

The Passages of the Russian and East European Left

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Between the two poles of Blairite accommodation to neo-liberalism and nationalist populist accommodation to xenophobia lies a socialist left of many millions in the former Soviet Bloc in search of socialist advance. These people can be found in the parties from the Ukrainian left in the East to the Czech Communist Party and the German PDS in the West, from the Lithuanian left in the North to the Bulgarian and Albanian Socialist Parties in the south. Throughout the region, the left and the labour movements have now experienced almost a decade of what Michael Ellman has aptly called Katastroika. They have watched the impoverishment and humiliation of tens of millions of people suffering the degrading consequences of what the pitiless Western powers call Economic Reform, while in the former Soviet Union and parts of South Eastern Europe barbarism itself remains in sight.

In such conditions, brought about in the first place by the far from inevitable failure of the Soviet project to offer a sustainable and credible alternative civilisational model to the advanced capitalist countries, it is hardly to be expected that the left in Central and Eastern Europe could quickly turn forward to the task of offering a new perspective of advance towards social progress and emancipation. What is at issue is, rather, its longer-term potential, which we can only begin to assess through a sober analysis of its most recent trajectory. This is what this article seeks to provide, concentrating on three main themes.

First, we must track the many differing political and ideological trends and configurations of trends in the different Communist Party leaderships in the 1980s for these profoundly shaped the subsequent course of left politics during and after the collapse of the Soviet Bloc. The initiative for actually dismantling the political systems of the Bloc actually came from within some of these leaderships, in other words 'from above'. Popular movements from below against Communist rule played some part, notably in Bohemia and the GDR, but their role has often been greatly exaggerated in the West.

Secondly, and the other side of the coin of Western images of 'civil society' against 'totalitarianism', we must examine the degree to which large parts of civil society remained attached to the values of socialism and indeed (though to a lesser extent) to the Communist Parties within the region. This has, on the whole, been widely under-rated. While electorates overwhelmingly rejected the authoritarian political system of single party rule, significant and in many cases large parts of the electorates retained perceptions of the former 'single parties' which were much more sympathetic to their record than 'totalitarian' theory could allow for. The interactions between these parties, the new Western-backed Social Democrats and the sections of electorates still oriented towards socialist values have demonstrated just how many links have been maintained between the former ruling parties and their societies: only in the Czech Republic out of all the countries of the former Bloc has a Western-backed social democratic party become stronger amongst parties to the left of centre than the former Communists.

And thirdly, the directions taken by the various post-Communist Parties have also been shaped quite strongly by the parties' perception of the new geopolitical situation in which they have found themselves. We will explore all these themes with reference to three sub-regions in what used to be called Eastern Europe: East Central Europe, known often today as the Visegrad countries; South Eastern Europe, particularly Bulgaria and Romania (leaving to one side the tragic special case of Yugoslavia); and Russia and Ukraine amongst the former Soviet Republics.

I. THE LAST ATTEMPT AT REFORM COMMUNISM

The collapse of 1989-91 and the subsequent evolution of the post-Communist Parties was shaped, of course, by the Soviet Communist Party leadership's attempt to reform the political and economic systems of the Soviet Bloc between 1985 and 1990. Gorbachev gained allies for the political aspect of his reform project from powerful groups in the Polish P W leadership and in the Hungarian HSWP leadership. [1] When these latter two groups gained majorities in their respective central committees at the start of 1989 a political opening towards liberal democratic pluralism was initiated within the Soviet Bloc.

These steps in turn destabilised the Communist Party leaderships in the GDR, Czechoslovakia, Romania and Bulgaria, all of whom had been resisting the Soviet leadership's programme of political democratisation. Moreover, unlike Gorbachev, the Hungarian democratisers were already committed to introducing capitalism along with liberal democracy and by 1989 this was also largely true of the Polish Communist leaders as well.

Gorbachev's reform project could be summarised in terms of three main planks: ending the party's political monopoly and moving

towards political pluralism arbitrated by free elections; attempting to end the conflict with NATO, replacing it with what might be called a cosmopolitan liberalism; and scrapping the doctrine of the Bloc as an autonomous economic system, seeking to integrate it into the institutions of the capitalist world economy.

Ending the Party: Political Monopoly

By the mid-1980s the Stalinist political model of the single party system had long since lost its legitimacy, even within the party nomenklatura themselves. During the collapse of 1989 no significant sections of the Communist Parties continued to try to justify a single party system. At best the political monopoly was justified as an instrument both to preserve the Soviet Bloc - the argument for stability - and to maintain the socialist economic system. [2]

The CPSU leadership had come to the conclusion that the lack of free discussion and circulation of information was crippling Soviet development, and between 1985 and 1989 Gorbachev gradually dismantled the vertical political control mechanisms through the campaigns first for 'glasnost', then for 'democratisation'. In June 1988, the 19th Party Conference of the CPSU scrapped the Stalinist constitutional principle of the 'leading role of the party' - by agreeing that the CPSU would have to *achieve* leadership by gaining popular support, instead of having it paranteed constitutionally.

In Hungary competitive elections had been initiated in 1985, though without allowing full party pluralism; early in 1989, the HSWP Central Committee decided to move towards full-scale liberal democratic competitive politics. In Poland minor elements of subordinate pluralism had existed within the political system since 1956 (notably the small, independent Catholic political groups, represented in parliament and the media) but the PW's dominance had been underwritten constitutionally since the mid-1970s. It had then been challenged by the rise of Solidarity in 1980-81, followed by martial law and the suppression of Solidarity in the early 1980s. In attempting to re-engage the population with the regime, the PUWD leadership had resorted to trying to use referenda and had liberalised the media, but these methods were judged to have failed by 1988 and from the autumn of 1988 parts of the PUWP leadership were openly calling for radical change within the political order. This wing of the leadership then triumphed in early 1989 when the Central Committee decided to hold round table negotiations with the remnants of the Solidarity leadership in order to pave the way for free though partial parliamentary elections in the early summer of 1989.

