

Russia's rising fascist threat

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Kate Foster reports on the rise of fascism in Russia

The Russian elections brought an unexpected success for the extreme right and a hollow victory for Boris Yeltsin. His new constitution was only narrowly agreed. Nine of the Russian Federation's republics did not vote for the constitution.

The closeness of the vote—only 28% of the eligible voters actually voted for the constitution—has inevitably led to accusations of vote-rigging. The pro-reform parties who support Yeltsin were only able to win a third of the vote, but this is just enough to allow them to stop the new parliament blocking Yeltsin's every move.

Russia's economic collapse, more severe than the one Germany suffered in the years before Hitler's rise to power, has led to the emergence of a proto-fascist force, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy's Liberal Democratic Party (LDP).

The LDP won one of the highest proportions of the poll, around one quarter of votes cast. Some of the pro-Yeltsin "reformers" were so surprised by Zhirinovskiy's success that they suggested he had used the talents of the faith healer Kashpirovskiy to induce mass hypnosis of the electorate.

The reasons for Zhirinovskiy's success, however, are the direct result of the effects of the capitalist restoration process, not of a television faith healer.

During the election campaign the Russian media gave Zhirinovskiy much more coverage than, say, the Communist Party of the Russian Federation. Why? First he supported Yeltsin's October coup, though he has since criticised the bloodiness of the repression.

Then he repeatedly advocated a "yes" vote for Yeltsin's "authoritarian" constitution. He is fond of saying that Russia needs a strong man and not a parliament. He has said repeatedly that he would ban or crush the Communists.

Yeltsin and his advisers may have thought that Zhirinovskiy would split the protest vote against the economic "reforms", keep the Communist Party of the Russian Federation's vote under control, and act as a bogeyman to the West, making it ease up its pressure on him to go faster with the shock therapy.

All of this may be true but it is not a sufficient explanation for Zhirinovskiy getting 22.79% of the votes.

Racist

Zhirinovskiy's main stock in trade is ferocious Great Russian chauvinism with strong racist overtones. He is for a ban on refugees coming into Russia. He is for the expulsion of millions of non-Russians living in the cities and towns of Russia. He declares his "understanding" of the violence against them. He is for a ban on any non-Russian having the right to trade in Russia. His call for the dissolution of the current republics

in the Federation is a means of ensuring Great Russian dominance over other ethnic groups.

The main butt of his attacks are the Caucasian and central Asian small traders in the major cities and the cosmopolitan intellectuals who, according to him, dominate the media and fill it with praise for the West and un-Russian lifestyles.

Despite the strong possibility that Zhirinovskiy's father was Jewish, and the reported fact that he was active in 1989/90 in a Jewish organisation (probably as a KGB agent), he has added Jews to the list of his targets.

Of course he has also denied he is an anti-Semite. Yet on his visits to the west he has hob-nobbed with the Austrian industrialist Edwin Neuwirth, Waffen-SS veteran and holocaust revisionist. He has met with Dr Gerhard Frey's German Peoples Union (DVU) whose publications also proclaim the Nazi regime's innocence.

Zhirinovskiy's economic programme includes an end to any aid to the former soviet republics, stopping the closures of arms manufacturing factories and no conversion of these factories to civilian uses. He also promises the liquidation of the organised gangs which run the virulent and extremely violent black market.

This is an extremely populist programme but it is not an anti-capitalist one.

His fulminations against the informal economy, which obviously strike a chord with people suffering rampant inflation, are directed more against the non-Russians, who in his view dominate it, than against the market as such.

Orders

Zhirinovskiy's economic plans include a commitment to preserving a strong state sector, the reintroduction of state orders and stronger inter-enterprise links. The state should organise the labour market to avoid unemployment and strikes, he says.

However this does not represent any kind of defence of post-capitalist property relations. Fascists are also frequently defenders of a large sector of the economy controlled by the state: not in order to abolish private capitalists, rather to protect them in times of economic crisis.

In Zhirinovskiy's case it is the road to creating Russian capitalism. Zhirinovskiy's corporatism is part of a state-capitalist programme of restoration which will ensure the creation of a Russian imperialism, not under the domination of foreign multinationals.

He has threatened not only all the states of the former USSR with re-absorption but also Finland and Alaska. The backdrop to his election broadcast showed a map which included all these areas as Russia plus a large slice of eastern Europe thrown in for good measure.

