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**THE COMMUNIST PARTY OF RUSSIA:  
Rural Support and Implications for the Party System**

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## **Executive Summary**

Political scientists have devoted considerable attention to analyzing democratization in Russia. Of notable interest has been the weak party system and a strong president. Parties have dual functions in democracies: (1) to strengthen the party system by providing a balance to the executive; and (2) to represent the interests of their constituents. In short, a democratic system based on a competitive party system needs competitive (and independent) parties.

The weakness in the party system in Russia is seen in numerous ways. Perhaps the main weakness is the absence of strong parties which have wide appeal across various regional and socio-economic variables, are able to remain independent from pressure by the Kremlin, are able to balance some of the power concentrated in the Kremlin, and which have a realistic chance of capturing either the presidency or a majority of deputies in the Duma.

The Communist Party of Russia comes closest to this ideal type, but it is far from it. Today, the Communist Party of Russia is commonly acknowledged as the largest, best-funded, and most highly organized political party in Russia, and it is also the leader of anti-reform/anti-system parties. The countryside in particular is considered a bastion of Communist electoral strength, so much so that the rural south has been termed the "red belt" by analysts. However, the prospect of a Communist president or Duma majority is small.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the nature of electoral support of the Communist Party in the countryside and, implicitly, the strength of that support. This article argues that Communist Party electoral strength in the countryside is more tenuous than previously understood. Communist support does not appear to be economically motivated, nor a result of social alienation. Support is based upon ideological values, but those values are not popular among the young, and as older generations pass away the number of believers in communism dies.

## **Introduction and Methodology**

One of the most important political events in Europe in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century was the implosion of the Soviet political system, bringing to an end the rule of the Communist Party in the Soviet Union and throughout Eastern and Central Europe. The demise of the Communist political system in Eastern Europe and then in Russia ushered in competitive elections, a multiparty system, and progress towards a civil society, all undertaken with the intent of building a democratic political order.

A second important event has been the revival of the Communist Party, particularly in Russia. Following collapse and banishment in 1991, the Communist Party of Russia reemerged as the primary opposition to market reforms in post-Soviet Russia, thereby shaping the political environment for much of the 1990s. Today, the Communist Party of Russia is commonly acknowledged as the largest, best funded, and most highly organized political party in Russia, and it is also the leader of anti-reform/anti-system parties (see McFaul and Markov, 1993). Thus, Communist Party political strength is one of the primary anti-system challenges to the post-socialist political order. The countryside in particular is considered a bastion of Communist electoral strength, so much so that the rural south has been termed the "red belt" by analysts. The analytical focus in this article is on rural support for the Communist Party.

Political scientists have devoted considerable attention to analyzing democratization in former communist states, in particular in Russia, thereby spawning a significant literature (Fish, 1995; Dawisha and Parrott, 1997; Colton and Hough, 1998; Eckstein, et al., 1998; Colton, 2000; Colton and McFaul, 2001; McFaul, 2001a; and Anderson, et al., 2001). Of notable interest has been the weak party system and a strong president (McFaul, 2001b).

It is well to remember that parties have dual functions in democracies: (1) to strengthen the party system by providing a balance to the executive; and (2) to represent the interests of their constituents. In short, a democratic system based on a competitive party system needs competitive (and independent) parties. The weakness in the Russian party system has not been quantitative: Russia certainly does not

lack for parties--13 parties met registration requirements for the Duma elections of 1993, 43 in 1995, and 26 in 1999.<sup>1</sup> In large part, the weakness in the party system has been qualitative. The weakness in the party system is seen in numerous ways.

First, there are structural weaknesses, referring to the Constitutional arrangements which are heavily weighted in favor of the president and give him overwhelming political power. In short, the Constitution does not provide a balance of power between executive and legislative branches. This outcome was not an accident, but rather was a result of political choice by elites about how to structure post-Soviet political institutions (McFaul, 2001b).

A second weakness is organizational and refers to the fact that even for the most influential parties, membership is low, the party is centered around a single individual, the party is often regionally limited, and parties have not coalesced around socio-economic cleavages as in Western Europe. A measure of the organizational weakness of parties is further seen by the fact that no Russian party nominates candidates for single mandate districts nationwide. In the 1999 Duma election, only two of the six parties winning party list seats ran candidates in half the single mandate districts (Rose, Munro, and White, 2001: 421).

A third weakness is functional, referring to the fact that parties are not able to hold the Kremlin accountable, have not penetrated state institutions to a significant degree in terms of representation, have generally weak interest aggregation and articulation, and party deputies in office are often not accountable to their electorate. Richard Rose has referred to this latter development as a system of "floating parties" by which he means there is a disjunction between electoral parties and the formation of parties, factions, and groupings in the Duma, with the result that the electorate may or may not get what it voted for when the Duma convenes (Rose and Munro, 2002: 101-117). Fourth, party weakness stems from a lack of public trust in parties to serve popular interests, a lack of identification with a party, and doubt about the efficacy of political parties in Russia (McAllister and White, 1995: 57-59).

Finally, the main weakness in Russia's party system is the absence of strong parties which have wide appeal across various regional and socio-economic variables, are able to remain independent from pressure by the Kremlin, are able to balance some of the power concentrated in the Kremlin, and which have a realistic chance of capturing either the presidency or a majority of deputies in the Duma. The Communist Party of Russia comes closest to this ideal type, but it is far from it. Communist support is found only in various regional and socio-economic niches, and the prospect of a Communist president or Duma majority is small.

The weakness of the party system has direct and significant implications for the nature of Russian democracy. This article approaches party weakness from a somewhat different angle by examining the economic, behavioral, and social characteristics of Communist Party supporters. The purpose is to analyze the nature of electoral support for the Communist Party in the countryside and, implicitly, the strength of that support.