Although other party leaderships sought to resist the dismantling of the 'leading role of the party' and the turn to liberal democratic pluralism, it is striking that only one of these leaderships had the confidence or energy to try to resist the democratic challenge in practice through the use of significant force: that was the nationalist Ceausescu in Romania. Even in the USSR, the attempted coup of

August 1991 against the loosening of the bonds of the USSR was a feeble, lethargic effort. [3]

The Break with the Primacy of Power Politics

A second fundamental pillar of Stalinism was the primacy which it gave to state force and great power politics in the international arena. Both Lenin and Trotsky were acutely aware that the triumph of Communism was ultimately dependent upon the power of international Communism as a social movement and they sought to rebuild the energies of this movement both within Russia itself after the civil war and internationally. But under Stalin, the primacy of state power politics over all other values became fundamental, both in domestic and international affairs. While in the second world war this emphasis on the military aspect of Communism seemed eminently justified, its continuation and even accentuation during the post-war period was to have catastrophic consequences, leading to Soviet 'overreach' in East Central Europe, locking the USSR and its allies into trying to compete militarily with the USA and its allies -instead of competing on the central front of social and cultural models of development, distorting Soviet economics and undermining the attractiveness of Soviet society.

The break with this Stalinist legacy was the most dramatic and obvious side of the politics of the Soviet leadership under Gorbachev: its ending of the Brezhnev doctrine its increasingly unilateral measures of disarmament and military disengagement and its adoption of new military ideas of minimum sufficient defence. All these changes were allied to a downgrading of state force for dealing with opposition in domestic life. This aspect of Gorbachev's programme, of course, profoundly affected the thinking of the Communist Party leaderships. The lesson drawn in much of the literature is that this is what led them to open their regimes to political democracy rather than attempting to resist popular pressures. But this aspect is almost certainly exaggerated as far as Czechoslovakia and the GDR is concerned. [4]

They realised that their entire geopolitical context was being transformed and thus also, in the case of the East-Central European Visegrad countries, their relationship with West European capitalism.

From Autonomous Economic System to Integration in the World Economy

During the Stalin period the Soviet leadership had convinced itself that it could develop limitlessly on the basis of its own resources and internal division of labour without significant participation in the international capitalist economic system (a position which, of course, Zinoviev and Trotsky disputed). This belief continued to be a central tenet of official Soviet Bloc thinking right through the Khrushchev period and into the early 1970s. The nomenklatura of the Bloc believed that on the basis of their own autonomous economic system they could overtake the capitalist world and thus ultimately triumph, provided only that the Bloc was not once again subject to external

attack. But at least from the early 1970s, confidence in this idea was progressively undermined with the Communist Party leaderships themselves. The USSR itself could not even feed its own population without importing grain from the capitalist world. During the 1970s various East Central European party leaderships sought to integrate their economies more deeply in the capitalist market, and when their policies failed, some of them (notably the Polish, Hungarian and East German leaderships) felt unable to draw back from even deeper international integration.

From the very start of his General Secretaryship this became a central pre-occupation of Gorbachev and his team. The strategic concept was to make Soviet integration into the institutions of the world economy possible by destroying the ability of the Western powers to continue branding the USSR as an enemy state rather than just a social competitor. Domestic political democratisation and the turn away from power politics were to help to make this drive for international integration more possible.

For the reform Communists in the CPSU, this turn towards international economic integration was not supposed to be accompanied by the social integration of the USSR into capitalism. Gorbachev hoped for one world economy with two social systems, and indeed he hoped that international economic integration would revive the socialist project within the USSR itself. The Hungarian party leadership, on the other hand, were committed by the late 1980s to Hungary's return to capitalism. The Polish PUWP's nomenklatura was also increasingly convinced that this was the only possible path for a Poland in which the industrial working class had lost allegiance to the Communist Party. This Hungarian and Polish view was not accepted by the majority of the leaderships in the other East Central and South East European Communist parties. While the Czechoslovak Communist Party was ready to accept political pluralism, it remained committed to preserving a socialised economy. The PDS leadership and government in the GDR took a similar stance until, in February 1990, it felt unable to resist the collapse of the socialised economy. Similar resistance to capitalist restoration was maintained both by Iliescu in Romania after Ceausescu's overthrow, and by the Bulgarian Socialist Party during 1990.

At the same time, these parties resisting capitalist transformation lacked any common economic policy platform. This was equally true of the Gorbachev leadership of the CPSU, which signally failed to produce any coherent strategy for economic reform and whose economic policies simply plunged the economy into deeper crisis. In these circumstances large parts of the managerial nomenklaturas of the Soviet bloc abandoned their efforts to maintain the socialised economies and began a scramble for property rights, leaving the Communist parties in their tens of thousands or using their party connections for largely illegal transfers of property.

II. THE COMMUNIST PARTIES' ELECTORAL BASE AFTER THE COLLAPSE

East Central and South East Europe.

Opinion surveys during the 1980s in the Visegrad countries and the GDR showed that significant minorities of the population supported the ruling parties. Even after the imposition of martial law in Poland, polls in 1984 showed that 25% supported the Communist Party leadership, 25% were hostile to it and 50% either had no opinions or did not wish to express them. [5] Furthermore, the 25% supporting the party tended to hold socialist social values, particularly egalitarianism and nationalised property, while those hostile tended to be anti-egalitarian and in favour of the free market: Polish society was thus politically polarised on a left-right basis, with the PUWP supporters occupying the left. The same poll evidence shows majorities of the population supporting various central aspects of the social principles of state socialism.

Similar evidence is available for neighbouring countries. From 1985, competitive elections were taking place in Hungary, and these demonstrate that as late as 1989, the Hungarian Communists were gaining 30% or more of the vote [6] and such votes were indicative of support for left-wing political and social values. Polling in the GDR tells a similar story. Polls conducted there between 20th November and 27th November, 1989, showed the Socialist Unity Party (SED) as having the largest percentage of support of any party - 31%. [7] In Czechoslovakia polling in December 1989 showed majority support not only for socialised property but for central planning. [8] This pattern was equally evident in the Soviet Republics and in South Eastern Europe.

