

Vladimir Zhirinovsky and the LDPR

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Abstract

Zhirinovsky's so-called Liberal-Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR) may, in the upcoming elections, reconstitute itself as Russia's "third force". The party has a well-established profile as being outspokenly nationalist, and could benefit from the rising nationalist sentiment in Russia. Although the LDPR has been part of official politics for almost 20 years now, it has had continuous links to Russia's lunatic fringe, including some openly neo-Nazi activists. While the party is outspokenly anti-Western and places considerable concern on what Zhirinovsky calls "the South", its main focus today is on "the Russian Question."

An Expected Winner

In the December 2011 State Duma elections, three to four parties will pass the 7-per-cent electoral threshold, according to polls by the Levada Center and VTsIOM. The anticipated winners are: United Russia (leader: Prime Minister Vladimir Putin), the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (Gennady Zyuganov), the Liberal-Democratic Party of Russia (Vladimir Zhirinovsky), and Just Russia (Nikolay Levichev).

Should the election results correspond to these opinion polls, the LDPR could receive more than 10 per cent of the votes. This may return the party to its previous status of being Russia's "third force"—a political image that Zhirinovsky had, with some success, already promoted in the 1990s. The flamboyant party leader recently claimed that the LDPR would gain 25 or even 30 per cent of the vote in December, on the condition that the elections are free and fair. Whether the upcoming parliamentary elections in Russia will meet democratic standards is indeed unclear. Among others, the previous, 2007 State Duma elections were classified as unfair by the OSCE and the Council of Europe. Nevertheless, Zhirinovsky's optimistic assessment of his party's electoral potential is unrealistic, and repeats his pre-electoral boasting during earlier campaigns for the State Duma.

The LDPR's base of electoral support is located in small- and medium-sized towns throughout Russia's provinces, not least, in the Far East. It consists above all of young and middle-aged men with secondary education and lower to lower-middle class background. The party's ideological "winning formula" has been a mixture of extremely populist rhetoric, increasingly open criticism of the "party of power" (i.e. Putin's United Russia), rabid anti-Americanism, inflammatory hate-speech, anti-Southern racism, and Russian nationalism.

An Unusual Party

Many see the LDPR as merely a "party of clowns", in view of the eccentric behaviour of Zhirinovsky. The "clowns" label also refers to the LDPR's ambivalent oppo-

sitional stance vis-a-vis the "party of power" and the Russian president—be it Boris Yeltsin, Vladimir Putin or Dmitry Medvedev. The party appears often as an instrument of the Kremlin, rather than as an independent political phenomenon. No matter how condemnatory and fervent party speeches have been, rarely has the LDPR opposed major legislative proposals drafted by the "party of power."

Zhirinovsky's party is also an unusual organization in as far as its name is misleading, the leadership composition is unstable, and true membership numbers remain unclear. The curious name "Liberal-Democratic" is a remnant of the organization's initial role as a Kremlin-inspired "political technology" project during the early 1990s. The then pseudo-party had apparently been set up by the Soviet authorities to discredit and confuse the emerging really liberal-democratic movements of the USSR.

Today, only a few of the party's initial leaders and organizers of the 1990s—except for Zhirinovsky and his family members—are still to be found in the LDPR's leadership. Rather, the organization seems to go through regular purges during which most of the top posts are refilled with formerly unknown figures. Seemingly, the upper positions on the party's parliamentary elections list are often simply sold to the highest bidder.

The number of members belonging to the LDPR provided by the Russian Ministry of Justice's website for 2010 was 185,573. That may, however, include many "dead souls," i.e. names of people who are only de jure, but not in fact members of the party. The LDPR, already in the 1990s, regularly overstated its membership numbers, and may have collected signatures from politically inactive persons in order to secure registration as a party, in compliance with the restrictive rules for parties' participation in elections introduced during Putin's presidency.

Party Platform

Zhirinovsky claims that the LDPR would implement some political and economic changes immediately if it

were to take power. The party would limit the tenure of governors, bureaucrats and party leaders to ten years or two terms. The national republics would be abolished. Instead, Zhirinovsky proposes to create a unitary state that consists of 10–12 large guberniyas. Russia would seek closer economic and political integration within the “Slavic world,” in particular, with Ukraine and Belarus, and integrate all former Soviet republics on the basis of a renewed economic and political union. The LDPR proposes the expulsion of the USA from the United Nations Security Council and to establish, within the UN, an international commission providing control over the emission of US Dollars by the Federal Reserve System.

Nevertheless, the LDPR’s anti-Westernism is only of secondary importance. At least, opposition to the West is not at the core of Zhirinovsky’s own world-view which is, instead, focused on “the South,” and “the Southerners” (*iuzhane*)—the area of his expertise in Turkish studies. The LDPR leader sees the Russian nation as a part and parcel of the world’s northern hemisphere, rather than in principal opposition to the West. At times, he has even argued for a Russian–Western–Japanese alliance that would re-divide the world into designated spheres of influence.

