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Twenty years of Communist Party: Progress or decay?

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The upcoming anniversary Congress of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation will hardly go down in history of the national party building. The adoption of an updated version of the Charter of the Communist Party and the vote of the new chairman of the Central Committee of the Communist Party can hardly attract much attention of the general public.

There will be no intrigue in the upcoming congress either for party members or observers. The Communist Party will strengthen the hierarchy, and "the dear and irreplaceable" Gennady Zyuganov will retain his post.

The event per se, according to tradition, will be a very pompous one. As the leader of Russian Communists promised, hundreds of various parties and movements of the left front will attend the congress. The guests will listen to the political report of the Central Committee, which will also be published in advance (nearly a million copies). Noteworthy, the Internet portal of the Communist Party has been upgraded especially for the congress: the website now has an English page. Apparently, the party is going to sum up the results of its activities in two decades.

A lot has been achieved indeed. No matter what some may say, the Communist Party objectively remains a serious political force that has its own voters. The party can successfully win over the "protest electorate" as well.

"The Communist Party, on the one hand, has successfully used the rational and legitimate aspects of the communist ideology of the Soviet time. On the other hand, it has been successful in cooperating with adequate groups of the electorate, relying on the support of the older generation, - political analyst Nikolai Mironov told Pravda.Ru. - It guaranteed strong position for the party in the political spectrum, and even made it a serious opponent to the government in the 1990s."

Indeed, many remember the so-called "red parliaments" and "red zones" around Moscow.

However, in the new millennium, the state of affairs started to change not for the benefit of the ideological heir of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

"During the 2000s, the values of the Communist Party began to erode, making way for other type of values. Actually, the party had to make a tough choice: either to move in the direction statist patriotism and conservatism or in the direction of social democracy, which implied the choice of social groups - said Nikolay Mironov. - The ambition to combine both of these things, as Zyuganov wrote in 1996 in his book "Russia, My Motherland. The Ideology of State Patriotism," turned out to be impossible to Communists in practice."

However, the choice of one of the above-mentioned directions did not take place. The party has not mastered the patriotic themes, leaving the corresponding ideological field free. It did not become a social democratic party either, the expert believes.

"The strategy was to keep the electorate that the party has had since the 1990s, and preserve the status quo in the political system. In other words, the party had to survive without any transformations - said Mironov. - A disadvantage of the party is the lack of party policy in their inner upgrade. Communists began to attract businesses, providing them an opportunity to run for representative bodies. We could observe this process at the autumn elections, and the party was already discussing the validity of such practices back then."

Indeed, the autumn elections saw an outflow of the electorate, which generally did not affect the abilities of the Communist Party, which voters consider as an alternative, to stay afloat.

"By voting for the Communist Party, people mostly vote "against," rather than "for." They vote against the things that they do not like in their region or in the state on the whole. Similarly, people vote for other opposition parties, although to a lesser extent, the format of the "parliamentary party" works for the opposition. Since they have a chance to overcome the barrier, then it makes sense for them. Tactically it is advantageous, but in terms of strategy - it's not very promising," says Nikolay Mironov.

Speaking about the problems of the Communist Party, the political scientist named "the erosion of the content program and the difference of ideology and practice." More importantly, it is the lack of "the story of success" - the implementation of ideas, requirements and stagnation in management. "If the party is unable to resolve these issues, it risks to lose the position that it has now, not to mention the opportunity to gain stronger positions in the political system," he concluded.

Thus, the Communist Party remains the main opposition political party in the country, consistently providing its representation in the law-making process. All of it speaks of the success of the 20-year project. However, the two decades may well be described as "degradation," especially if we compare the current situation with that from the mid-1990s.

"Since that time, the Communist Party has evolved into an organization that is almost devoid of political influence at the federal level, although it used to be the largest in size in the parliament, - the director of the Institute of Globalization and Social Movements, Boris Kagarlitsky, told Pravda.Ru. - If we look back at the mid-1990s, we can see that the Communist Party had its governors in Russian regions. In 1995, the Communist Party was the largest faction in the Duma, and the electoral results of the party were approximately twice, and in some regions, approximately three times as large, as they are

now. We can see that the number of those voting for the Communist Party has been declining steadily."

Another important aspect is the aging of the party. "After the party was rebuilt in 1993, the lack of young people was seen as a major problem, and the task was to correct the situation and rejuvenate the party - said Kagarlitsky. - But many, if not most of the young people, who had been joining the Communist Party during that time, left the party afterwards". Thus, at least on the federal level, the Communist Party remains the party of older people, who only became older during the past 20 years.

According to the sociologist, on the regional level, where the rejuvenation of staff occurred, one can see a strange disparity between individual young functionaries, who advanced to higher positions, and the mass of ordinary not-very-young members with virtually no middle-aged individuals. Thus, in general, we can speak of the degradation of the Communist Party as a political structure, even judging by the criteria of success that the party sets for itself.

But, of course, one cannot explain all the problems of the Communist Party with mistakes made its administration. The party has come across objective and unfavorable changes in the political system.

"During the 1990s, Russian rulers were incapable of establishing a functioning political party to implement their policies. The 2000s saw the appearance of United Russia, which is largely perceived by the population as some sort of a successor to the Communist Party. United Russia was able to win over a large part of those, who previously supported Communists," says Boris Kagarlitsky.

Strangely enough, tougher competition provided additional preferences to Communists. "The Communist Party has become a monopoly "in the market of opposition services. The party has lost much of its influence on the one hand, and on the other hand got very well integrated into the system that has developed during the 2000s," said the expert.

Boris Kagarlitsky noted that to date, the party leadership was absolutely satisfied with its position in the country and with the state of affairs in the country as a whole: "The role of the monopolist in the field of opposition in the absence of any liability or any requirements of political activities of the party - this is a convenient and comfortable position, which, I think, the party wants to maintain and support.

"Another question is that the development of the political struggle and the appearance of various new opposition forces, including the left ones, complicates everything. At this point, the Communist Party as the party of the status quo, as the party that guarantees the preservation of the current order, is under attack, just like United Russia is," concluded Boris Kagarlitsky.