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# Russia's Communists Are Split Over Support for Navalny

## The opposition activist's jailing is upsetting the balance between the party's pro-Kremlin leadership and radical grassroots membership.

By Felix Light

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The Communist Party's core demographic of older voters is nostalgic for the Soviet Union. **Mikhail Tereschenko / TASS**

When Nikolai Bondarenko stepped outside his apartment building in the Volga River city of Saratov on the morning of Feb. 8, the police were waiting for him.

The city council communist deputy and video blogger was arrested and fined 20,000 rubles ($270) for attending an unsanctioned protest in support of jailed opposition leader Alexei Navalny. Bondarenko, 35, whose YouTube channel has over a million subscribers, now faces a corruption probe that could see him stripped of office and barred from future elections.

"The only explanations I can see for Bondarenko's case are political," said Yevgeny Stupin, a

communist member of Moscow City Council who was arrested at the Jan. 31 protest in the Russian capital.

For Bondarenko's fellow party members the detention of a rising political star — who on Jan. 17 had turned up at Moscow's Vnukovo Airport to welcome Navalny home before announcing a run against State Duma speaker and Saratov native Vyacheslav Volodin in September's parliamentary elections — was an attempt to neutralize him personally.

However, according to longtime observers of the Russian Communist Party (KPRF), Bondarenko's legal problems also point to wider splits within the country's largest opposition party, as the crackdown on Navalny and his supporters upsets the uneasy balance between a traditionally pro-Kremlin leadership and an increasingly radical grassroots membership.

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When Navalny's team called for protests for his release in January, the reaction of Russia's leading parliamentary opposition party — which holds 42 out of 450 seats in the State Duma — was blistering.

"Not one communist will support these provocations," said Gennady Zyuganov, the party's leader since 1993, in a statement slamming Navalny as a foreign agent intent on inciting a "Color Revolution" to overthrow President Vladimir Putin on behalf of the U.S. government and multinational corporations.

It was a reaction characteristic of Zyuganov who, since narrowly losing the 1996 presidential election to Boris Yeltsin, has under Putin steered the Communist Party in a more loyalist direction, offering rhetorical opposition to the Kremlin while backing many of its political priorities and providing a safety valve for anti-government protest votes.

Among the party's lower ranks, however, Navalny's call to take to the streets found a much warmer reception. At protests in Moscow, Kazan and Khabarovsk, local communist lawmakers were among those detained by the security forces, while in the Urals city of Perm, the party branch formally split over the question of whether to back the protests.

Even senior party stalwarts came out against Zyuganov's line, with Moscow party boss Valery Rashkin, former Irkutsk governor Sergei Levchenko and State Duma deputy Alexei Kurinny all praising Navalny or his supporters.

For many sympathetic communists, the wave of dissent transcends the issue of Navalny himself.

"Navalny deserves our support as a political prisoner," said Maxim Shevchenko, a former TV presenter and communist deputy in the Vladimir regional parliament, who was detained at a protest in the city of Kazan.

"But these protests are about much more than just him. People have had enough of low pensions, poverty wages and authoritarianism."

For longtime observers of Russia's Communist Party, a sharp ideological and tactical divide between a Kremlin-oriented leadership and radical grassroots is nothing new.

"The Communist Party has always been something of a centaur," said Alexei Makarkin, vice president of the Center for Political Technologies, a Moscow political consultancy, referring to a half-human half-horse creature from Ancient Greek mythology.

"It's a party in two halves, one loyalist and conservative, one radical and oppositionist."

Increasingly, say observers, the communists are riven by ideological splits as the party's core demographic of older voters nostalgic for the Soviet Union coexists uneasily with younger cadres committed to radical leftism and attracted to the KPRF less by Marxism-Leninism than by its status as Russia's largest legal left-wing party.

"The younger generation of communists is very akin to the modern European left," said Alexander Kynev, a political scientist formerly at Moscow's Higher School of Economics.

"The Soviet-era rhetoric and ideology is meaningless for them."

With Navalny and his movement having adopted increasingly left-wing positions on the economy in recent years, much of the communists' grassroots membership has found a lot to like in the opposition leader's political message.

"For many younger cadres, their affinity with Navalny is entirely organic," said Kynev. "He's a left populist, and so are they."

For Moscow City Council Communist Yevgeny Stupin — who is facing party disciplinary proceedings for attempting to visit Navalny in jail — the wave of protests has exposed a rift between himself and the KPRF hierarchy.

"My political differences with Gennady Andreyevich [Zyuganov] are substantial," he said.

"Of course I sympathize with Navalny as a political prisoner who was poisoned by the authorities. I am a democratic socialist."

### Duma elections

With September polls for Russia's State Duma fast approaching, the Communist Party's ideological splits are reflected in disputes over electoral tactics.

In a recent blog post for the Ekho Moskvy radio station, political analyst Ilya Graschenkov described a split between a conservative "Stalinist" faction content with retaining the communists' core vote of between 10% and 15% and a "Leninist" grouping — comprised predominantly of regional officials — willing to embrace more radical tactics to attract opposition-minded voters to the KPRF coalition.

This increasingly confrontational mood is already making itself felt within the party. With the communists' traditional Red Army Day rally on Feb. 23 banned by Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyanin on coronavirus grounds, local party chief Valery Rashkin announced that the demonstration will go ahead regardless. Should it do so, attendees could be subject to the

same treatment meted out to Navalny supporters at unsanctioned rallies in recent weeks.

Above all, however, the KPRF is divided over cooperation with the Navalny movement's much-discussed Smart Voting scheme, under which opposition-minded voters are encouraged to rally around the strongest non ruling United Russia party candidate in each district.

With the communists the clear contenders against the ruling party in most of the Duma's 225 districts, their candidates are likely to receive the bulk of Smart Voting endorsements.

Though the party's central authorities have disavowed any cooperation with Navalny's organization, for local party chiefs — almost 40% of whom, according to a recent analysis by the Liberal Mission think tank, are recent appointees under the age of fifty — there are clear incentives to cooperate with regional Navalny headquarters to maximise the communist vote share.

For many KPRF officials, the example of the 2019 Moscow City Council election, when Smart Voting-backed Communists slashed United Russia's majority, leaping from five seats to thirteen, demonstrates the potential fruits of collaboration with Navalny supporters.

"It is entirely possible that there will be cooperation between the KPRF and the Navalny team," said Moscow City Council communist deputy Stupin, who unseated a pro-Kremlin legislator in 2019 after being endorsed by the Smart Voting scheme.

"Smart Voting was partly responsible for our victories in 2019. In some districts, it pushed us over the line."

### Kremlin pressure

However, experts believe that the Presidential Administration — the Kremlin department responsible for managing domestic politics — will exert pressure on the pliant communist leadership to prevent an alliance between Navalny supporters and KPRF radicals from seriously damaging United Russia's electoral prospects.

"The Kremlin will likely force the Communists to keep the most radical candidates out of the Duma elections. They might even have to expel some of them," said the Center for Political Technologies' Makarkin.

Even so, backstage pressure may not be enough to ensure that the KPRF's large and well-motivated grassroots organization continues to toe the political line.

As the direct heir to the rich revolutionary heritage of Vladimir Lenin and the Bolshevik party, for many rank and file communists radical opposition to the authorities is written deep into the party's Marxist ideological fabric.

"The Leninist line is to defend Navalny against persecution by the state," said Shevchenko, the Vladimir region deputy.

"Lenin was very clear on this before the revolution. Our duty as communists is always to attack the Tsar, not the liberals."

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