The article is organized around the following questions. Who are the Communist Party's rural supporters? What are the social, economic, and demographic characteristics of rural Communist supporters? To what extent are communist supporters distinct from non-communist supporters? Is the countryside resigned to being a permanent base of electoral support for anti-reform and anti-system parties and candidates? If the Communist Party based its comeback on the rural vote, what are the future prospects for continued Communist strength in the countryside?

This article argues that Communist Party electoral strength in the countryside is more tenuous than previously understood. Communist support does not appear to be economically motivated, nor a result of social alienation. Support is based upon ideological values, but those values are not popular among the young, and as older generations pass away the number of believers in communism declines.<sup>2</sup> Further, one of the political phenomena under President Putin has been the rapid development of pro-Kremlin parties, which, with Kremlin backing, have gained political clout in a short period of time.

Under Putin, the trend has been for moderate and centrist parties to be even more compliant. This occurrence has allowed Putin to rule in a less confrontational manner than did his predecessor, Boris Yeltsin. But this trend also portends of the erosion of party independence from influence of the center. If electoral support for the Communist Party further weakens, significant opposition to the Kremlin and its policies are in doubt. Thus, if Russia had an unbalanced political system in terms of the distribution of political power in the 1990s, the shift of power to the Kremlin and away from parties may become even greater in the future, thereby perpetuating a weak party system and forestalling democratic consolidation.

In short, this article argues that although the Communist Party has been largely anti-system, it is the most important and most independent party in Russia's weak party system. The upshot is if the Communist Party is weak in the countryside, which it has used to support its reemergence, the implications are twofold: (1) reformers have real opportunities to make significant inroads into the rural vote, for which there is already supporting evidence; and (2) the impact may be a further weakening of the party system, attendant with even more power shifting away from parties to the executive.

The article makes two contributions to the existing literature. First, it examines in detail a subject which heretofore has been absent. The article is motivated by the fact that analysts have correctly identified an important urban/rural cleavage in Russian voting patterns, and more generally, in Russian politics, thereby conforming to one aspect of the Lipset/Rokkan model of party cleavages (1967).<sup>3</sup> However, for contemporary Russia we lack an understanding of political cleavages *within* the rural sector. Quite simply, we do not know how rural voters who support the Communist Party differ voters who do not support the Communist Party. This article fills that void.

Second, using survey data from rural respondents, the article provides new perspectives on Communist Party strength and prospects for the future. The data for this article are drawn from a survey conducted in five Russian regions. Those five regions include: Belgorod oblast, Volgograd oblast, Krasnodar kray, Novgorod oblast, and the Chuvash Republic. All five regions are located in European Russia. The sample was designed for geographical diversity. The first three regions are located in southern Russia in good agricultural regions known as the Black Earth zone and have strong agricultural

sectors in their regional economies. Novgorod is located in the north, is a poor agricultural region, and is located in the Non-Black Earth zone. Chuvashia is a non-Russian region, dominated by people with Turkish backgrounds. It has a strong agricultural economy although it is not located in the Black Earth zone.

Within each of the five regions, four villages were selected, and within each village, 40 households were surveyed, for a total sample of 800 households (160 households in each region). The pretest of the questions was conducted in June 2001 in Ryazan oblast, followed by the full survey during July-October 2001. For each of the selected villages a stratified sample was composed from the household list of permanent residents which is kept by the village administration for all households within its jurisdiction. This list is updated annually and contains demographic and social characteristics of the households on the list. One person from each household was interviewed.<sup>4</sup> The survey consisted of more than 100 questions per respondent. Information was collected about the respondent as well as other members of the household, although for purposes of this article, the unit of analysis is the individual respondent.

### **The Fall from Power, 1988-1993**

In a short period of time, the Communist Party went from having dominant power in society, controlling the state and all resources and organizations thereof, to being banished and stripped of its power and resources. The decline of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) has been analyzed elsewhere (Gill, 1994), and thus the purpose here is to provide a brief overview of some of the main trends which transpired. In general, during the demise of the CPSU and the Soviet political system four main trends were evident.

(1) From 1988 on, the more Gorbachev liberalized the political system, the more the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) declined. There was an inverse relationship between democratization and continued rule of the CPSU, an inherent tension which led to fissures in the party between reformers and conservatives.



(2) As the party became hopelessly divided, reformers and conservatives fought over urban support for their policy platforms.

(3) Reformers won urban support. As early as 1989 and 1990 it became clear that the CPSU lost its traditional base of support in large cities to reformers. With the change in the base of support, support from small towns and rural areas became more crucial for the Communist Party.

(4) In the post-Soviet period, the elite struggle over reform and over the direction the nation would take was fought out mainly in Moscow where liberal reformers were strongest. Unlike 1917, Yeltsin did not allow the political battle to shift outside of large cities. The essence of this political strategy was summarized by Jerry Hough who wrote:

“The groups that bore the brunt of the economic decline--the older and middle aged, women, and inhabitants of the small towns and countryside--were not those that would go into the streets in protest. Yeltsin's own base of support in the larger cities would be protected.” (Hough, Davidheiser, and Lehmann, 1996: 9)

The beginning of the end for the CPSU may be dated to the 19th Party Conference in June 1988, at which Gorbachev introduced measures to democratize the CPSU (Bialer, 1989). Later that same year Gorbachev pushed through a decision for competitive elections in 1989 to elect a new legislative body, the Congress of Peoples Deputies (CPD), that would replace the rubber-stamp Supreme Soviet.<sup>5</sup> The initial fruits of democratization were the first contested elections in Soviet history, held in March 1989.<sup>6</sup>

The March election, which required a candidate to receive 50 percent of the vote in his/her district (with 50 percent turnout), led to some notable defeats of important Communist leaders. In the Russia Republic, 21 of 55 Communist Party regional first secretaries were defeated. Many of the worst defeats came when Communist candidates ran unopposed (Hough, 1997: 165-66). Despite the fact that Communist members comprised 87 percent of the CPD deputies, the elections were seen as a "great defeat" for the Communist Party (Hough, 1997: 167). Gorbachev notes that following the 1989 election, a meeting of the Politburo at the end of March found "most of the members were depressed, and failure was in the air" (Gorbachev, 1996: 281). The malaise spread to party members at large. After increasing about

two percent a year during the 1970s and 1980s, starting in 1989 party membership began to decline for the first time since Stalin's purges, and the decline accelerated in 1990 (Hill, 1992: 78). The exodus from the party was especially significant in the republics of the Caucasus.