He also proposes the seizure of the Middle East and the break up of the Muslim world. His book *The Last Dash to the South* advises the United States and Canada to colonise Central and South America, Europe to re-colonise Africa, and Japan and China to take over South East Asia.

Crazy ravings? Yes, but Hitler's plans for world conquest in weak, crisis ridden Weimar Germany must have seemed the same!

How then has Zhirinovskiy succeeded in gaining the support of a quarter of the Russian electorate? A large section of the electorate has had its illusions in capitalist democracy shattered by economic reality and yet remembers the stagnation and political repression of Stalinism. Zhirinovskiy said there was a 'third way',

and there was no significant revolutionary socialist opposition to expose his ravings and offer a genuine alternative to capitalism and Stalinism.

Industrial output continues to decline, inflation is rife and massive unemployment is expected. Whilst some wages have been increased as price controls have been lifted, those on pensions and in low paid work have been affected severely. In January 1992, when price controls were lifted on 90% of goods, there was a 250% price increase, virtually overnight.

Chaos at the level of the economy is mirrored by social breakdown. Black marketeering and profiteering have become rife. The levels of corruption, if anything, appear to have increased since the days of the Stalinists. In an opinion poll published in December, 42% described the current state of Russia as one of increasing anarchy.

Zhirinovsky himself is clearly a fascist and he has obviously found strong electoral support. But it is not the case that fascism is close to triumph in Russia. First, the programme of the party put before the electorate was a chauvinist one, but it was not overtly fascist.

As with fascist leaders like Le Pen in France, Zhirinovsky has to hide his full intentions behind a smokescreen of outbursts, denials and retractions. Consequently many in his party, including some of its leaders, are not yet fascists.

Centralised

Zhirinovsky has to combine notoriety with respectability. The hard core fascists of Russia, like other restorationist forces, have yet to develop a strong, centralised party organisation. Their forces are divided into the old organisations, such as Pamyat, which existed alongside Stalinism, and the newly-emerging chauvinist-populist forces which Zhirinovsky represents.

There are currently six openly fascist groupings in Russia. There are also a number of extreme nationalist groupings which have links with fascism. The essential difference between fascism and other far right dictatorial movements is that fascism attempts to mobilise a mass movement with the open programme of crushing working class opposition.

The LDP as a whole is thus not yet a fully edged fascist party. It has a relatively small membership of around 20,000, though it is likely to recruit rapidly in the wake of the election. But it is funded by big business and, according to opinion polls, it appeals differentially to young male voters on average or above average wages who are more concerned about the humiliation of Russia and its army and law and order than economic hardship. All these facts show the LDP's potential to become a fascist force.

Strikes

The Russian working class is just beginning to fight back against the effects of restoration. In November, gas and construction workers were on strike for over a week in Nadym in Siberia. The miners of the Kuzbass and Vorkuta came out on strike in December. Both strikes began with demands for payment of wages which were overdue. In both cases the demands rapidly moved from the economic to the political, with strikers demanding a say in who should be in the cabinet. These sectors of the working class are the most used to taking action. Until recently they also had the biggest illusions in Yeltsin, but now things are changing.

With the obvious potential of a mass base, of money from sections of the military industrial complex, and with increasing numbers of desperate young unemployed and dismissed soldiers there is no reason why the Russian fascists should not resolve their differences and coalesce into a fully fascist party with

organised street gangs.

Zhirinovsky's high level of support in the army and the easy availability of weapons all indicate that if resistance to the restoration process steps up, then what is at present a semi- or a proto-fascist party can become a fully edged mass fascist movement.

Workers in Russia must reject both Zhirinovsky and Yeltsin. They must reject Gaidar's call for a popular front against fascism. It is Gaidar's 'reforms' that gave Zhirinovsky so much support.

Direct action, strike action, giving a lead to all who feel helpless faced with the collapse of the economy and the welfare system, are the best answers to the LDP.

If the working class rouses itself from its passivity and atomisation, the fascist scum like Zhirinovsky will be pushed back down the sewers from which they have emerged. Workers will need to organise their own militia, drawing in the unemployed and the ex-soldiers, to do this.

A united front of the working class including those from the oppressed and threatened nationalities can smash both Yeltsin and Zhirinovsky.

But most of all the Russian workers urgently need a new revolutionary party to lead the way in these combined struggles, to provide a real alternative to Stalinism, fascism and the unfettered market.

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