

Real Politics Is Being Forced on Russia's Communist Party

The Kremlin is abandoning attempts to cosplay democracy and relying more openly on the suppression of any critical voices, including the KPRF.

By [Mark Galeotti](#)

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Communist Party leader Gennady Zyuganov (C) in Red Square. **Sofiya Sandurskaya / Moskva News Agency**

Having long relied on it as a stalwart of the “systemic opposition,” the Kremlin now seems to be treating the Communist Party (KPRF) as if it were a real opposition party, after all. Might this be a self-fulfilling prophecy?

For the past two decades, the KPRF has been a fixture of the theatrical fake-politics that the Kremlin has used so effectively to generate a form of hybrid regime, both authoritarian and yet not wholly undemocratic. It was there to soak up the protest vote of the genuine leftists

and Soviet nostalgics alike, to shout and complain, wave red banners and march behind portraits of Stalin, yet never actually challenge the government when it mattered.

Indeed, like the other main systemic opposition party, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy's ultra-nationalist Liberal Democrats, in many ways its role was also to be so unattractive and unelectable that the Kremlin's "party of power," United Russia, might even look appealing in comparison.

Led since 1993 by Gennady Zyuganov — a man who criticised Mikhail Gorbachev's perestroika reforms in the 1980s as a young Communist apparatchik and called for the "re-Stalinization" of Russia in 2010 — since the 1996 presidential elections, the KPRF has never looked in danger of actually winning anything. From a high of 24% in 1999, its share of the vote in parliamentary elections has wavered between 11 and 19%.

A crackdown of its own

Now, though, as the Kremlin increasingly abandons attempts to cosplay democracy and instead relies more openly on the suppression of any critical voices, this campaign has moved from exclusively focusing on Team Navalny and other members of the "non-systemic opposition" and is also targeting the KPRF.

In the most striking move, Pavel Grudinin, the agribiz millionaire who ran against Putin in the 2018 presidential elections, and who was meant to be third on the Communist party ticket for the September elections after Zyuganov and cosmonaut Svetlana Savitskaya, has been [barred by the Central Election Commission](#). The grounds are that he is in breach of the rules against candidates owning property abroad, even though he notes that he unloaded his shares in Belize-based Bontro Ltd in 2017, and the firm itself closed in 2019.

A visibly furious Zyuganov [called this](#) a sign of the "fascistification" of the country, characterised by "forceful reprisals against the opposition, dirty raiding of people's enterprises, false pensions, cannibalistic reforms, wild extortions, innumerable taxes."

The KPRF has applied for permits to hold [protest rallies](#) on Aug. 14-19 and Sept. 1, and there are warnings from senior party figures that even if they are not authorised the Communists will [still take to the streets](#).

Has Zyuganov, after more than two decades of servility, finally grown a backbone? Possibly; after all, the implicit deal was that he would ensure the KPRF played its role in the Kremlin's *dramaturgiya* in return for respect and status. The new team of Presidential Administration political technologists under Sergei Kirienko look as if they have decided to reshuffle the political deck and feel no need to pander to the aging Communist.

A more cynical take is that, seeing United Russia floundering — it is currently struggling to get much more than 25% in opinion polls, even as the Kremlin hopes to engineer a supermajority in the Duma — Zyuganov is seeking to raise his price. The more the KPRF is a headache for the Presidential Administration, the more concessions he can extract. At present, it is polling around 10% — enough in theory to deny that supermajority, in fair counts, at least.

If that is his calculation, then he may have made a mistake. [These are not politics as usual](#), and today's Kremlin looks more inclined to bear down on inconveniences rather than buy them off. Zyuganov probably has little choice, though.

On the one hand, the KPRF faces marginalization. On the other, Zyuganov is being [pressed by a younger generation of Communists](#) who actually believe that the business of an opposition is to oppose. Some of these retain links to Navalny's people and hope to benefit from his Smart Voting campaign to encourage tactical voting against United Russia.

For example, Saratov region KPRF deputy and popular YouTuber Nikolai Bondarenko, who has also been [barred from running](#) on allegations of distributing extremist propaganda, had been detained attending pro-Navalny rallies in February.

Back to the opposition?

The once-docile KPRF is finding itself in the unfamiliar position of being treated as an opposition party by the Kremlin. This may give it an opportunity to [redefine itself as a genuine and serious political force](#), especially if it can move beyond its familiar talking points of higher pensions and reverence for the war veterans.

Indeed, they could position themselves as the only real opposition party. They have the last truly independent political machine in Russia. Their years championing the triumph of the Great Patriotic War makes them relatively immune to the usual charges of being Western stooges.

Indeed, two can play at that game: [Another of Zyuganov's broadsides](#) after the exclusion of Grudinin presented the struggle as between "patriotic left-wing forces" and "the liberal-oligarchic pack that seized our country in 1991 [and which] is clinging to power with claws and teeth."

That will take guts, though, because it will also expose the KPRF to the full political firepower of the Kremlin. It is hard to see Zyuganov and the other magnates of the party, accustomed to a comfortable life of fake opposition, embracing this. But [the discontent that keeps people joining and voting for the Communists](#) will end up going somewhere, and the more they feel the constitutional system offers them nothing, the more they will be tempted to alternative means and politics. It may be that the Kremlin will one day miss the KPRF if it succeeds in breaking it.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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