In March 1990, the Communist monopoly on power ended when Article 6 of the Soviet Constitution was abolished. That same month, republican elections were held in Russia and the other republics to replace the old legislative Soviet system. The 1990 election in Russia confirmed the end of the Communist stronghold on the largest cities and large urban settlements generally.<sup>7</sup> The Communist Party was a party of industrial workers and based its support on large cities, with considerably weaker support in rural areas. Party control of social and economic organizations was much stronger in cities, and party penetration, as measured by membership, was considerably less in the countryside (Hill and Frank, 1982: 35-37).

Given these political realities, one can appreciate the surprise following the 1990 Russian election, in which reformist and liberal candidates did best in large cities, while conservative candidates did best in settlements with less than 50,000 residents. In settlements with a population of less than 50,000, 181 conservative deputies were elected, while only 47 radical (strongly pro-market reform) deputies were elected (Hough, 1997: 297). Thus, an important shift in electoral support became evident during the first competitive elections in the Soviet Union, with the Communist Party losing its traditional base of support to radical reformers.

Thereafter, further damage was inflicted as the CPSU experienced fissures in its own ranks. In June 1990 the Russian Communist Party (RCP) was founded as an outgrowth of the CPSU.<sup>8</sup> The RCP existed from June 1990 through late August 1991.<sup>9</sup> The creation of the RCP represented an "organizational vehicle for those Russian Communists who actively opposed Gorbachev's increasingly far-reaching reformism" (Urban and Solovei, 1997: 38). The RCP reached its low point in 1991.

In June 1991 Boris Yeltsin was elected president of Russia, capturing nearly 60 percent of the vote nationwide. However, the urban-rural divide was again evident, as Yeltsin captured 70 percent of the vote in Moscow and St. Petersburg, 64.5 percent of the vote in densely urban areas, but only 51 percent of

the vote in areas that were less than 60 percent urban. In July 1991, Yeltsin banned all political parties in state organizations and enterprises in Russia, an act that was aimed at the RCP since it was the dominant political organization in Russia. In August 1991, following the failed coup to overthrow USSR President Gorbachev, Yeltsin suspended the activities of the RCP and nationalized its property. A week later, the USSR Supreme Court acted similarly toward the CPSU throughout the USSR. In early November 1991, Yeltsin issued a presidential decree which banned the CPSU and the RCP from Russia. Thereafter, the CPSU split into several factions, mass defections occurred, and party property was seized (Gill, 1994: 175).

In November 1992, the banning of the RCP was declared unconstitutional by Russia's Constitutional Court, although the decision was ambiguous (Urban and Solovei, 1997: 32-33). Based upon this decision, the Communist Party was able to reconstitute itself, and the founding congress of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF) was held in February 1993. However, the road to recovery was neither linear nor easy. The party continued to be plagued by weak urban support. For example, one of the questions in the April 1993 referendum asked whether the respondent trusted Boris Yeltsin as president. More than two-thirds of residents in Moscow and St. Petersburg responded yes, as did six in ten respondents in highly urbanized areas. The less the area was urbanized, the lower the level of trust in Yeltsin.

Another main obstacle was the relationship with the executive branch, specifically Boris Yeltsin, who continued to press his role as an anti-communist reformer. The struggle between "liberals" and "conservatives" came to a head in September 1993 when Yeltsin illegally dissolved the Parliament, a power not envisioned in the Constitution (see Yeltsin, 1994: 255). A standoff ensued, during which time Russia had either two presidents or no Parliament, depending on to whom one was talking. But the perception of blame for the crisis was clear, as summarized by one of Yeltsin's spokesmen: "no concessions to Red Soviets, no concessions to Stalinists and fascists" (Reddaway and Glinski, 2001: 425).

After nearly a month-long siege, the standoff was "resolved" with force, as Yeltsin ordered the shelling of the Parliament building in October 1993. Force was used to defeat conservatives, and the stalemate between the executive and legislative branches was broken, with the executive emerging victorious.

Following the October crisis, a new post-Soviet political system was established, along with a new Constitution. Elections were called for December 12, 1993 to ratify the Constitution and to elect representatives to a new legislative system (the Federal Assembly), comprised of two independent houses (White, Rose, and McAllister, 1997: 92-106; Remington, 2001a: 45-61).<sup>10</sup> After meeting registration requirements, party candidates had only about six weeks to conduct their campaigns. The political order that emerged bestowed upon the president predominant power in the system, with the Communist Party having to fight for influence as an anti-system party in a weak legislative branch and party system.

### **The Role of Rural Support in Communist Revival, 1993-2000**

At the beginning of economic reform in Russia, logic would hold that those with the most privilege would be most resistant to reform. As reforms unfolded, the assumption by many analysts was that:

...those in a privileged position in the old system would be very reluctant to support a radical economic reform that threatened the old institutions or that exposed workers to sharp price increases and unemployment....The larger the city, the better the living conditions....Life in small towns and villages in the provinces seemed a throwback to decades ago....For all these reasons, if privilege were the crucial factor, those living in large cities should have been disproportionately conservative. Those living in small towns and the countryside should have advocated radical change because they were especially disadvantaged." (Hough, Davidheiser, and Lehmann, 1996: 5-6)

With the introduction of democratization and competitive elections in the Soviet Union and then Russia, however, it became clear that the base of political support for the Communist Party was not the voter who resided in large cities, but rather the voter in small towns and the countryside. The importance of the rural vote in the reemergence of the Communist Party in Russian politics was evident in the Duma elections in 1993, 1995, and 1999, as well as the presidential elections of 1996 and 2000. This section summarizes the role of the rural vote in the reemergence of the Communist Party.

