

the growth of monetary incomes for a part of the Russian population, conceals a negative potential that is accumulating year after year, with regard to the market reforms which have been carried out, because the wealth of small groups is based on the impoverishment of large masses of people, the acute criminalization of the economy, and, ultimately, the repulsion of honest Russian and foreign producers and investors from Russia. For Russia and its partners, the prospects in this connection can be highly pessimistic, which makes the business and intellectual elite strain every nerve in order to shift the situation in favor of honest business.

Next Russian President may be a communist

by Yuri Skubko

Yuri Skubko, Doctor of Economics, was a founding member of the "Memorial" human rights society in the Soviet Union and of the Democratic Union party—the first anti-communist opposition party during Gorbachov's perestroika.

The December 17, 1995 election in Russia to the State Duma, a rather impotent parliament under the Yeltsin 1993 constitution, was seen by many as important not in itself, but rather as a test of public opinion in the run-up to the Presidential election in June.

According to the results of this test, there is a high probability that the next President of Russia may be a communist. Official results gave the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF), headed by Gennadi Zyuganov, 22% of the overall vote, with the more extremist "Communists Labor Russia for the U.S.S.R." of Viktor Anpilov as well as the pro-Communist Agrarian Party and the Women of Russia gaining around 4% each (with other small groupings and individuals, the "red" deputies comprise almost half of the 450-member Duma, not to mention certain groups of moderate nationalist orientation supporting Zyuganov).

The real result for the CPRF may have been even higher, because the Central Election Committee, headed by Yeltsin loyalist Nikolai Ryabov, made a suspicious nine-hour delay in reporting further results, after the CPRF took an early lead on the morning of Dec. 18. In those early returns, the CPRF had about 26% of the vote, leaving all other parties far behind, including the pro-government Our Home Is Russia, which had little more than 5% before, but 10% after the strange pause.

Western observers preferred not to notice any irregularities and vote-rigging, which could not conceal the message of the electorate, anyway.

Would it be so bad for Russia and the world if this country had a leader like Zyuganov as its President? I do not think so, taking into account, albeit with some apprehension, his declarations of support for political pluralism and a mixed economy with a greater role for the State to save the country from deindustrialization, even from disintegration, and to restore some basic social guarantees for the impoverished people.

Anyway, it would be much less of a mess than keeping on top the former CPSU Politburo member Yeltsin. The worst enemies of democracy and the market economy could not have done more to discredit these values in the eyes of Russian people, than the rampantly corrupt and incompetent regime that inherited communist rule here.

Phony 'reform'

Yeltsin, like Gorbachov, loves to pose before the West as a great reformer. Both were anything but reformers, never introducing a single significant reform and succeeding only in the destruction of the country (Russia was abruptly reduced to its pre-mid-17th-century borders), its economy, its people's welfare.

Instead of reforms, the country has undergone, as the well-known Russian film producer Stanislav Govorukhin put it, a "great criminal revolution" in which the huge State property of the former U.S.S.R. was divided between the former CPSU-KGB *nomenklatura* and the criminal mafia.

Speculation, racketeering, practically total corruption of all power structures and an enormous gap between the few criminally rich and the sub-poverty-line majority, are the main features of Russia's "market reform." Industrial production and the living standards of the bulk of the population have collapsed, the latter best demonstrated by the drastic reduction of the duration of life. During 10 years of "kastroika," the life expectancy for men dropped from 69 to 58 years.

One could also mention the bloody Chechen adventure of the Yeltsin regime. It is not only exacting a heavy price of its own (the economic price alone is billions of dollars, while the government "cures" inflation and budget deficits by non-payment of salaries), but also rapidly destroying the only positive aspect of life in post-communist Russia—the relative individual liberty.

A country at war can hardly avoid becoming a police state. A popular expression today is "Russia is pregnant with dictatorship." So what is next?

According to the latest opinion polls, Yeltsin has the support of less than 5% of the Russian electorate—that leaves him practically with no chance of being reelected in a normal democratic way.

