\right)$$

where:

y^1 = the percentage of vote won by the communist candidate in each rayon in the first presidential election (1991/1996).

y^2 = the percentage of vote won by the communist candidate in each rayon the second presidential election (1996/2000).

X^1 = the percentage of pensioners in each rayon in the first presidential election year.

X^2 = the percentage of pensioners in each rayon in the second presidential election year.

If support for the Communists among pensioners was diluted between the first and the second elections, then, in the manner described above, we would expect the coefficient for the pensioner vote in the second election relative to that in the first $(B_2 - B_1)$ to be negative. In order to properly specify this equation, we need to also estimate the across-the-board changes in support for the Communist candidate between the two elections. We thus specify a dummy variable for observations made in the second

election, in addition to a constant term. We also specify dummy variables for each of the 48 regions and republics from which the rayons in our sample are drawn. This is necessary because of the substantial regional variation in support for the Communist party.

Another complication we need to address derives from the fact that there were three major candidates in the 1991 presidential election – Boris Yeltsin, the Communist candidate Nikolai Ryzhkov, and Vladimir Zhirinovsky – two rounds in the 1996 presidential election and only one round in the 2000 presidential election. Rather than speculate as to the best way to specify the dependent variable, we thought a preferable strategy would be to run the regression on several different permutations. To the extent our results do not vary with the way we specify the dependent variable, we can be confident in their robustness. It should be noted that in some of these equations the dependent variable is pro-Yeltsin, and thus our expectations about the signs of the coefficients would be reversed.

We used the following pairs of votes in the first part of the analysis: (1) for Ryzhkov in 1991, for Zyuganov in the first round of 1996; (2) for Ryzhkov in 1991, for Zyuganov in the second round of 1996; (3) for all candidates other than Yeltsin in 1991, for Zyuganov in the first round of 1996; (4) for Yeltsin in 1991, for Yeltsin in the first round of 1996; (5) for Yeltsin in 1991, for Yeltsin in the second round of 1996; (6) for Yeltsin in 1991, for Yeltsin or Lebed in the first round of 1996. Also, simply out of curiosity we ran the regression using Zhirinovsky's votes in 1991 and in the first round of 1996.

In the second part of the analysis the following pairs of votes have been used: (1) for Zyuganov in the first round in 1996, for Zyuganov in 2000; (2) for all candidates other than Yeltsin in 1996 first round, for Zyuganov in 2000; (3) for Yeltsin in the first round of the 1996, for Putin in 2000.

Results of the 1991/1996 part of our regression analyses are reported in Table 4. The top number in each entry is the regression coefficient, the bottom number the standard error. Note also that coefficients associated with the 48 regional dummy variables are not reported.

Table 4. Pensioners' Choices in Russian Presidential Elections, 1991-96

Variable	Ryzhkov 91 Zyuganov 96-1	Ryzhkov 91 Zyuganov 96-2	Anti-Yeltsin 91 Zyuganov 96-1	Yeltsin 91 Yeltsin 96-1	Yeltsin 91 Yeltsin 96-2	Yeltsin 91 Yeltsin+Lebed 96-1
Constant	4.7 (2.1)	6.8 (2.0)	22.2 (2.5)	78.8 (2.2)	77.7 (2.4)	80.7 (2.3)
Second Election	5.6 (.19)	11.3 (1.9)	-19.5 (2.3)	-9.5 (2.1)	13.3 (2.2)	4.9 (2.1)
Pensioners, First Election	.29 (.05)	.19 (.05)	.28 (.06)	-.33 (.06)	-.28 (.06)	-.42 (.05)
Pensioners, Second Election	.45 (.06)	.55 (.06)	.52 (0.8)	-.22 (.07)	-.45 (.08)	-.23 (.07)
R^2(adj)	.64	.74	.46	.59	.45	.46

Looking first at the coefficients associated with the pensioner vote in the 1991 election, we see that this category of voters was quite supportive of Ryzhkov and correspondingly unsupportive of Yeltsin. This is exactly what the findings from the survey data discussed previously would have predicted. But contrary to the hypothesis that pensioners' support for the communists had become diluted over the intervening five years, we see that the elderly were actually *more* supportive of the Communist candidate in 1996 than they had been previously. Clustered around .5, the coefficients we estimated in the first three equations for the "pensioners, second election" term must be added to the coefficients of the "pensioners, first round" term (which average about .3) to gauge their effect. Our results thus indicate that an increase of one in the percentage of pensioners in a rayon would lead to a .8 percent increase in the percentage of votes won by Zyuganov. Support for the Communists among Russian pensioners thus became more concentrated, not diluted.