Within Russia's weak party system, only the Communist Party managed to increase the percentage of the vote it received from party lists in the three Duma elections. A key component of the revival of the Communist Party was the rural vote. The electoral performance of the Communist Party and its candidates is shown in Table 1 below. Special attention should be paid to the importance of the rural vote to Communist Party electoral performance.

**Table 1: Electoral Support for Communist Candidates in Duma and Presidential Elections, 1993-2000**

	1993 Duma— For Communist candidates	1995 Duma— For Communist candidates	1999 Duma— For Communist candidates	1996 Presidential (For Zyuganov)	2000 Presidential (For Zyuganov)
Total number of votes/% of total party list vote	6,666,000 (12.4%)	15,432,963 (22.3%)	16,195,569 (24.29%)	30,102,288 (40.3%)	21,928,371 (29.1%)
Of total votes, number and percentage from southern regions*	2,681,773 (40%)	8,372,491 (54%)	5,825,229 (36%)	14,936,328 (49.6%)	9,483,552 (43.25%)
Percentage of vote in Moscow city	11.03%	14.8%	11.77%	17.93%	19.16%
Number of regions won by communist candidates (89 possible)	4	63	32	--	--
Percentage of party list seats received by CPRF	14%	44%	30%	--	--
Total number of seats from party list (225 possible)	32	99	67	--	--

\*Southern regions are defined as republics, oblasts, and krai within the Central Black Earth, Volga, and Northern Caucasus Economic regions.

Sources: Author's calculations from election data; Clem and Craumer, 1995: 592; *Rossiiskie regiony nakanune vyborov-95*, 1995; *Itogi vyborov*, 2000; Marsh, 2002: 67, 83, 92; and [www.rusline.ru](http://www.rusline.ru).

The data in the table are based upon electoral results from 23 oblasts, krai, and ethnic republics in three economic regions in European Russia (nationally, Russia has 89 oblasts, krai, and ethnic republics). These three regions have a southern location and are agriculturally rich. Although their populations are statistically urban (as is Russia as a whole, with 72 percent of the population considered urban), the economies of these regions are heavily agricultural and these regions are the primary agricultural producers for the country. More so than any other regions, these oblasts, krai, and ethnic republics comprise the “red belt” of the rural south.

Turning first to Duma elections, the data most notably show that a disproportionate percentage of electoral support for Communist candidates came from southern regions. These 23 oblasts, krai, and ethnic republics produced 40 percent of the total Duma vote for Communist candidates in 1993, 54 percent in 1995, and 36 percent in 1999, thereby far exceeding the percentage of votes the Communist Party received nationally. Conversely, urban support for Communist candidates was weak, reflected by the poor showing in Moscow in those three elections.

The same general pattern is evident with regard to presidential elections. In both the 1996 and 2000 presidential elections, the rural southern vote far exceeded the percentage of the national vote obtained by the Communist candidate Gennady Zyuganov. In 1996, for example, Zyuganov received 40 percent of the vote nation wide. About one-half of the vote came from the 23 rural regions. Likewise, in 2000, Zyuganov received 29 percent of the national vote, but 43 percent of his vote came from the rural south. Therefore, it is clear that the rural southern vote has been a major component in the resiliency of the Communist Party. However, the fact is that while rural support is one of the most critical elements in the electoral resurgence of the Communist Party, there is no literature which examines in detail the basis of Communist political strength in the countryside. The section below begins to address that shortcoming.

## **Characteristics of the Rural Supporter for the Communist Party**

In Russia, there is an inverse relationship between the size of a population settlement and support for reform candidates: the larger the settlement, the higher the level of electoral support; the smaller the settlement, the higher the electoral support for the Communist candidates (Colton, 1998: 75-114; Clem and Craumer, 2002: 1-12). This section analyzes the characteristics and behaviors of rural communist supporters, based on the survey data explained above.

One of the survey questions asked "for which party did you vote in the 1999 Duma election?" The responses included "Communist Party," "Liberal Democratic Party," "Edinstvo," "Other Democratic Parties," "Did Not Vote" and "Don't Remember." Of the 800 respondents in the sample, 196 voted for the Communist Party, which was second only to the 245 votes for Edinstvo. From these responses, a dummy variable was created to capture "Communist supporters" and "non-communist supporters." An analysis of the characteristics of rural supporters of the Communist Party is provided below using this dichotomous variable.

The conventional view of the typical Communist supporter is that he/she tends to be older, with a secondary or less than secondary education, occupies the lower income brackets, has a standard of living that is barely above subsistence, neither supports reform nor participates in the "new economy" to any significant degree, and is opposed to the course of state policy (Brudny, 2001: 166; Colton, 2000: 72-82; Wyman, 2001: 75-80). Similar to most conventional wisdom, there is an element of truth to these characteristics.

The survey data confirm that Communist supporters tend to be somewhat older, with a mean age of 57, whereas non-communist supporters have a mean age of 50. (The mean age for the entire sample is 52.2). Some 56 percent of communist supporters are over 60 years of age, whereas only 36 percent of non-communist supporters are 60 or above. Moreover, the data confirm that Communist supporters are somewhat less educated: non-communist supporters have a mean educational level of 10.4 years, while Communist supporters have a mean educational level of 9.0 years of education.