A further very important feature of political developments in the late 1980s and early 1990s has been the survival of the official unions of the State Socialist period as the dominant trade union confederations during the transition to capitalism. [9] They survived despite concerted efforts to weaken them on the part of governments of the Right, and of Western bodies like the ICFTU and the AFL-CIO. In Hungary, the main trade union centre, MSzOSz, retained some 3 million of its 4.5 million 1988 membership in 1991. [10] The Polish official union, OPZZ, emerged with 4.5 million members in comparison with Solidarity's 2.3 million members. The same pattern held in Czechoslovakia where the official federation, CSKOS, predominated. [11] In Bulgaria the official unions faced the most serious challenge with the emergence of an initially strong new union centre, Podkrepa, but after rising from about 350,000 at the end of 1990 to over 600,000 at the end of 1991, Podkrepa's membership declined to about 225,000 by the start of 1993. The old official federation's membership also declined, from 3 million at the end of 1990 to 2.5 million at the end of 1991 and only 1.6 million at the end of 1992, but its dominance within the trade union field was maintained. In Romania, the official unions also remained the strongest, although they fragmented into competing

centres in the early 1990s. The continuing role of official trade unions has also been evident in the former USSR.

The official unions of the Communist period thus turn out not to have been mere transmission belts for a 'totalitarian' state without a significant social base; there was a substantial trade union constituency remaining in these organisations to be won by parties of the left if they were prepared to orient themselves towards it. [12] The strong showing of the socialist parties during the first part of the 1990s is thus scarcely surprising. Indeed, the puzzle is why these parties did not do much better in the first post-1989 elections than they did - why their votes were lower in the GDR and the Visegrad zone than polling evidence from the 1980s would have suggested. One explanation could be that erstwhile Communist supporters were temporarily swept up in the wave of enthusiasm for a transition to capitalism in 1989-90 and switched their support to the parties of the free-market right. This does seem to have been an important factor in the GDR elections of March 1990. Polling in early 1990 showed over 60% of the GDR electorate holding social democratic or socialist opinions, yet Kohl's campaign promises swung a big majority for the Right precisely in the traditional social democratic Saxon strongholds, leaving the PDS with only 16.3% and the SPD with only 21.8%.

On the face of it the same effect seems to have operated elsewhere. In 1990 and 1991 opinion polls showed large majorities in favour of so-called 'market economies' in Poland, Hungary, the Czechoslovakia and Bulgaria, with a majority the other way only in Romania. This support had dropped massively by 1994 (except in Romania where there was a reverse trend). [13] But this evidence of enthusiasm for the market among large parts of the electorate does not explain why the still large minorities hostile to the introduction of the capitalist market did not fully turn out for the 'post-Communists'. The reality is that there were large numbers of abstentions; many of those who told pollsters they favoured a market economy must have decided not to vote. In the 1989 Polish elections, less than 50% of the electorate voted for Solidarity: the turnout was low. In 1991 when the first full parliamentary elections in Poland were held, total turnout was 43%. In the 1993 Parliamentary elections both the turnout (52%) and the vote for the SDPR went up substantially and detailed analysis has shown that this correlation was central to the SDPR's success. [14]

Parties of the

Centre and Right in Hungary also failed to gain support from over 50% of the electorate on a low turnout, and the party that called fairly explicitly for free market capitalism, the Alliance of Free Democrats, gained only 21% of the votes cast.

The high abstention rate in Poland and Hungary suggests another puzzle: why was it that in the only two countries where the ruling Communist Party leaderships took autonomous decisions (in February 1989) to move towards pluralist democratic political systems, and where they had been campaigning for years for 'market reform', did the

Communists perform worst of all the Communist parties in the region? If the great issue of these elections was freedom (and the free market) against totalitarianism, why did these two parties perform worse than the two parties that resisted democratic change and the market - the East German and Czechoslovak parties? [15]

This points to the possibility that the poor performance of the Polish and Hungarian parties had nothing to do with freedom versus totalitarianism, but was linked to another feature that distinguished these two parties from the Czechoslovak and East German parties. This was the fact that their party leaderships had for some years been vigorously promoting policies which tended to contradict the socially egalitarian ideologies of their parties - policies of increasing marketisation and increasing social differentiation - with increasingly negative effects on those sections of the population in whose name they ruled: policies which were not being promoted by the Czechoslovak and East German parties whose economies were more successful under centralised planning. [16] Evidence from the results gained by smaller parties in the Hungarian elections tends to confirm this view that the HSP's low vote was partly the result of its pro-Market orientation. While the HSP gained 10.9% of the vote a further 8.8% of votes went to small parties, mainly further to the left on the issue of marketisation. The HSW gained 3.7%, but more significant is the fact that a group of Agricultural Technicians stood on the single issue of opposing the break up of agricultural co-operatives and gained 3.2% of the vote; and some local political leaders from the HSWP days stood separately from the HSP as a network of local leaders and gained 1.9%.

Research on all these issues still needs to be undertaken. What has been offered here is nothing more than a set of hypotheses based upon some empirical pointers. But it would certainly explain the rather general revival of the fortunes of these parties as the 1990s progressed: their levels of support were returning to the trend of the 1980s. And they did so despite strenuous efforts by anti-Communist parties and the media to delegitimise these parties. It would also suggest another conclusion: that a significant minority of electorates may have held social values to the left of the post-Communist Party leaderships and may indeed still do so.

Meanwhile in what may be called, in a broad sense, the Balkans, the 'post-Communists' tended to emerge from the first elections as the strongest parties. This occurred in Romania, Bulgaria, Serbia, Montenegro, and later Albania. [17] These initial successes were not momentary: these parties retained strong support even if they were, in Bulgaria and Albania, subsequently to go into opposition.