An escalation of the conflict in the Caucasus and the spread of Chechen terrorism to Russia itself could give Yeltsin a good pretext for introducing a state of emergency and postponing the Presidential elections indefinitely.

Options are running out

But no emergency could help the current Russian leadership to manage the worsening situation in the country. So, with the introduction of military-type emergency rule, the probability of a real military coup by disenchanted generals would become much higher.

Another option would be to hold the elections with vote-rigging, whether mild or blatant. Either could bring about a social outburst. A blatant violation of people's right to choose, was already given a trial run in the Central Asian Republics of the former U.S.S.R., where a number of Presidents got "reelected" for another term through a process of referendum, substituting for normal elections.

A more democratic-looking trick is possible with the help of the "Zhirinovsky factor" (to use the vote-rigging mechanism to allow only Yeltsin and radical nationalist Zhirinovsky to get through to the second round of the Presidential elections). While it is difficult to confirm decisively what many people in Russia believe, that Zhirinovsky was introduced into politics as a KGB agent, all his records show

that he and his Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR), having gained a large number of seats in the Duma, capitalizing on the protest vote, have come to the rescue of the Yeltsin-Chernomyrdin administration during all critical political situations of the recent time.

Zhirinovsky's cannibalistic rhetoric is very useful for Yeltsin propagandists, who love to scare Western and local democratic public opinion by this really nonexistent dilemma: If Yeltsin, bad as he is, has to go, we will have instead a fascist regime of Zhirinovsky. But this "Trojan horse" of the Yeltsin regime is steadily losing popularity (this time, LDPR got 11% of the votes for party lists, half as much as in 1993, and it won only one seat through the single-mandate constituency elections) and only a gross falsification of election results could give Zhirinovsky, like Yeltsin himself, any real chance.

The devaluation of "democracy" and "capitalism" in the eyes of the population also give little chance to liberal democrats, even the most popular among the intelligentsia such as Grigori Yavlinsky, who is not tainted by cooperation with the "regime of thieves," as was Yegor Gaidar, but is still too pro-Western for the current Russian public mood.

But, if the Presidential elections in the summer proceed more or less in a proper way, there is little that can prevent a victory of the communist candidate, Gennadi Zyuganov.

There is a certain logic in the return to power of the former communist parties in post-communist countries. People are certainly unhappy with "wild capitalism" smashed upon them with the help of "shock therapy" and are quickly forgetting the worst sides of communist totalitarianism, reviving in their memories the best aspects of former life—welfare guarantees and the philosophy of social justice. On their part, the former communist parties were smart enough to learn some lessons of history and are now acting (Poland is the latest example) more like social-democratic parties in a pluralistic society.

What gives Russian communists an advantage, and not only practical but moral, over their eastern European colleagues, is that they have definitively rejected the ideology of atheism and made an important step toward rapprochement with the Russian Orthodox Church.

Also, Yavlinsky's Yabloko party, the only effectively surviving party of the democratic opposition in Russia, has recently made several important steps toward cooperation with the Zyuganov communists in the State Duma, such as helping CPRF member Gennadi Seleznyov to be elected as the speaker. The new potential partners, the CPRF-led left with more than 200 deputies and "Yabloko" with around 50 deputies, can control key nominations to parliamentary commissions and apparatus, and are capable of turning the current Russian Duma into a strong legal fighting force, safeguarding Presidential elections to be held on time and in a proper way.

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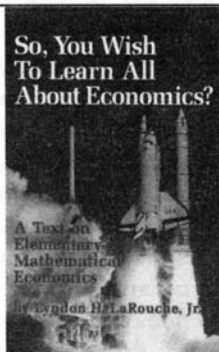
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Constitutional options provide an opportunity

On the other hand, the recent third congress of Yabloko revealed deep divisions between the roughly equal liberal and social-democratic wings of the party. While members of the latter, headed by Yavlinsky's deputy Vyacheslav Igrunov, are prepared for a "historic compromise" with Zyuganov's CPRF (not unconditional, of course), the liberals are scared by the prospect of cooperation with any communists, on any basis, in principle, preferring to seek partnership with such groups as the remnants of Gaidar's "Russia's Choice," which has been definitely rejected by the electorate. But the uniting factor that works, is the goal of saving the Presidential elections as such from any attempt by the bankrupt Yeltsin regime to postpone them, foil them, or forge their results. On that, Yabloko and CPRF are together.