Beyond age and education, however, there are key characteristics of rural Communist supporters which to date have not been known to analysts. These characteristics are important because they do not support conventional views of Communist supporters and add important detail about who supports the Communist Party in the Russian countryside. Taken together, the analysis suggests that Communist supporters are not altogether different from non-Communist supporters on a number of economic, social, and psychological dimensions. In particular, the survey data show that: (1) rural Communist supporters are not significantly economically disadvantaged; (2) rural Communist supporters utilize opportunities created by market reform; (3) rural Communist supporters are not significantly more depressed or dissatisfied; and (4) rural Communist supporters are not alienated from their social environment. Each of these aspects are analyzed in turn below.

#### *Economic Disadvantages*

An interesting question is whether Communist supporters are those who have suffered the most during reform, who are the poorest, or who have the lowest standard of living. In other words, are Communist supporters economically disadvantaged? Some analysts have argued that pocketbook issues, or otherwise known as sociotropic variables, influence voting patterns in post-Soviet Russia (Colton, 1996). The survey data cast new light on this question. In the sample as a whole, the mean monthly monetary income on a per capita basis is 1,418.2 rubles (about \$49 at prevailing exchange rates in 2001). Of respondents who voted, Communist supporters had the lowest mean monthly per capita income at 1,439.8 rubles. Voters who voted for Edinstvo have the highest per capita monetary income at 1,707.8 rubles, followed by voters for "other democratic parties" at 1,691 rubles. This distribution is explained by the fact that Communist supporters tend to be somewhat older, and non-Communist supporters somewhat younger.

This is important because younger people are more likely to start new private businesses which earn more money, and generally are more entrepreneurial than older individuals. Older individuals depend more heavily on transfer payments from the state. Second, a large portion of unemployed or



retired are Communist supporters—those two groups depress the income mean somewhat, but provide over 64 percent of total Communist support in the sample, and the retired give more support to the Communist Party than any other party or non-party (no party). If these two cohorts are removed from the pro-communist cohort, the mean income of working individuals who support the Communist Party is closer to the mean income of non-communist supporters.<sup>11</sup> Overall, Communist supporters have mean monthly monetary incomes that surpass the mean for the entire sample.

Furthermore, Communist supporters have similar levels of productive capital compared to non-communist supporters. Communist and non-communist households have insignificant differences in terms of the mean number of cows, pigs, goats, sheep, and poultry. These family holdings are a basic source of household food production and thus affect to a significant degree how well and how much the family eats. In addition, both types of households have essentially equal possession rates of automobiles and motorcycles, which provide not only transportation to a nearby urban settlement but also are important for transporting food to town for sale. Therefore, in terms of productive capital, Communist and non-communist households are essentially equal.

Finally, the very poorest individuals—those with less than one half the subsistence level in monetary income in 2001--give more support to the pro-Kremlin party Edinstvo (Unity) and to “no party” than the Communist Party. The data show that the second poorest category—those with from one-half to three-quarters the subsistence minimum—also give more support to Edinstvo and to “no party” than the Communist Party. Only in the non-poverty grouping—individuals with 1.1 times or more the subsistence level—does the Communist Party receive more support than Edinstvo or no party. These data are shown in Table 2.

**Table 2: Support for Political Parties by Income Group (in %)**

Coefficient of Subsistence Level	.5 and below (<762 rubles a month)	.51 to .75 (763-1143 rubles a month)	.76-.90 (1144-1372 rubles a month)	.91-1.1 (1373-1676 rubles a month)	1.11 and above (1677 rubles and more a month)
For Edinstvo	26.4	22.6	20.8	24.1	26.2
For Communist Party	18.9	14.6	24.5	29.7	32.6
For Liberal Democratic Party	9.4	5.8	1.9	2.8	3.3
Other Democratic Parties	3.8	6.6	4.7	2.8	5.8
No Party	37.7	38.0	35.8	33.1	25.6
Too Difficult to Answer	3.8	12.4	12.3	7.6	6.4

Sources: Author's calculations; Survey data, 2001.

Based on these data, the idea that the Communist party has attracted supporters who are the poorest of the poor and who are acutely disadvantaged is shown to be misleading. Communist supporters are somewhat less advantaged than non-communist households, for instance in per capita income and in human capital. Communist households have a mean of 2.81 persons while non-communist households have a mean of 3.17 persons, a difference that translates into more labor power to grow food and to engage in commercial agriculture if desired. On the whole, however, economic differences are not significant.

#### *Utilization of Reform Opportunities*

A second popular perception about Communist supporters is that they oppose market reforms and have not participated in new economic opportunities. Perhaps the best measure to analyze this issue is the question of private land ownership and a rural land market. The right of private land ownership and the ability to buy and sell rural land was one of the most contentious issues in Russian politics during the 1990s. At the national level, a fierce struggle between Communist deputies in the Duma and reformers in

the executive branch delayed the adoption of a post-Soviet Land Code for more than seven years, although the right to buy and sell land (with restrictions) existed since late 1993 (Wegren and Belen'kiy, 2002).

Separate survey questions asked whether the respondent increased (or decreased) its household land plot since 1991, and by how much. (Other questions asked about the size of rental land and land allocated from a large farm). The increase question indicates participation in the land market by buying (or selling) a land plot. In the sample, 35 percent of respondents had increased their household plot since 1991. The differences between Communist and non-Communist respondents' participation in the land market are not large: 32 percent of Communist voters participated in the land market by increasing their land plot, while 36 percent of non-Communist voters did so.<sup>12</sup> It is also interesting to note the mean sizes of different types of land plots. Communist voters actually have a larger mean size for their household plot than the sample mean (.25) and than do non-Communist voters: .29 to .23 hectares.