Turning to the other equations reported in Table 4, we see that the coefficients in the Yeltsin equations are smaller, but still sizable. They thus indicate that pensioners' opposition to Yeltsin, while already quite strong in 1991, was much stronger in 1996. We can thus be confident that our results do not depend upon any particular specification of the dependent variable. Finally, we see that although pensioners were somewhat more supportive of Zhirinovsky in 1991, by 1996 they were no more likely than younger cohorts of Russians to vote for him.

Results of the 1996/2000 part of the analysis are reported in Table 5. The first row of coefficients, which denote pensioners' support for a particular candidate in the 1996 election, is roughly similar to the sum of the first and second rows in Table 4, which is what we had hoped to see. The much smaller coefficients in the second row basically indicate that pensioners, as a group, were as loyal to the Communist party in 1999-2000 as they had been four years earlier, despite a large amount of replacement of individual pensioners (who had died) by new individuals who became eligible for pensions during the intervening period.

Table 5. Pensioners' Choices in Russian Presidential Elections, 1996-00

Variable	Zyuganov 96-1 Zyuganov 2000	Anti-Yeltsin 96 Zyuganov 2000	Yeltsin 96-1 Putin 2000
Constant	5.2 (3.1)	17.8 (3.1)	83.2 (3.5)
Second Election	1.4 (.46)	-15.3 (2.4)	17.5 (1.9)
Pensioners, First Election	.81 (.11)	.77 (.7)	-.81 (.14)
Pensioners, Second Election	.03 (.004)	-.01 (.02)	.34 (0.1)
R^2(adj)	.73	.69	.38

Interestingly, Table 5 also shows that in 2000 Putin did not enjoy much support from the elderly. This is somewhat similar to Yeltsin's situation in 1991 and 1996, but the coefficients also indicate that Yeltsin's 1996 voters did not go "all as one" to Vladimir Putin, implying that Putin must have gotten most of his votes from elsewhere.

Discussion

"Pensioners are paid very little, but at least they get something... Nobody notices us."
—Nina Matskevich, 49-year-old unemployed accountant

One explanation of our findings, which run utterly counter to the conventional wisdom that the degree of Communist support among pensioners was being diluted by turnover in the membership of this group, involves timing: while Russian pensioners tended to oppose Yeltsin in 1991 because of their apprehension over the political and economic reforms he was promoting, they strongly opposed him in

1996 because, by then, they had experienced the severe, economic dislocations the reforms engendered. They kept voting Communist in 2000 for the same reason, i.e., that the government had not improved their lives. There may be some truth to this, but we doubt that it is the full story. First, the regression equations we estimated included a dummy variable for the 1996 (2000) election, which should have registered across-the-board changes in support for the Communists and opposition to Yeltsin (Putin). The pensioner variables thus register effects over and above the nation-wide swing, and so this interpretation would imply that pensioners were especially hard hit.

According to our reading of the situation, however, this was not the case. The pensions Russians receive are certainly quite modest, but payments have been indexed to inflation and are probably not much lower in real terms than they were when the reforms began. Although whatever savings they might have had in Sberbank were wiped out, most Russians have long kept much of their savings in other forms. They also received title to their apartments; given the high property values of Moscow and other major cities, this means that they would experience a windfall profit were they to sell their apartment. This is not meant to minimize the very difficult material conditions under which many elderly Russians live, but only to note, as Varoli (1996) reports, that: "Their plight is not as severe as portrayed by the mass media" (p. 11).

In our view, it was not pensioners, but rather Russian workers approaching retirement who were disproportionately injured by the transition to a more market-oriented economy. They, too, suffered the loss of savings, but in many cases they also lost their jobs. Although many such workers remain on the company payroll, there is in fact no work for them and they are infrequently paid. Unlike younger workers, they simply lack the time to learn the new skills and new habits that the economy now calls for.

During the years spanned by the three Russian presidential elections, then, those who had been pensioners in 1991 were joined by large numbers of new pensioners who had suffered badly during the final years of their working lives. While not officially counted as unemployed, many, in fact, had no work and received little pay. For such people, becoming old enough to receive a pension actually marked an

improvement in their material conditions. As retrospective economic voters, they thus strongly supported Zyuganov in 1996 and in 2000. In short, the "new" pensioners who entered this category between 1991 and 1996 were substantially more supportive of the Communists than those who had died. That support remained intact between 1996 and 2000 presidential campaigns.

This is probably pretty good news for Zyuganov and the Communists. According to data on the age structure of the Russian population, there are many millions of people over fifty years old and, thus, too old to smoothly transition to the ways of the new economy. Support for the Communists among such people is disproportionately strong, and old workers (who are soon-to-be pensioners) will remain a very large category of voters for many years to come.

Endnotes

1. The category of "elderly" needs to be adjusted downward in a country in which normal retirement age for women has long been 55. 60 for men. and where current male life expectancy is about 58.

2. We are indebted to Sergei Beriozkin and to the late Alexandr Sobianin for making these data available to us.

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