According to the Constitution, the Duma cannot be dissolved by the President during its first post-election year, and it is highly improbable that the Yeltsin regime, with its social base reduced to almost nothing, would try again (as in 1993) to overrun parliament with tanks; or, putting it differently, the Russian military, if given such an order, is most likely to turn them in the opposite direction.

A key question in the run-up to the June elections is whether Zyuganov will be able to demonstrate that his party is really prepared to cooperate with other political forces in a democratic way and adhere to the principles of the division of power. Two most obvious ways to do so is to support an amendment of the autocratic Yeltsin constitution (for this a two-thirds majority is needed, which is attainable) to give more real power to the Duma and to cooperate with "Yabloko," whose leading economists are known and trusted in the world as qualified proponents of a socially oriented market economy, in the drafting of economic reforms.

After 10 years of national catastrophe, Russia's only real choice is to mobilize all its remaining human potential to fight for survival as a nation, as a country, as a people. The change of power, necessary for survival, can be achieved through the ballot-box or through the gun.

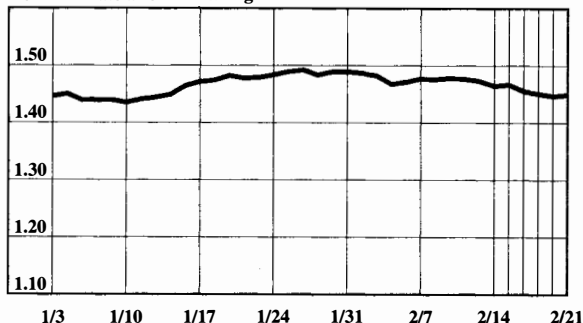
The only viable peaceful and legal way to start at last the process of putting Russia's house in order, seems to be the victory of an opposition candidate (most likely Gennadi Zyuganov) in the summer Presidential elections. Victory in a fair election accepted by all sides. And today only the Communist Party of the Russian Federation has the necessary muscle, the mass political support, and the organizational structures all over the country that provide an opportunity for peaceful change in all vital spheres of national life, in cooperation with small parties of democratic intelligentsia not associated with the current regime.

It should be kept in mind that the alternative is a transition to a military, terrorist dictatorship (whether by the current regime, incapable of retaining power by other means, or in the wake of a bloody revolution/coup) based ideologically on ultranationalism and chauvinism.

Currency Rates

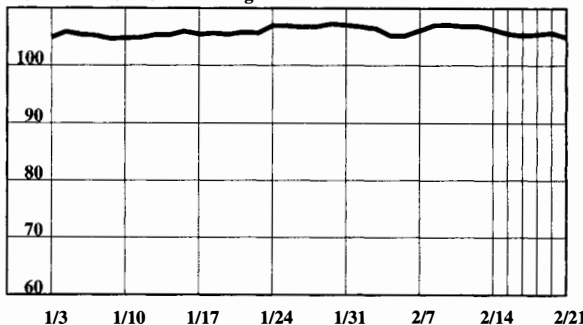
The dollar in deutschemarks

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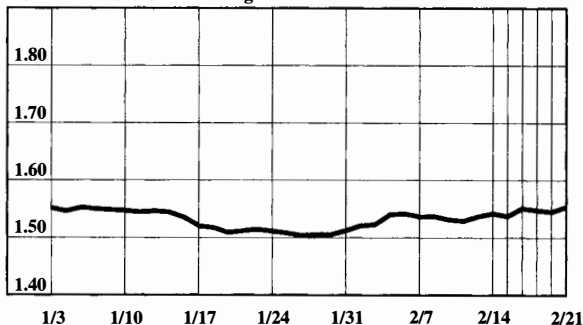
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