The main difference between Communist and non-Communist voters is in the size of a rental land plot. A rental plot is different from a household plot in that the land is leased, not owned, for a defined period of time; the land is likely to be located some distance from the household; and statistically, rental land is more likely to be used to grow food for sale rather than household consumption. Communist and non-Communist supporters have similar rates of rental plot usage (34.7 percent for Communist voters to 33.3 percent of non-Communist voters). However, non-Communist voters' rental plots have a mean size of .62, whereas Communist voters plots have a mean size of .11 hectares. This difference may be partially due to age, as households with a higher mean age have less labor power than younger families, keeping in mind that nearly all households already have a pre-existing household plot. Overall, it is difficult to conclude that Communist households have not used the opportunities created by land reform.

### *Satisfaction, Mood, and Participation*

A third common belief about Communist supporters is that they are dissatisfied with state policies, are unhappy with life and the situation in the country, and may withdraw into isolation as a result

of dissatisfaction and unhappiness. The survey data again provide results that necessitate modification of the conventional wisdom regarding satisfaction, mood, and participation as shown in Table 3 below.

**Table 3: Mean Scores for Support, Satisfaction, Personal Mood, and Participation among Communist and Non-Communist Supporters**

	<b>Communist Supporter</b>	<b>Non-Communist Supporter</b>	<b>Mean for the Sample</b>
Support for Farm Enterprise Privatization	2.74	3.16	3.06
Support for Land Reform	2.47	2.87	2.77
Support for Credit Policy	2.98	3.27	3.20
Support for Price Regulation	2.88	3.15	3.08
Support for Tax Policy	3.70	3.92	3.87
Support for Wage Policy	2.24	2.30	2.28
Satisfied with Life in General	3.33	3.43	3.41
Satisfied with Situation in Country	2.58	2.75	2.71
Personal Mood: Felt Sad	1.80	1.82	1.81
Personal Mood: Felt Lonely	1.74	1.74	1.74
Personal Mood: Felt Happy	2.14	2.13	2.14
Participate in Family Ceremonies	2.45	2.24	2.29
Participate in Neighbor's Ceremonies	1.84	1.73	1.76
Participate in Village Ceremonies	1.10	1.04	1.06

“Support for” variables are scaled 1-5, with 1=absolutely reject and 5=absolutely agree.

“Satisfaction” variables are scaled 1-5, with 1=absolutely dissatisfied and 5=absolutely satisfied.

“Personal Mood” variables are scaled 1-4, with 1=never, 2=sometimes, 3=often, and 4=most of the time.

“Participation” variables are scaled 0-5 with 0=never, 1=very seldom, 2=seldom, 3=sometimes, 4=often, and 5=very often.

Source: Survey data, 2001.

Turning first to evaluations of state policy, one of the questions asked “how do you evaluate state policy, as it relates to the countryside, which has been conducted during the past years?” The most striking fact is the lack of opposition for state policies among all rural dwellers, which suggests neutrality or ambivalence. This response is remarkable given the deterioration in the standard of living, both relative and in absolute terms, which occurred during the 1990s. Within the rural cohort, non-communist supporters are somewhat more supportive of state policy, and Communist supporters somewhat less

supportive, but the differences are not especially large. Although the mean scores of Communist voters lag the sample mean and the mean of non-Communist supporters, the data do not strongly uphold the view of Communist supporters being strident opponents of state policies. For some policy reforms Communists' responses tend toward neutral, while for others such as wage policy there is significant opposition.

Moreover, there are not significant differences between Communist and non-Communist in terms of satisfaction with life in general. Separate survey questions asked the respondent to "evaluate your level of satisfaction towards different aspects of life." Communist and non-Communist supporters have very similar responses, with non-Communist supporters somewhat more satisfied with life and the situation in the country, although again the differences are not large.

Turning to personal mood, it is apparent that Communist supporters are not significantly more sad or lonely, or conversely, less happy, than non-Communist supporters. Separate questions asked about different moods: "in the past week, how often have you felt..." The data show the two cohorts are very similar in their psychological mood. Similar moods between the two cohorts are significant because it shows that despite somewhat less support for state policies and less satisfaction with the situation in the country, personal mood is not different than that of non-Communist supporters. The fact that Communists are not significantly more unhappy helps to understand why, when asked "what needs to be done to improve the standard of living in your village," only one percent of Communist voters replied "to strike" and only 2.6 percent "to protest." In contrast, almost six percent (6.5 percent of non-Communist voters) said to "work harder."

Finally, if Communist supporters were dissatisfied and unhappy, it would be expected that they would retreat into isolation and become less participatory. However, regarding participation in ceremonies of friends and family, neighbors, and the village, the data suggest that participation rates between Communist and non-Communist supporters are very similar. Persons who support the Communist Party are actually somewhat more participatory in family and neighbor's activities.

Both Communist and non-Communist supporters participate the least often in village ceremonies. Participation in social activities is important for two reasons: (1) it maintains assistance networks which help households survive; and (2) it contributes to positive feelings about self and one's environment. Point 2 is supported by positive correlations between participation in ceremonies and feelings of happiness, satisfaction about family relations, and satisfaction with village life.<sup>13</sup> Thus, participation plays an important economic and psychological role.

### **Rural Support and the Future**

The analysis above showed that rural voters who support the Communist Party are not particularly distinctive from rural voters who do not support the Communist Party. Communist supporters have mean household incomes that are above the sample mean and not significantly below that of non-Communist supporters, Communist supporters participate in opportunities created by reform, their psychological moods are not significantly better or worse than supporters of non-Communist parties, and Communist supporters display similar rates of community participation. This analysis portends future electoral weakness of the CPRF because it suggests that there are few political niches, issues, or cohorts that Communist candidates can exploit. In short, the CPRF is not able to target or to build support from a base of economically disadvantaged, alienated, discontented persons who resist reform through their behaviors.

