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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Vladimir Zhirinovsky, Far-Right Court Jester of Russian Politics, Dies at 75

The founder of the Liberal Democratic Party carved out a unique space for himself within the system through his outrageous personality and often vulgar outbursts.

By Felix Light

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Valery Sharifulin / TASS

Vladimir Zhirinovsky, a notorious political showman and demagogue who founded Russia's far-right Liberal Democratic Party (LDPR) and led it for over 30 years, has died in a Moscow hospital, the lower-house State Duma confirmed Wednesday. He was 75.

According to Russian media reports, Zhirinovsky, who had been in declining health for some time, had been gravely ill for weeks after contracting Covid-19, despite claiming to have received eight vaccine doses.

In one of his last public appearances in late December, Zhirinovsky appeared to predict Russia's invasion of Ukraine with startling accuracy, saying "At 4 a.m. on Feb. 22 you'll feel our new policy."

"I'd like for 2022 to be a peaceful year, but I love the truth. I've been telling the truth for 70 years. This will not be a peaceful year. This will be a year when Russia once again becomes a great country," he said while addressing the Duma.

Embed:

> Who needs CIA intel when you have Zhirik? (Speaking on 27 Dec)
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> "At 4am on 22 Feb you'll feel [our new policy]. I'd like 2022 to be peaceful. But I love the truth, for 70 years I've said the truth. It won't be peaceful. It will be a year when Russia once again becomes great." pic.twitter.com/MUZtuZI1is
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> — Francis Scarr (@francska1) February 20, 2022

As leader since 1989 of the LDPR, which despite its name espoused a rambunctious ultranationalist populism, Zhirinovsky carved out a unique space for himself within the Russian political system through his outrageous personality and his often vulgar outbursts.

In recent years, he was sometimes dubbed "Russia's Trump," and his political style compared to the former U.S. President.

His provocative policy positions proposing the military conquest of Central Asia and the Middle East, bombarding the Baltic states with toxic waste and dropping nuclear bombs on Japan and Britain, were matched by his outrageous personal conduct, including engaging in fistfights in the Russian parliament, physically attacking political opponents and on one occasion instructing aides to rape a pregant journalist.

Though Zhirinovsky — whose party centered around its leader's personal charisma rather than any coherent program — managed to remain relevant throughout three decades of turbulent Russian politics, he did so at the cost of his independence.

As Russia became more authoritarian, he became symbolic of the country's co-opted, "systemic" opposition, providing a semblance of political competition, while supporting President Vladimir Putin on key issues. Some theorized that some of Zhirinovsky's outlandish proposals were trial balloons planted by a Kremlin looking to test the waters before adopting them itself.

Vyacheslav Volodin, speaker of the State Duma, called Zhirinovsky "a bright, talented politician" and "a man who deeply understood how the world works and foresaw many things" in a Telegram post confirming his death.

Born Vladimir Wolfovich Edelshtein to a Jewish father and Russian mother in 1946, in Almaty,

then the capital of Soviet Kazakhstan, Zhirinovsky would later write of how his early life informed his later politics.

Growing up in the bleak postwar years left Zhirinovsky, later a fervent anti-Communist, disillusioned with the Soviet system from a young age. In his autobiography, he said his mother's dying words were: "Volodya, there is nothing to remember, not one joyful day."

Abandoned at an early age by his Jewish father, and growing up against the backdrop of interethnic rivalry in Soviet Central Asia, Zhirinovsky — who took his mother's second husband's name — adopted a robust Russian ethnic nationalism, experimenting at times with both antisemitism and resentment of Russia's minority nationalities.

Moving to Moscow, Zhirinovsky enrolled at Moscow State University's faculty of oriental studies, graduating with a degree in Turkish language and literature, before taking a clerical position in a publishing house.

The party he co-founded in 1989, during the dying days of Mikhail Gorbachev's *perestroika*, was the Soviet Union's first legal opposition party. That fact led to longstanding rumors, always denied by Zhirinovsky, that he had links to the Soviet Union's feared secret police, the KGB.

Zhirinovsky's first breakthrough came in 1991, where in the Russian Soviet Republic's first presidential election, the then-unknown Zhirinovsky ran on a populist ticket railing against separatists in the national republics, and the Communist Party apparatus. He won almost 8% of the vote.

His political zenith came two years later, when the LDPR topped the polls in the 1993 State Duma election, with 23%, and over 12 million votes, against the backdrop of the painful post-Soviet transition. One of the first signs that then-president Boris Yeltsin's reform program was running into trouble, the success of the clownish Zhirinovsky — who at the time mused publicly about establishing a dictatorship and compared himself to Hitler — horrified Russia's liberal intelligentsia.

"Russia, you've lost your mind! Come to your senses!" said prominent literary critic Yury Karyakin in an emotional speech on election night 1993, as the scale of the LDPR's triumph became apparent.

Though much of the world began to gird itself for President Zhirinovsky, the far-right's leader 1993 success proved short lived. His boorish conduct and the party's rumored links to organized crime saw the LDPR eclipsed by a revived Communist Party, which proved far more effective at harnessing the anger of the Soviet collapse's losers. In the 1996 presidential election, Zhirinovsky came fifth.

As Yeltsin's chaotic semi-democracy gave way to Putin's authoritarianism, Zhirinovsky changed with the times.

The LDPR became one of the pillars of Russia's tame, parliamentary opposition, all but accepting a supporting role in a system in which neither Putin, nor his United Russia party could ever really lose.

A regular guest on the bellicose political talk shows that came to dominate Russian state TV after the annexation of Crimea and the break with the West in 2014, Zhirinovsky maintained his role as the court jester of Russian politics. At a 2020 meeting of Russia's State Council, a meandering, 10-minute tirade on the need to purge the Russian language of foreign words saw Putin, along with many other dignitaries, reduced to tears of laughter.

Ever the consummate survivor, even Zhirinovsky could not escape the Kremlin's tightening grip on Russia's political system. The 2020 arrest for murder of the Khabarovsk governor Sergei Furgal, an LDPR member, was seen as a warning shot fired against the party. The LDPR's refusal to back Furgal embittered many of its voters, and exposed the hollowness of its opposition. At the State Duma elections the year after, the LDPR turned in one of its weakest ever performances.

Outside of elective politics, Zhirinovsky found time to write several dozen books, ranging from Last Dash to the South, in which he advocated for Russian troops to subdue the entire Asian landmass as far as the Persian Gulf, "for the good of all humanity," and The ABC of Sex, dedicated to Zhirinovsky's thoughts on "issues of love and sex."

In 2009, for the 20th anniversary of his party's founding, he released an album, on which he performed a number of popular Russian songs, alongside some of his own compositions. He is survived by three adult children.

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