Russia and Ukraine

In the Soviet case far more than in East Central Europe, the populations experienced the collapse of both the single party system and of the Union itself as something external to them and traumatic. After 5 years of growing economic crisis under the auspices of the reform

Communists' 'perestroika' there was great disillusionment with the Gorbachev leadership, and the elections for the Congress of Peoples Deputies showed hostility on the part of voters towards candidates from the party apparatus. But popular political allegiance was transferred to other leaders and groups within the CPSU nomenklatura, particularly those at Republican level offering republican rather than all-Union solutions to daily problems. This was true both in Russia, where former Politburo member Yeltsin sought to build his base as a leader of the Russian federation, and in Ukraine where the party leader Kravchuk championed the idea that Kiev could solve problems better than Moscow. [18]

These developments have often been viewed as the rise of ethnic nationalism against Communism but outside the Baltic States and parts of the Caucasus this view is very misleading. [19]

At the time of the

Soviet Union's collapse, ethnic nationalism was a very minor force in the three big Slav republics and in Kazakhstan. And republican nationalism, though hostile to 'Moscow' as the all-Union centre, was not necessarily anti-Communist. This picture appeared to be transformed utterly by the failed coup of August 1991, which was followed by the banning of the Communist Parties of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus in the autumn of that year. [20] But these prohibitions were ambivalent steps which by no means signified a unified popular hostility to the Communists. On the other hand the last two years of the CPSU had been a drawn out and increasingly chaotic fragmentation and paralysis which undoubtedly did much to undermine public support. The banning of the CPSU at the same time enabled the Communist nomenklatura groups in power at republican level to free themselves from political constraints and maintain their positions of power, while also freeing themselves from All-Union party disciplines. And it enabled hundreds of thousands of members of the managerial nomenklatura to easily turn their backs on Communism and throw themselves into the scramble for private wealth.

Continuing support for the Communist Party in Russia could not be tested until the party was refounded in February 1993 with a declared membership of about half a million. Over the next three years its support grew rapidly from 12.4% (6.7 million votes) in the December 1993 elections to 22.3% (15.5 million votes) in the December 1995 elections (to which should be added another 5 million votes of other basically Communist forces). In the first round of the Presidential elections in June 1996 the Communist candidate Zyuganov gained 24 million votes and this figure climbed to just under 30 million, or 40.4% of the electorate, in the second round.

In Ukraine the Communist Party leadership responded to the ban of August 1991 by forming a Socialist Party of Ukraine in October of that year. Its relationship to the former Communist Party of Ukraine was ambiguous: its leader refused to declare it the legal successor of the Communist Party but most of its members considered it as such.

Its membership rose from a mere 29,000 in 1991 to 80,000 in 1994, making it by far the largest party in Ukraine. [21]

When the Communist

Party of Ukraine was able to re-emerge legally in the summer of 1993, at least half of the membership of the Socialist Party left to join the Communists, who claimed a membership of over 130,000 in October 1993. In the parliamentary elections in the spring of 1994 the Socialists, Communists and Agrarian parties formed an alliance which gained a substantially larger share of the vote than any other party. The official first round result overall for the alliance was 21.78% but this seriously underestimates left support because the electoral system encouraged many to stand as 'independents', including many successful candidates allied to these left parties. [22]

Within the left

alliance the Communists gained by far the largest share of the votes - 14.84% as against 3.7% for the Socialists and 3.24% for the Agrarians.

At the same time, both in Russia and Ukraine, public opinion's continued support for collectivist economic and social values and for social egalitarianism and social security is far more extensive than its support for the post-Communist Parties themselves. In 1996, opinion polls continued to show, for example, an absolute majority of the population preferring big industrial enterprises to be state owned rather than privatised. [23]

The failure of Western-backed social democratic parties to mount a significant challenge to the former Communists anywhere in the region apart from the Czech Republic is due above all to the fact that these parties failed to demonstrate any serious commitment to social egalitarianism and social welfare: they were simply too far to the right in their social programmes to gain an audience. [24]

III. DIVERGENT PATHS FROM SOVIET ORTHODOXY

If there has been a general pattern of continuing electoral support for socialist parties throughout the former Soviet Bloc, the directions in which the parties have travelled since the start of the 1990s have varied greatly. The different parties' directions were influenced by four main factors: where the parties stood electorally in the aftermath of the collapse; the geopolitical position of their country in the new international situation; the dominant trend in the party leadership after the collapse; and the party's location within the national political system.

The Parties in East Central Europe

In the Visegrad countries, the former Communists all were ousted from power in the first general elections, while at the same time their countries were being rapidly drawn into the Western alliance's sphere of influence. In both Poland and Hungary, the dominant groups

within the new 'post-Communist' parties were firmly committed to becoming the dominant centre-left parties very much along the lines of the Party of the Democratic Left (PDS) in Italy. They also re-oriented themselves towards support for the European Union and NATO, eventually championing their countries' membership in both.

The Polish Socialists did, however, include supporters of a traditional social-democratic persuasion, seeking privatisations and to limit the erosion of social welfare provision. The Hungarian Socialist Party has a small Marxist left with some intellectual influence, as well as a more pronouncedly neo-liberal wing even than the Polish socialists.

The Czechoslovakian Communist Party leadership, on the other hand, attempted to maintain a Marxist orientation, while accepting a liberal-democratic political framework. It refused to change its name and opposed the capitalist transformation of the country, adopting a stance somewhat like that of the French Communist Party under its present leadership. With the division of Czechoslovakia, the Czech Communists have maintained this course, while the Slovak Communists have divided, one branch being prepared to co-operate with nationalist formations hostile to the free market while the other has sought alliances with social democratic formations.

