7 Zyuganov’s Communists and Nationalism, 1993–95

How did Zhirinovsky’s aggressively nationalist LDPR and Zyuganov’s revived communists, the KPRF, use the opportunity afforded by their electoral gains? Did they succeed in establishing their authority and strengthening their power base in Russian society and institutions? Those who saw the 1993 election results purely as a protest vote were dismayed when the parties were not tamed by their victories. The LDPR retained a significant constituency in the December 1995 Duma elections, while Zyuganov’s communists, at least in their official rhetoric, became increasingly committed to a form of socialist nationalism, which seemed to preclude the possibility of their becoming a social-democratic party.

A) THE LDPR

The 1993 elections suggested that the re-emerging KPRF had most to fear not from the democrats, who were associated with Gaidar’s unpopular economic policies and with the collapse of the Soviet state, but from rivals on the nationalist wing of the political spectrum. The press devoted much alarmed attention to the tiny neo-fascist parties. The most threatening of these tendencies was represented by Zhirinovsky, who appeared to have demonstrated their popular appeal. However, his strength was more illusory than it seemed. Most analysts concluded that his support was unstable and that his parliamentary power was not an accurate reflection of his following in the country.¹ Even the real size of his party was disputed: it claimed 80,000–83,000 members in April 1993 but only 40,000 the following October, while elsewhere membership was estimated at 100,000.² Opinions about its strength in the regions differed, with some writers believing it to be numerous and well-organised, while others pointed to the absence of successful candidates in the constituencies as evidence of its weakness in the provinces.³ Similar confusion reigned about its finances: funding was thought to have come from foreign

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sympathisers (including Jean-Marie Le Pen and Erich Honecker) and the black market (the LDPR allegedly benefited from a Russian money-laundering operation in Holland). Zhirinovsky insisted that the party’s income derived from membership dues and voluntary contributions, but offered no proof of this. However, he appeared to have prosperous patrons: his close associates (his deputy, Alexander Vengerovsky, and his running-mate in 1991, Andrei Zavidiya) included some newly wealthy businessmen, who claimed to have funded him between 1991 and 1994. The LDPR was widely believed to have had KGB backing, which may have been the source of the party’s initial income. The impression given by the party’s finances and organisation was that the party was not so much a real political organisation, based on regional networks, as a proto-party, organised around a dynamic personality and useful to some business circles.

That the party was largely a one-man show was suggested both by Zhirinovsky’s attitude to it and by the divisions which beset it after 1993. Zhirinovsky was anxious to maintain his hegemony over the party, feeling that his colleagues might be emboldened to challenge him in the light of their electoral mandate. He not only ensured that he monopolised media attention (for example, by congratulating the amnestied parliamentary leaders on their release from prison, in February 1994) but, more significantly, he sought to institutionalise his power. At the LDPR’s fifth congress, on 2–3 April 1994, the party rules were changed to allow Zhirinovsky to be confirmed as leader until the year 2004. The party’s voting rights were restricted, with the congress electing only the leader (a function it had de facto abdicated for a decade) and the governing councils of the party being appointed henceforth by Zhirinovsky alone. Congresses were no longer to be held annually but every three years. Zhirinovsky also struggled unsuccessfully to strengthen party discipline in the Duma, where the LDPR constituted the second largest bloc of party deputies.

Zhirinovsky’s tactics proved divisive, especially within the parliamentary party. Only 35 deputies in the 64-strong LDPR fraction were members of the party; others had simply stood for election on the party ticket, but were resistant to following Zhirinovsky’s lead at all times. By April 1994, five deputies had left the fraction, criticising the leader’s policies and behaviour and many more soon followed them. The party’s performance in the Duma was ineffective, partly due to poor discipline. Alexei Zavidiya believed that up to half the members of the fraction were closer to the communists and a quarter more to