There is further evidence that portends of Communist political weakness. This weakness is seen by the fact that "traditional" sources of support for the Communist Party are not as strong as believed. Traditional sources of support for the CPRF come from the poor and economically disadvantaged (including those in poverty), the unemployed, workers, and the retired. Communist candidates have explicitly targeted these groups in their policy speeches. The survey data demonstrate that rural support among these cohorts is not particularly strong for the CPRF, as shown in Table 4 below.

**Table 4: Party Representation (in %)**

<b>Which Party represents your interests?</b>	<b>Communist Party</b>	<b>Edinstvo</b>	<b>No Party</b>
Unemployed	17	20	42
Employed	28	25	30
At or below poverty*	26	23	34
Above poverty*	29	29.5	24
Not working**	31	21	31
Husband- farm manager	27	33	27
Husband- farm worker	21.5	29	31
Wife-farm manager	18	45.5	9
Wife-farm worker	25	26	34

\* Poverty level in fourth quarter of 2001 was 1,574 rubles per person, per month.

\*\* Not working is a variable created to include the unemployed, the disabled, the retired, students, and stay at home wives. The largest single component is the retired.

Percentages have been rounded.

Source: Survey data, 2001.

The table demonstrates Communist Party weakness among different cohorts. Table 4 is based on an open ended survey question which asked “which party today best represents your interests?” Of the nine categories in Table 4, respondents answered that the CPRF best represents their interests in only one of the categories: those who are not working (of whom the vast majority are retired). For the other eight categories, the CPRF either trailed the pro-Kremlin party Edinstvo, or “no party,” or both. The table further demonstrates the significant inroads that the pro-government Edinstvo has made in a short period of time. Edinstvo was formed in the autumn of 1999 as a centrist coalition which was given Kremlin support. In the December 1999 Duma election, Edinstvo had widespread regional support, seen by the fact that it was supported by no less than 30 regional governors.

Further, it was headed by well-known politicians who were considered politically “clean” (Marsh, 2002: 88-89). These factors contributed to Edinstvo receiving 23.3 percent of the party list vote in the December election, only slightly less than the 24.2 percent received by the CPRF. The electoral performance of Edinstvo in December 1999, its subsequent support of Putin since 2000 (Remington,

2001b: 303), and the resignation of Communist committee chairmen in mid-2002 served to increase the Kremlin's legislative power even more, thereby leading analysts to conclude that Putin's Russia is a "managed democracy" (Moses, 2003).

It is especially significant to note the prevalence of the "no party" response. In six of the nine categories, respondents answered that "no party" best represents their interests, an indication of the alienation of the rural voter from party politics and the belief that parties are not effective. There is little evidence that the Communist Party is poised to take advantage of rural alienation from politics and other parties. In fact, despite the fact that the retired give high levels of support to the Communist Party, the evidence suggests that the CPRF is not meeting the needs of its core constituency, the rural old.<sup>14</sup> One of the axioms of Russian politics is that the older voter provides the primary base of electoral support for Communist candidates. However, the survey data suggest that there is more to the story, as indicated in Table 5.

**Table 5: Support for Communist Candidate in the 1996 and 2000 Presidential Elections, By Age of Respondent (in %)**

<b>Men</b>	<b>Men For Zyuganov in 1996</b>	<b>Men For Zyuganov in 2000</b>
18-29	10	0
30-39	22	11
40-49	26	15
50-59	27	18
60+	45	29
<b>Women</b>	<b>Women for Zyuganov in 1996</b>	<b>Women For Zyuganov in 2000</b>
18-29	9	8
30-39	14	5
40-49	28	13
50-55	35	20
56+	28	17

Numbers have been rounded and may not add to 100 percent.  
Source: Survey data, 2001.



The table indicates two main trends: (1) a significant gender divide; and (2) interesting electoral patterns by age. For rural men, electoral patterns are precisely as would be predicted: increasing support for the Communist candidate as age increases (and conversely, declining support for the non-Communist candidate as age increases). Thus, rural men conform to the expected pattern. However, for rural women, electoral support for the Communist candidate actually declines among rural women after age 60.<sup>15</sup>

This finding is important for two reasons: first, rural women outnumber rural men, significantly at upper age brackets (50 and above); and second, it suggests that CPRF policies are not perceived as meeting the social needs of older women, who tend to head the rural household. In this respect, Putin's policy of paying pension arrears and increasing pension levels are likely to further erode Communist support among pension-age rural dwellers. Therefore, even among the cohort of voters believed to be the strongest Communist supporters there is evidence of electoral weakness on the part of the CPRF.

## **Conclusion**

Russia faces numerous obstacles along its path of democratization, among them a constitution which places most power in the hands of the executive, political recentralization during Putin's rule, attempts to lessen the independence of regional leaders, and attempts to streamline the party system into fewer parties, to be led by pro-Kremlin parties in Duma. While it certainly would be an exaggeration to say Russia's party system is under assault or is endangered, it is not an exaggeration to say that trends are not favorable for the consolidation of a vibrant party system with strong opposition parties to balance the influence of the Kremlin.

The Communist Party plays an integral role in Russia's party system. As an independent and opposition party, the strength of the Communist Party helps define the vibrancy of the party system itself. Once the Communist Party fell from power, it reemerged as an anti-system party on the back of the vote from small towns and rural dwellers. Therefore, the primary electoral cleavage in contemporary Russia is an urban-rural divide. The reliance by the Communist Party upon the rural voter for a large part of electoral support has enormous implications for Russian politics and the party system as a whole.

The importance of rural electoral support for the CPRF is threefold. First, although Communist Party members have higher rates of party identification than other parties (Wyman, White, Miller and Heywood, 1995; McFaul 2001b), this paper has shown that the rural Communist supporter is not particularly distinctive in economic, behavioral, or psychological attributes. Support for the Communist Party does not appear to be driven by economic need or a sense of alienation. In short, there are limits on how much Communist candidates can exploit the “misery of the market” or play upon specific economic, social, or psychological consequences thereof. This reality serves to blunt the message of Communist candidates and limits their appeal.