In Bulgaria, the post-Communists won the first elections and have been the ruling party for much of the 1990s, though currently in opposition. The consequence of their electoral victory was that many of the linkages between the party and state economic management groups, broken in countries where the former ruling parties were placed in opposition, remained strong. At the same time, Bulgaria's geopolitical position placed the party in an unusual international environment: it was not earmarked by the West European states to be drawn rapidly into their sphere, while for the USA, preoccupied with the Yugoslav wars, the most important goal for Bulgaria was political stability rather than Shock Therapy. In consequence, the BSP retained a leadership which, though internally divided, was much more concerned with handling the economic crisis of a country strongly tied economically to the former USSR than with engaging in rapid social engineering towards capitalism. The party continued to include strong Marxist currents and to retain strong attachments to collective forms of property both in the countryside and in the industrial sector, despite the leverage offered to the West by Bulgaria's very heavy debt burdens and extremely fragile financial system. With the Dayton Accords and manoeuvring between the USA and Russia over NATO enlargement, however, Bulgaria became a target of intense Western interest and its financial difficulties were used by the IMF powers to destabilise the BSP government, leading to a continuing grave crisis within the party itself.

The Romanian political transition was carried through by a combination of potentially radically opposed forces: a popular uprising against the Ceausescu dictatorship and a palace coup by Ceausescu's formidable praetorian guard. Political leadership was seized by the pro-

Soviet wing of the Communist Party under Iliescu. This group then successfully stabilised a new regime by simultaneously banning the Communist Party and transferring its' forces into a new National Salvation Front (NSF). In 1992 the NSF split into two separate movements, one led by Iliescu, the other by his former Prime Minister, Petre Roman. The Iliescu group then formed a Party of Social Democracy of Romania (PSDR) in 1993, while another group, led by Verdet, established a Socialist Labour Party, claiming allegiance to the traditions of Romanian Communism. The Iliescu group remained the dominant party in all elections up to the autumn of 1996, when it lost power to the Centre Right. [25]

With the Soviet collapse at the end of 1991, Iliescu's new Party oriented itself towards the introduction of capitalism, though initially of a strongly 'national-capitalist' rather than 'globalised' variety and with a declared commitment to continued welfare provision. The PSDR's privatisation programme was geared towards passing the ownership of the bulk of enterprises into Romanian hands rather than offering large scope for foreign buyers. Since the Ceausescu government had paid off Romania's debts, the IMF had little leverage against this orientation in the early 1990s. [26]

But Iliescu's orientation shifted in an increasingly Europeanist direction; signalled and reinforced by Romania's acceptance into the Council of Europe in November 1993. [27]

The government gave up its earlier attempts to re-annex Moldova. In October 1995 the PSDR broke its alliance with the extreme right Greater Romania Party and during a visit to Washington Iliescu called the leader of this party and the leader of another allied far right party 'Romania's Zhirinovskies'. [28] Hand in hand with this has been Iliescu's positive response to the election of the HSP in Hungary in 1994, expressed in his desire to settle disputes with Hungary over minority and territorial issues, through an 'historic reconciliation' treaty between the two countries. [29]

The Post-Soviet Parties in Russia and Ukraine

The collapse of the USSR, and way it collapsed, profoundly shaped the new parties of the left in both countries from 1992. The reform Communists around Gorbachev accepted the banning of the CPSU in August 1991 and lacked the energy or cohesiveness to form a new party. When they did try to establish a presence they did so on the basis of accepting a capitalist transformation, while trying to insist that this capitalism should be humanised by social democratic values. They were thus swiftly marginalised as a serious force in Russian politics.

Although various efforts were in fact made to create social democratic parties, support at the polls for groups roughly equivalent to Western social democratic parties has been insignificant: not more than 1%. Those prepared to maintain the networks of the banned Communist Party and to rebuild it when it was re-legalised were therefore overwhelmingly those who had opposed the Gorbachev reform effort

of the second half of the 1980s. This leading group also bitterly opposed the break-up of the USSR and Yeltsin's programme for restoring capitalism. And they were able to draw upon the networks already established within the Russian Federation section of the CPSU before the collapse, networks with a strong traditional Stalinist stance.

Led from its foundation in 1993 by Gennadi Zyuganov, the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF) leadership has proved tactically astute and sophisticated in building a formidable coalition against the Yeltsin government. When the leadership of the Russian Parliament was goaded by Yeltsin's break with the constitution into trying to seize control of Moscow television by force, Zyuganov opposed this as a trap. Despite the extensive evidence of the Yeltsin government's fraud in the 1993 referenda and elections, the CPRF stuck to a strictly electoral strategy. It also sought to claim the mantle of patriotism for itself while repudiating links with the quasi-fascist party of Zhirinovskiy. It thus displaced Zhirinovskiy as the main opposition to the government until by 1996 Russian political life was polarised between the Communist Party and a government camp including Zhirinovskiy's party. And while strongly championing the reconstruction of the USSR, Zyuganov also criticised from the start Yeltsin's military attack on Chechnya and holds that the recreation of the Union should be on a voluntary basis (although other prominent figures within the CPRF were more positive towards Yeltsin's military adventure).

At the same time, the CPRF's definition of Russia's predicament and of its own tasks sets the party apart from any other of the post-Communist Parties of the former Soviet Bloc. It presents the catastrophe which has overcome the country as if Russia has been the victim of something akin to a Western invasion and colonisation. The party's programmatic task is thus defined as a kind of national liberation struggle by all patriotic forces in all classes against imperialist capitalism and its anti-patriotic and largely criminal Russian stooges. The CPRF must then lead a national democratic struggle, drawing in not only workers and intellectuals but also patriotic capitalists. As Zyuganov explained in his speech to the CPRF Congress in April 1997, the restoration of 'rampant capitalism' is resulting, in practice 'in the progressive colonisation of Russia'. Or rather, it is a qualitatively new form of waging war against our country. The dirty money, lies and provocations with which the fifth column arms itself have proved no less devastating to Russia than the incursions of Batu, Napoleon, and Hitler put together. In essence the Third Patriotic War is already raging in the wide territories of our country. . . . ' [\[30\]](#)

The CPRF's economic programme calls for taking the commanding heights of the economy back into state hands, especially 'income-generating enterprises', and renationalising the banking sector, without excluding a role for private 'national capital' and small private businesses. It aims to crack down on capital flight, squeeze the dollar

out of the domestic economy, restore the state monopoly of foreign trade in strategic sectors, 'strike resolutely' at criminal structures and corruption and increase taxation on non-productive property while easing taxation on commodity production. The party's political programme is centred first on returning power from the Presidential executive to parliament. But the party also champions the ultimate aim of reconstructing Soviets, to which labour collectives will nominate their representatives, and Soviets are counterposed to the liberal conception of the division of powers. As Zyuganov put it to the 1997 Party Congress, '[The Soviets] shape unity of action among power structures.' These goals are supplemented by a distinctive set of ideological themes and symbols, stressed by the Zyuganov group. These have been well brought out by Jeremy Lester [31] who stresses that for Zyuganov the ethnos is the main 'agent of history'. And the Russian ethnos is integrally connected to Russian Communism. So too is the Russian orthodox Christian tradition.

