
RUSSIA'S COMMUNIST PARTY TURNS TO THE ORTHODOX CHURCH

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Moscow, Russia - Jesus Christ was the world's first Communist, Tamara Lavrischeva announced cheerfully.

"Jesus said, 'Don't collect earthly wealth, you won't take it with you after death,'" the 78-year-old pensioner and Orthodox Christian told Al Jazeera as she trudged through the snow-covered streets of central Moscow with thousands of other Communists during the November 7 rally that commemorated the almost-centennial anniversary of the 1917 Bolshevik revolution.

"And Communists thought the same," she added, her voice drowned by the crowd chanting Soviet-era songs under red banners with hammers and sickles and portraits of Soviet leaders Vladimir Lenin and Joseph Stalin.

It is a holy duty of Communists and the Orthodox Church to unit

Gennady Zuyganov, chairman, Russia's Communist Party

With a dismissive shrug and a condescending smile, Lavrischeva rejected the killings, imprisonment and persecution of millions of Orthodox Christian clerics and believers at the hand of Communists.

What she said was not just an opinion of an elderly woman who wants to reconcile her faith with the ideals of her youth in the officially atheist USSR. Her selective amnesia about the persecution of believers - well-documented and brandished by Soviet authorities - reflects a seemingly paradoxical trend in the recent policies of Russia's Communist Party.

More than 25 years after the Soviet collapse, the party vocally appeals to Orthodox Christianity, Russia's dominant creed. The party's sole post-Soviet chairman Gennady Zyuganov called Jesus "the first Communist" more than once.

"It is a holy duty of Communists and the Orthodox Church to unite," Zyuganov wrote in 2012 in his party's first lengthy document on religion, because both institutions shared "common goals and enemies". The goals included censorship of "debauchery and violence" in mass media, eradication of Western liberalism and "its conception of human rights", e-government and sexual education in schools.

A populist move

Russia's Orthodox Church considers two-thirds of the nation's population of 143 million as its flock. Even though most of them are only nominally religious, as polls show, they still form a demographic group no political force can ignore - even if it is the biggest rival of United Russia, the ruling Kremlin behemoth.

The Communist Party easily fields tens of thousands of supporters for rallies. Zyuganov has run for president four times, always coming second, and the party he has headed since 1993 holds almost a tenth of seats in the State Duma, Russia's lower house of parliament, forming its second-largest fraction.

But in reality, the Communist Party is a colossus on feet of clay.

Its support has been waning for years; its loyalists are simply dying out. The age of an average party member is 56, and the number of members has fallen to about 155,000 - a trivial number in comparison with the 19.5 million Soviet Communists in 1989. The speeches of Zyuganov - balding, pudgy and famously uncharismatic - hardly attract millennials or middle-class urbanites, the main antagonists of the Kremlin.

The Communist Party needed to widen its ranks - and secure the support of its core base.

It has whitewashed the image of Stalin, whose name the Politburo condemned and made taboo in 1956. It boosted its online presence and recruited a Nobel Prize-winning physicist, a cosmonaut

and a retired admiral to top its federal ticket at the September parliamentary election.

And it turned to religion - something sociologists call a populist move.

"The most devout churchgoers are mostly elderly women, pensioners, in a certain sense the CP's electoral base," Denis Volkov of the Levada Centre, Russia's last independent pollster, told Al Jazeera.

A symbiosis after persecution

"All political forces should be together when it comes to the values of faith, morals, culture and our nation's unity," Russian Patriarch Kirill was quoted by the Interfax news agency as saying in 2014 when he handed Zyuganov a medal of Glory and Honour, his Church's top award, on his 70th birthday.

In February, Zyuganov congratulated Kirill on the five-year anniversary of his enthronement. "One of the most serious mistakes of my predecessors was that they fell out with the Church," he told the patriarch.

But, it wasn't just a matter of falling out.

Each Soviet leader before Mikhail Gorbachev sought to root out religion - be it Abrahamic faiths, Buddhism, Siberian shamanism or endemic pagan cults. Sacred texts and relics were destroyed, religious buildings blown up, desecrated and converted to stables, schools or storehouses.

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Lenin laconically set the number of Orthodox priests to be executed: "The more, the better." The Politburo supported the policy of "militant atheism" that replaced religion with a rigid ideology that prophesied the worldwide triumph of Communism, and developed an elaborate cult of Lenin and lesser Communist "saints" and "martyrs".

This ideology was imposed through a propaganda machine designed to regulate all walks of Soviet life and indoctrinate children since pre-school. One of the first Soviet youth organisations was

called "Little Red Devils".

Although religion was not banned outright, authorities tried to control religious institutions by enlisting some clerics as KGB agents.

In the early 1990s, a parliamentary commission led by politician and Orthodox priest Gleb Yakunin published KGB documents purportedly proving that top Orthodox hierarchs, including future Patriarch Kirill, were KGB informers.

The Orthodox Church denied the claims and defrocked and excommunicated Yakunin. The frail priest joined a splinter Orthodox sect and was severely beaten several times by unknown assailants.

Ideological shift

But these days, Communists even blame their own godlessness on the USSR's collapse.

"Atheism destroyed the Soviet Union," Vadim Potomsky, a Communist governor of the western Oryol region, reportedly said in mid-July.

Zyuganov also occasionally mentions Islam and Buddhism, whose adherents form sizeable minorities in Russia.

"If Jesus Christ, Muhammad and Buddha had not been prophets, they would have been 100 percent Communists," Zyuganov told the Kommersant daily in December 2015. The U-turn towards religion also reflects a tectonic transformation in the Communist Party's ideology.

Zyuganov still pledges to nationalise Russia's oil and gas industry, restore a socialist welfare state, and stand up to the "rotting Western capitalism".

But, instead of messianic strife for a worldwide "proletarian unity", today's Communist Party endorses nationalism and exploits a widespread nostalgia for the Soviet past.

It is "a party of imperialistic nostalgia and Russian nationalism, and there's no imperialism or

nationalism without Russian Orthodoxy," Andrei Kolesnikov of the Moscow Carnegie Centre, a think-tank, told Al Jazeera.

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Another thing that undermines the party's popularity is its conformism. Splinter Communist groups and critics accuse Zyuganov of becoming part of the "systemic opposition", a term used to describe three parties nominally opposed to United Russia.

These parties have Duma seats, vocally criticise the Kremlin - and quietly vote in most of the bills. For years, the Communist Party has backed some of Kremlin's most controversial initiatives - Crimea's annexation, air strikes in Syria and unpopular domestic reforms such as dramatic cuts in welfare payments.

Kaynak/Source: