

Inside the Campaign of Russia's Least Popular Presidential Candidate

Ahead of Sunday's presidential election, Maxim Suraikin's team is already resigned to defeat

By [Evan Gershkovich](#)

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Maxim Suraikin visiting the tax inspection service in Moscow. **Alexander Shcherbak / TASS**

Across the street from one of Moscow's most prestigious financial universities is the campaign office of Maxim Suraikin, a presidential candidate who has pledged to eradicate capitalism from Russia and return it to its communist past.

His promise, however, may have to be put on hold.

On Wednesday afternoon, just three days out from the country's presidential elections, Suraikin's team was already resigned to defeat.

“The current administration’s resources will win on Sunday,” said Ruslan Khugaev, the Deputy Chairman of Suraikin’s party, the Communists of Russia — not to be confused with the Communist Party. “All the government’s resources are aimed at getting Vladimir Putin re-elected.”

The resignation is clear-eyed given the latest polls. According to the state-run VTsIOM pollster, the Communists of Russia candidate is [trailing](#) in last place with less than 1 percent of the vote. Leading all eight candidates on the ballot is Putin with 69 percent. Barring a monumental surprise, Suraikin will not be Russia’s next president.

Around a long conference table under the watchful portraits of Lenin, Stalin and Marx, Khugaev spoke, instead, of the seeds their 2018 campaign had planted for the future.

“Moscow wasn’t built in a day,” he said. “What Suraikin has said on the campaign trail and in debates will live on in people’s minds.”

Ahead of the vote, Suraikin, 39, has traversed the country promising to turn back the clock to December 1991, when the Soviet Union crumbled. He even took his campaign to former Soviet countries, Belarus and Ukraine.

“It will be an updated, optimized version of the Soviet Union, but the system will be essentially the same,” Khugaev said, without offering specifics.

Suraikin, however, is not the only communist candidate on this year’s ballot promising a return to the Soviet past. Also in the race is Pavel Grudinin, a millionaire farm boss in second place with 7 percent of the vote. “He is not even a real communist,” Khugaev protested. “He is an oligarch.”

For Roman Yatsenko, 27, the Communist Party’s millionaire candidate was a sign it had become obsolete. “Its communist spirit has been corrupted,” he said.

During a tour of the offices, Yatsenko said his party was just starting and that this year’s campaign would lead to victories down the road. “Our goal is to attract their members to us and to become the country’s leading communist party,” Yatsenko said.

Born in 2012, the new communist party first participated in major elections in 2016. It won 2.3 percent of the vote in Duma elections, but not enough to secure even a single seat. The Communist Party, on the other hand, won 42, along with 13.59 percent of the vote.

Suraikin’s presidential campaign this year has been a boon to the Kremlin, says political analyst Dmitry Oreshkin, by splitting the Soviet nostalgia vote.

“Suraikin, Grudinin and even Putin all speak fondly of the lost Soviet Union and attract that nostalgia — which is high in our society right now,” Oreshkin added. “But of these three, Suraikin speaks to the most extremist factions.”

Even with the vote looming, the mood in the headquarters was hushed. In offices adorned with Soviet-era regalia, about a dozen staffers were busy phoning journalists or

plodding through administrative tasks. One was more interested in talking to an American reporter about life in the United States than answering a ringing phone.

The bulk of the work, Yatsenko explained, had already been done earlier this year when they collected 100,000 signatures for Suraijin to be registered. "That's when we were working weekends and barely sleeping," Yatsenko said.

Even though the staff in the Soviet-era building ranged from 19 to over 50, all spoke wistfully of a forgotten time. "I remember stories from my grandfather, grandmother, my parents," said Alexei Velesko, who was just five years old when the Soviet Union fell apart. "They only told me good things about their lives."

His grandfather, Velesko recounted, was born in a village to parents who could barely read. But thanks to the communist system, he said, his grandfather eventually became a university professor. In today's Russia, he added, that biography is only possible "if the stars align."

An astrological occurrence may also be his candidate's best hope on Sunday.

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