These ideas are by no means universally shared within the CPRF. Although dominant since the party's founding, the Zyuganov group, which is most closely associated with the nationalist themes, is probably an ideological minority within the party. There are strong currents much closer to the outlooks of West European communists and there are also currents closer to Western social democratic ideas.

The Ukrainian post-Communist Parties provide an interesting contrast with the CPRF. After being a conservative bastion of opposition to the Gorbachev leadership in Moscow the Ukrainian Communist Party split before the break-up of the USSR, with the dominant group led by Kravchuk adopting a statist republican nationalism against the Gorbachev leadership in Moscow. This generated two currents of opposition to the Kravchuk wing of the CPU within the Party: conservative Communist opponents both of Gorbachev and of Kravchuk's nationalism, who favoured a return to Brezhnevite principles within a single Soviet Union; and a modernising current, led by Oleksandr Moroz, the leader of the Communist deputies in the Ukrainian parliament, which also favoured the separation of the Communist party of Ukraine from the CPSU.

Unlike Yeltsin, Kravchuk made no attempt to introduce Shock Therapy into Ukraine. He declared that there were two main problems for Ukraine to solve: economic reform and state building, but that the priority was state building. This orientation appealed both to right-wing Ukrainian nationalists in the Western Ukraine and to the Communist-oriented Eastern Ukraine which was strongly hostile to the introduction of capitalism. Behind this position, large parts of the former nomenklatura proceeded to pillage the country's assets in ways very similar to those in Russia, with Kravchuk turning a blind eye. Against this background, Moroz sought to rally the Communist constituency in the country to the Socialist party formed in October 1991 while the CPU remained banned. He tried to develop a left socialist platform for economic modernisation, the development of a

private sector but retaining a large state sector and a strong social security policy.

With the reappearance of the Ukrainian Communist party, Moroz's Socialist Party lost much of its base and membership to the reformed party. The latter expressed strong solidarity with the CPRF and declared its aim to be the restoration of the USSR, seeking a return to the status quo ante of the Brezhnev years. At the same time, it did not subscribe to the messianic Russian nationalist themes of the Zyuganov group and in its Eastern and Southern Ukrainian heartlands it was much more directly and strongly a champion of the cause of the industrial workers against their managements and against the local and regional bosses linked to first, Kravchuk, and then his successor Kuchma. And in national politics the CPU was prepared to seek alliances with Moroz's Socialist Party.

Thus the main themes on the Ukrainian left were much closer to the language of the Western Communist and left socialist movements than was the case in Russia, where the CPRF appears, in European terms, to be *sui generis*.

IV. CONCLUSION: DIVERGENT PATHS OF RETREAT

The main political fact throughout the region during the 1990s has been the terrible blow delivered to the self-confidence, organisation, living conditions and health of the great bulk of working people in all the countries concerned. This shock has thrown the post-Communist parties into ideological and programmatic retreat. Only the Czech Communists have felt able to hold onto a perspective of both transcending capitalism and retaining the democratic and working class commitments familiar to Communists in Western Europe.

Similar currents exist in nearly all the other parties and amongst socialist intellectuals throughout the region, but these other parties have tended either to attempt to follow the path already trodden by the Italian PDS towards a strategic accommodation with current capitalist dynamics, or have tended to attempt a nationalist appeal against the drive eastwards by Western state and business interests.

The Polish and Hungarian post-Communist Socialists are not just accommodators to casino capitalism. They are also important defenders of secular and democratic, anti-nationalist traditions. The Polish socialists have also avoided some of the more extreme versions of capitalist deregulation and privatisation. But what neither of these parties has been prepared to do has been to take a stand in defence of the principles of social citizenship and at least a minimal social egalitarianism. In this they have been to the right of their own electorates, very much in the mould of Blairite politics in Britain.

In Romania and Russia, on the other, hand the successors of the ruling Communist parties have sought to develop a nationalist-populist resistance to Western

capitalist expansion eastwards. In the Romanian case this type of politics was launched by the state executive itself after the overthrow of Ceausescu and its aims were as much to do with attempting to stifle deeply antagonistic tendencies within the ranks of the National Salvation Front and Romanian society as with attempting to develop a project based on socialist values. The Iliescu government's attempts to manipulate extreme right, quasi-fascist groups for its own political advantage brought great dangers for Romania's Romany population and its flirtation with irredentist projects towards Moldova had nothing to do with any form of socialism. The Iliescu government was subsequently prepared to sign a Treaty with Hungary designed to settle the potentially explosive issues of border recognition and Hungarian minority rights. But its very capacity to exploit xenophobia at one moment and repudiate it the next was symptomatic of the fact that both the NSF and its successor PSDR were less like stable political formations and more bands of followers of a state leader.