Second, this paper suggests that there is a divorce between personal behavior and political support, as shown by households which participate in the land market while voting for the Communist Party (which consistently opposed the buying and selling of rural land). A crucial question is whether the Communist Party can put forward leaders who project a positive image for the future. The 1990s saw no such leader move to the forefront. At what point do Communist policies become perceived as antiquated or not appropriate for Russia's future?

Third, the paper showed the emerging importance of a non-party preference in the countryside *and* weak support for the CPRF among different cohorts which are believed to be primary supporters of the CPRF, such as the elderly. Support for the CPRF declines among women aged 60 and above. It is notable that rural women of pension age constitute over 15 percent of the entire rural population, and previous research showed that older and rural voters have higher turnout rates than do younger and urban voters. This trend shows that the Communist Party is vulnerable to state policies, such as paying back pensions or raising pension levels (as Putin has done), leading to the perception among elderly voters that the Communist Party may not be able to improve living standards significantly over their present levels.

These three trends suggest that while the CPRF was able to rebuild its political strength on the back of the rural voter during the 1990s, it is not clear that the rural vote will sustain the party in future elections.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, election data suggest that the strength and influence of the CPRF peaked in the mid-1990s and declined thereafter, both in the Duma and throughout society. If the analysis about the

characteristics of the rural voter is correct, it is reasonable to conclude that the electoral strength of the CPRF may continue to decline in the future.

The importance of an erosion in electoral support for the primary opposition party to the Kremlin's power is enormous. Such an occurrence would mean even more influence for the Kremlin and less for parties, especially those that attempt to remain somewhat independent of the Kremlin. In a system with unbalanced political power, the weaker the opposition, the more endangered is the democratic process. Ironically, Russia needs a strong Communist Party to ensure a vibrant party system.

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> However, only a handful of parties ran candidates in a majority of Russia's 89 regions; only four parties contested all three elections; and only three surpassed the five percent threshold in each election (Remington, 2001: 192).

<sup>2</sup> Certain personal characteristics have been documented as the backbone of Communist's political strength: older individuals, those with less education, those with lower incomes, and those who live in rural localities (Wyman, 1996: 281; Hough, Davidheiser, and Lehmann, 1997; and Brudny, 2001: 166).

<sup>3</sup> This model was based upon party cleavages in Europe in the 19th and 20th centuries. The model envisions four cleavages among parties: center/periphery, religious/secular, urban/rural, and capital/labor. For a discussion of the Lipset/Rokkan model, as well as party cleavages in post-communist states, see Kitschelt, 1995.

<sup>4</sup> Interviews were conducted person to person by a research team from the Institute for Socio-Economic Studies of the Population (Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow).

<sup>5</sup> The Congress of Peoples Deputies (CPD) was elected directly, and in turn elected a smaller, standing body comprised of 542 representatives also called the Supreme Soviet. The new Supreme Soviet convened about nine months a year and was the real legislative body, whereas the (CPD) met only two to three times a year.

<sup>6</sup> The elections were not multi-party, just competitive, and of the 2,250 seats, 750 were "reserved" for representatives of "public organizations" which were of course controlled by the Communist Party, and 100 seats were allocated specifically to the party (White, Rose, and McAllister, 1997: chap. 2).

<sup>7</sup> That pattern was first evident in the 1989 national election, in which the Communist Party did better in smaller cities and in the countryside (Hough, 1997: 168-69).

<sup>8</sup> The technical name was Communist Party of the RSFSR. This organization is synonymous with the RCP, the latter being a shortened name. Prior to 1990, the CPSU served as the representative organization for communists in the Russian Republic. That is to say, a separate subunit of the CPSU in the Russian Federation was not permitted prior to this time, although the other Union republics had separate party organizations. While the RCP was not particularly effective during its short existence, it would serve as the foundation from which the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF) would emerge in early 1993 under the leadership of Gennady Zyuganov.

<sup>9</sup> In the mid-1990s, party membership was estimated at about 500,000 (March, 2002: 79), grouped into about 27,000 primary party organizations throughout Russia's 89 regions (March, 2001: 268).

<sup>10</sup> One day after the October crisis ended, a list of 28 political organizations was composed, divided into three categories. The first category were those organizations which had been the most active and had participated in the October crisis as organizations. They were banned. The second category of organizations were those whose members had participated as individuals. This category included eight organizations, one of which was the CPRR. These organizations were also banned, but the ban was quickly lifted (Urban and Solovei, 1997: 91). However, the opposition's media publications were also suspended, which meant that in the period prior to new elections, opposition forces were handicapped in their ability to mobilize support and reach out to their potential electorate.

<sup>11</sup> For example, on a per capita basis, an unemployed person has 72 percent of the mean monetary monthly income in the sample.

<sup>12</sup> Both types of respondents had similar frequencies of land plot decreases since 1991: five percent.

<sup>13</sup> All correlations were statistically significant below the .001 level of confidence using a two-tailed significance test.

<sup>14</sup> Pension age for women is 55 and 50 for men in Russia. Retirement is not mandatory at these ages.

<sup>15</sup> This finding is supported by the question in the survey which asks "which party best represents your interests?" Female responses about the Communist Party increased for each age bracket through age 59. For 60 and above, it declined. See Wegren, O'Brien, and Patskiorkovski, 2002: 55.

<sup>16</sup> In addition, the rural vote is in question because of political infighting between the Agrarian Party of Russia, another conservative party, and the CPRF; and because of divisions within the CPRF over rural policy. See Wegren, 2002: 471-73.

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