The LDPR, to be sure, has been highly critical of NATO’s “aggressive move to the East,” and in particular, of the idea of post-Soviet countries joining the Alliance. Moreover, the party has frequently undertaken provocative actions toward the West. For instance, in the 2007 State Duma elections, the LDPR offered the second place in its electoral list to Andrey Lugovoy, a former KGB officer suspected by the British police of having murdered Aleksandr Litvinenko, another former KGB and FSB officer who had received political asylum in the UK in the 1990s. Zhirinovsky commented on the deadly polonium-210 poisoning of Litvinenko by noting that “any traitor must be eliminated using any methods.” The Russian authorities refused to extradite Lugovoy. Today the British police has even less hope of interrogating him, as he is now a member of the State Duma, and enjoys immunity from prosecution. For the upcoming elections, Lugovoy has been put on the top position of the LDPR’s Irkutsk regional elections list. While this placement is a demotion, as the businessman is no longer included in the party’s federal list, it still means an almost secure seat in the State Duma, and should guarantee Lugovoy’s continued immunity.

In spite of these and other similar actions, the LDPR is less fundamentally anti-Western than other Russian ultra-nationalist groups, and supports the idea of Russia’s rapprochement with the EU. In his most important 1993 political pamphlet *The Last Dash to the South*, Zhirinovsky instead identified “the South” as Russia’s

major problem. In order to prevent instability spreading from Southern countries to Russia, he not only proposed to restore the Russian/Soviet empire. He also explicitly argued for an inclusion, in the new Russian state, of Turkey, Afghanistan and Iran. This would, such was Zhirinovsky’s argument in the 1990s, once and for all solve the issue of Russia’s centuries-old subversion by the “the Southerners,” and lastingly “soothe” the Euro-Asian continent.

The Russian Question

While there have been indications that Zhirinovsky is still obsessed with “the South,” he has since reformulated his public political agenda, in more traditionally nationalist terms. The party’s slogans for the upcoming elections are “LDPR—For the Russians!” and “Tougher Look, Russians!” The latter is also the title of a short pamphlet published in August 2011 and debunking a presumed Western myth that Russians are “idlers and dipsomaniacs who obey various rascals without a grumble or incite senseless and bloody riots.” Quite the opposite, the pamphlet argues, the Russians “have created a great state, great science and culture.” In general, the so-called “Russian question” has become the main focus of the LDPR’s electoral campaign. Although the party states that it defends the rights and interests of all the peoples of the Federation, the Russians are elevated as the state-forming nation. The LDPR’s main task is “the defence of the Russian people”, because “if they get up off their knees, it will be good for everyone, as the Russians will help all other peoples in the country, because the Russians are the kindest nation.”

In spite of Zhirinovsky’s half-Jewish family background, the LDPR is also aiming to attract anti-Semitic voters. Following the terrorist attacks in Norway in July 2011, an article published by the analytical department of the party on its web-site unequivocally suggested that the confessed terrorist Anders Breivik “belonged to a new creed of nationalists cultivated in the laboratories of Mossad”—Israel’s national intelligence agency. The motivation behind Breivik’s actions, according to the LDPR, were the allegedly pro-Palestinian attitudes of those whom he had killed.

Recently, the LDPR’s years of Russocentric propaganda have reduced its years-long isolation within the Russian ultra-nationalist spectrum, and led to a rapprochement with the extraparliamentary extreme right. In May 2011, for instance, the party organised a round-table that addressed “the Russian question” and was held in the LDPR’s office in the State Duma. A number of well-known leaders of Russian ultra-nationalist groups were invited to this round-table. Among them were: Georgiy Borovikov of the anti-Semitic “Pamyat”

group; Dmitry Demushkin of the now banned Slavic Union—National Socialist Movement; Aleksandr Below (alias Potkin), the founder and former leader of the also banned Movement against Illegal Immigration (DPNI); and Aleksandr Sevastyanov, co-founder and former leader of the National Sovereignty Party of Russia.

The list for the upcoming parliamentary elections includes, among many unknown personalities, two candidates highly respected, in the Russian ultra-nationalist scene: Valery Budanov, son of the recently murdered, notorious Colonel Yury Budanov, and Maksim Korotkov-Guliaev, Evgeniya Khasis's former defense lawyer. In May 2011, Khasis was convicted to 18 years in prison, in connection with assisting her husband, Nikita Tikhonov, in their 2009 murder of the human rights lawyer Stanislav Markelov and journalist Anastasia Baburova.

The LDPR's interactions with the lunatic fringe has, at times, even included direct cooperation with openly neo-fascist individuals. For example, since 2004, Dmitry Rumyantsev, founder of the National Socialist Society, has been an assistant of Sergey Ivanov, an LDPR member of the State Duma. Rumyantsev is a convicted

racist. In 2008, he was given a one-year suspended sentence for hate speech while six members of his former organisation were recently sentenced to life imprisonment for killing 28 “non-Russian” people.

For almost twenty years now, the LDPR has kept its status as the strongest ultra-nationalist party in Russia. It is thus well-positioned to garner the support of nationalist voters. In spite of the many oddities and contradictions in the LDPR's political history and public behaviour, Zhirinovsky and Co. may—in view of the recent growth of nationalist sentiment in Russia—turn out to be among the winners of the next parliamentary elections. The party may be able to avoid suffering heavily from possible manipulations of the election results in as far as current Central Electoral Commission Chairman Vladimir Churov had once entered the State Duma on the LDPR ticket (without being a member of the party). Zhirinovsky's years in Russian high politics has defied the expectations of many observers who assumed that his rise would be temporary. The ultra-nationalist firebrand may still be good for new surprises.

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