In Russia, the CPRF leadership's nationalist political stance also takes it very far from either the Socialist or the Communist traditions of the West European left. Its definition of the situation facing the Russian people is basically false. Russia has been destroyed not by the force of a Western imperialist invasion but by the demoralisation and corruption of the ex-CPSU nomenklatura. While the weak, open economies of the Visegrad countries were brusquely subordinated to the diktat of the main Western capitalist powers, the West had very little coercive leverage over Russia when the USSR collapsed in 1991. The Yeltsin government had no need of the IMF credits offered in the summer of 1992, unlike its Polish or Hungarian counterparts. Alone amongst the countries of the region, Russia could have avoided dependence on the IMF/World Bank, despite the defaults of many of the countries which owed it debts. Western capitalist penetration of Russia was the result of the free choice of the Yeltsin regime, with, of course, powerful inducements from Western capital to allow themselves to be bought. And this decision to open Russia to Western capital was in turn the result of the utter demoralisation of the Soviet nomenklatura inherited from the Soviet period. No longer believing in the Soviet project, these bureaucrats have engaged in an orgy of criminal asset-stripping, with disastrous consequences for the economy and the Russian people.

The IMF's role in Russia has been more or less unprecedented in IMF history: it has supplied billions of dollars to the Yeltsin government largely regardless of that government's previous compliance with IMF conditionality in order that the government can use the money to sustain domestic political support. The IMF has done this in order to help secure a central objective of the Clinton and Kohl governments - preserving Yeltsin in power. While Western governments encouraged the dollarisation of the economy and facilitated capital flight, responsibility for these developments must still lie

with the Russian government.

It is, of course, also true that the activities of Western financial operators in Russia and the policies of Western governments have been immensely destructive of Russia's economic assets. Western governments have wanted to weaken Russia and have also wanted to gain control of its energy and raw material resources. And the economic programme of the CPRF does address a great strategic choice as to the future of Russia: because of the exportability of the country's vast energy and raw materials, the Russian state could take what might be described as a Nigerian path in which the development of Russia's internal market and of the domestic industry to serve that market is ignored in the interests of a small group of compradors controlling a state which survives through the revenues derived from exporting energy and raw materials. That path would lead to the end of any democratic development in the country and to the long-term continuation of the present impoverishment of the Russian people. By emphasising national economic development, a strong state industrial sector and a nationalised banking sector, the CPRF does offer a progressive alternative development strategy for the country. All of this means that the CPRF would be justified in saying that it is defending the Russian nation as a whole from the slide into impoverishment and peripheralisation. Back at the end of the 1920s Trotsky warned: 'The Soviet system with its nationalised industry and monopoly of foreign trade, in spite of all its contradictions and difficulties, is a protective system for the economic and cultural independence of the country. This was understood even by many democrats who were attracted to the Soviet state not by socialism but by a patriotism which had absorbed some of the lessons of history.' [\[32\]](#)

Trotsky added that a restored Russian capitalism 'would be a dependent, semi-colonial capitalism without any prospects' which would occupy a position somewhere between the third-rate position of Tsarist Russia and the position of India.

The CPRF also has to its credit the enormously important fact that it is a party of legality and a defender of constitutional government, in stark contrast to the Yeltsin government which has repeatedly shown itself ready to flout constitutional norms and the most elementary standards of legality, practising electoral fraud and chicanery in its drive to hold onto power and enrich the families of its ministers and their retinues. In short, the CPRF is the main bastion of constitutionalism within Russia today. It also has to its credit the fact that it has pushed the quasi-fascist so-called Liberal Democratic Party of Zhirinovskiy, which in 1993 was the main opposition to the Yeltsin government, to the margin of the Russian political system. It has also fought the authoritarian demagoguery of General Lebed.

Yet the CPRF's Zyuganov leadership promotes ideas which have nothing in common with any tradition of the socialist Left and which cannot be excused by the need to seize the patriotic banner from the

Right. Zyuganov himself seems attached to some of the very worst aspects of the intellectual heritage of the Stalin years and to mark an ideological regression in comparison even with Brezhnev. His nationalism suggests a Russian spiritual superiority over other nations and it also contains disturbing suggestions of some sort of inner, organic unity of the Russian nation. Zyuganov's vision of the Soviets as expressing this supposed unity and as being superior to a supposedly destructive division of powers is very far from the conceptions of socialist democracy advanced by Lenin. If in the political field the CPRF has combatted the fascist Right, in the field of ideas and symbols, the Zyuganov leadership has made concessions to a Russian obscurantist mysticism which has nothing to do with the left. The party also has more than its share of people who hanker after a revival of Russian power politics. Within the CPRF itself there are, however, also many who utterly reject such themes and it is to be hoped that those who oppose Zyuganov's nationalism will grow in influence and help to reconnect the Communist movement in Russia with the Left in the rest of the world.

P.S.

* From THE SOCIALIST REGISTER 1998, pp. 125-144.
<http://socialistregister.com/social...>

Footnotes

[1] The Polish United Workers Party later wound itself up and created the Social Democrats of the Polish Republic (the SDPR). The Hungarian Socialist Workers Party majority later formed the Hungarian Socialist Party (HSP) while the minority formed what is now the Hungarian Workers' Party.

[2] In the early 1990s in the Czechoslovakian Communist Party a small neo-Stalinist group tried to advance the idea of a return to a single party system: they were swiftly expelled from the party. This lack of legitimacy was far less evident in the Slav and Asian republics of the USSR, except, increasingly, within the CPSU itself, as well as in liberal, democratic, Western-oriented sections of the intelligentsia.

[3] During the August 1991 coup the CPSU leadership neither supported nor opposed it, remaining completely silent.

[4] Even if the Soviet leadership had combined its democratisation programme with the maintenance of the Brezhnev doctrine, it is extremely unlikely that the governments of Prague or East Berlin would have attempted to use large scale force against the broad popular opposition movements in the autumn of 1989. Those who think that such a response would have been automatic should take note of the response of the Polish government in 1980 to the August strikes.

[5] Lena Kolarska-Bobinska: 'Myth of the Market: Reality of Reform' in S. Gomulka and A. Polonsky (ed.): *Polish Paradoxes* (Routledge, 1991).

- [6] Bill Lomax: 'Hungary' in Stephen Whitefield (ed.): *The New Institutional Architecture of Eastern Europe*, (St. Martin's Press, 1993).
- [7] Dieter Segert: 'The SPD in the Volkskammer in 1990: A New Party in Search of a Political Profile.' in Michael Waller, Bruno Coppieters and Chris Deschouwer (eds.): *Social Democracy in Post-Communist Europe* (Frank Cass, 1994).
- [8] Sharon Wolchik, Czechoslovakia in transition, (Pinter, 1991), and James E McGregor: 'Value Structures in a Developed Socialist System: the Case of Czechoslovakia' *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 23, No. 2, 1991.
- [9] See the special issue of the *Journal of Communist Studies*: 'Parties, Trade Unions and Society in East-Central Europe', Vol 9, No. 4, December, 1993.
- [10] See Ruth A. Bandzak: 'The Role of Labor in Post-Socialist Hungary' in the *Review of Radical Political Economy*, Vol. 28, No. 2, June 1994.
- [11] For a valuable analysis of the Czech trade unions, see Anna Pollert: 'From Acquiescence to Assertion? Trade Unionism in the Czech Republic 1989 to 1995' Paper Presented to 2nd Conference of the European Sociological Association, Budapest, August 1995.
- [12] See *Labour Focus on Eastern Europe*, 49, Autumn 1994 and 55, 1996 for surveys of trade unions in the region. See also Michael Waller (ed.): *Parties, Trade Unions and Society in East Central Europe* (Frank Cass, 1994) and Kirill Buketov: 'Trade Unions and Politics in Russia 1994' in *Labour Focus on Eastern Europe*, 50, Spring 1995.
- [13] In 1994 the proportion of electorate who said that they had previously supported the market economy but now rejected it were as follows: 21% in Poland; 28% in the Czech Republic; 29% in Slovakia; 32% in Hungary, and 47% in Bulgaria. See European Commission: *Eurobarometer Survey*, 1994.
- [14] Wade et al. stress that the higher turnout 'was perhaps the most important political reason for the strong emergence of the left in 1993.' See Larry L. Wade, et al.: 'Searching for Voting Patterns in Post-Communist Poland's Sejm Elections' *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 4, 1995.
- [15] The Polish and Hungarian parties did worse than the PDS and the Czechoslovak Communists: respectively 10.9% and 12% as against 16% for the PDS and 14% for the Czechoslovak Communists.
- [16] A further factor in Poland may have been the fact the partial character of the June 1989 election: the electorate seemed to have a chance to protest against the PUWP government without facing the possibility of that government being removed.
- [17] In Macedonia the Communists were the largest party but were not able to form the government.
- [18] See Jonathan Steele: *Eternal Russia* (Faber and Faber, 1994) for the best account

of the collapse of the USSR.

[19] In the Baltic Republics and in Georgia strong ethnic nationalist parties did challenge the local Communist Parties.

[20] Strictly speaking the CPSU and the Russian Communist Party were not banned in August 1991: their activities were suspended.

[21] See Andrew Wilson: *The Ukrainian Left: In Transition to Social Democracy or Still in Thrall to the USSR?*

[22] Thus although only 15 deputies were elected on an openly socialist party ticket, 27 joined their parliamentary faction; 19 deputies were elected on the official agrarian party ticket but 28 joined their faction in parliament.

[23] See Renfrey Clarke: 'Public Opinion in the East', *Labour Focus on Eastern Europe*, 50, Spring 1995. See also *Eurobarometer* annual reports on the Central and East European Countries.

[24] For a fuller analysis of these Social Democratic Parties and for the sources of Czech exceptionalism, see Peter Gowan: 'The Post-Communist Socialists in the East' in D. Sassoon: *Looking Left* (I. B. Tauris, 1997).

[25] On the early development of the NSF see Tom Gallagher: 'Romania: The Disputed Election of 1990', *Parliamentary Affairs*, Vol. 44, No. 1 January 1991 and Mark Almond: 'Romania since the Revolution', *Government and Opposition*, January 1991. Petre Roman's Democratic Party-National Salvation Front has now set up an electoral alliance with the small Social Democratic Party of Romania. The Alliance is called the Social Democratic Union.

[26] The IMF did insist upon the opening of a stock market, but the result was a stock exchange with 12 quoted companies only one of which was fully private. See Dan Ionescu: 'Romania's Stand-By Agreement with the IMF' *RFE/RL Research Report*, Vol. 3, No. 18, 6th May 1994.

[27] See Dan Ionescu: 'Romania Admitted to the Council of Europe', *RFE/RL Research Reports*, Vol. 2, No. 44, 5th November 1993.

[28] On the vituperative dispute which followed these remarks, see Michael Shafic 'Anatomy of a Pre-Election Political Divorce' *Tramition*, 26th January, 1996 29. In the foreign policy field, the turn by Iliescu in 1993 has been equally marked.

[29] The PSDR government has declared membership of the EU and NATO to be its 'strategic goal' and has worked vigorously to try to ensure that Romania is allowed to enter NATO at the same time as any Visegrad countries. The government evidently has two serious fears: first that the first enlargement of NATO may also be the last, with the result that Romania will be left in a security void that Russia would seek to fill and that would in turn pull the country away from being able to join the EU; secondly, the government fears that Romania's exclusion from NATO's first enlargement at the same time as Hungary is included could generate a new and perhaps serious deterioration of relations with Hungary over

Transylvania which could also make Romanian entry into NATO and the EU much more difficult. See Dan Ionescu: 'Hammering on NATO's Door' *Transition*, 9th August 1996.

[30] Translation from *Sovyetskaya Rossiya*, 22nd April 1997 in *Socialist Action Review* Vol. 2, No. 7, June/July 1997.

[31] See Jeremy Lester: 'Overdosing on Nationalism: Gennadii Zyuganov and the Communist Party of the Russian Federation', *New Left Review*, No. 221, January-February, 1997.

[32] Trotsky: 'Is parliamentary democracy likely?' in *Writings, 1929* (Pathfinder Press, New York, 1975) p. 55, cited in *The Choices for Russia* (Socialist Action, 1991).