

**The Rise of Political Party Activity
in the Soviet Union
1988-1989**

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Introduction

The March 1989 elections to the USSR Congress of People's Deputies (CPD) marked the first time that even remotely open and democratic elections had taken place in Russia since the birth of the Soviet Union in 1917. The 1989 elections can be viewed as the progenitor of the current political situation in Russia for it was those first elections that launched the long and rocky devolution of the centralized, one-party Soviet state into the multiparty Russian system that faced the electorate for the first time this December 12. A great deal has changed in Russia since the first contested elections at the national level took place across the USSR almost five years ago. So much in fact--the collapse of the Soviet Union, the end of the one-party monopoly on power and the introduction of market reforms, to name but a few significant alterations--that it is easy to lose sight of the beginnings of this fascinating process of political change. When candidates faced the Russian electorate in December 1993 in the elections to the newly-constituted Russian parliament, they followed a path first sketched out during the Soviet Union's previous experiment with broad-based democracy, the USSR CPD.

A number of the current players in Russian politics started learning the rules of the game during 1989-1990, the first years of the "democratic" Soviet legislature. Figures such as Boris Yeltsin, Nikolai Travkin, Gavriil Popov, Anatolii Sobchak, and many others who have been active participants in the modern Russian political scene rose to national prominence in the crucible of the USSR CPD. Many of the traits which now characterize the Russian political scene developed in the formative period of Russian democracy. The interactions among and within these first political groupings--the Interregional Group, the fragmenting Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) and its factions, as well as other informal (*neformal'nye*) organizations--greatly influenced the direction Russian politics were to take. The experiences of these political

figures during the first year of the newly-constituted USSR CPD were to guide them during the growth of democratic organizations within Russia.

An understanding of the origins of the current trend of political party formation is a key factor to understanding why the Russian political arena is the way it appears today. After the March 1989 elections to the USSR CPD, a wave of political organization took place as deputies allied with one another and against the perceived opposition. In many ways, the USSR CPD is the parent of the present Russian political system. They are so linked because the newly-independent Russian state, as the successor to the Soviet Union after its collapse in December 1991, inherited its nascent political system.

Political Parties Defined

A problem of discussing political parties in the Soviet Union in 1989-1990 is that Western definitions only loosely fit the Soviet Union. The description of political groupings is further muddled by the fact that these groups seldom referred to themselves in a systematic way. The use of the word “party” is itself problematic because it is the word the groups often used to describe themselves, even though these groups were often little more than simple coalitions with no electoral support (or, indeed, chance for it since they were formed after the elections). Where one group of deputies might refer to itself as a party, although its members did nothing more than meet periodically to discuss issues together, another group, calling itself a deputies group, implying more of an informal discussion group, would actively seek out support among a social strata such as the intelligentsia or the workers.

Before describing the various types of political organization present in the USSR, and before discussing the particularities of the Soviet political party system as it developed, a brief note on the definition of “political party” as it is understood by political theorists will provide a basis for understanding the Soviet version. By understanding how theorists view party formation, the differences and similarities of

Soviet parties will become clearer. Political parties can be broadly defined as “an organization which nominates candidates for election to a legislature.”¹ This definition though, omits a large number of the groupings which called themselves parties in the USSR Supreme Soviet because many of them have not yet actually tried to nominate candidates for election to legislatures. A broader definition, posed by Samuel Eldersveld, is:

a social group, a system of meaningful and patterned activity within the larger society [which]...consists of a set of individuals populating specific roles and behaving as members of a bounded and identifiable social unit.... Goals are perceived by these actors, tasks are assigned for and by them, and communication channels are maintained. The party is thus one social organism. But the party is also a polity, a miniature political system. It has an authority structure, although the manner in which authority is graded and legitimated may differ considerable from other social groups.... Above all the party is a decision-making system....²

This definition includes a broad range of activity, while maintaining a sufficiently narrow interpretation that it begins to describe the Soviet political world. This will be the basis from which parties will be considered below, with one caveat. Eldersveld’s definition implies a greater degree of party cohesiveness and organization than were present in the USSR Congress of People’s Deputies in 1989. Groups were fluid, mutable, and unstable, and furthermore, in this early period of development, generally did not directly connect with an electorate. Many of them exist almost exclusively at the upper levels of society, limited to the intelligentsia and rarely claiming membership among broad masses of society. The largest parties, aside from the CPSU, over the period from 1988 to 1992 claimed only several hundred thousand “supporters,” and far fewer actual members. As noted by Lilia Shevtsova, “existing political parties are based on ideological packages and differences in world view among

¹Fred W. Riggs, “Comparative Politics and the Study of Political Parties: A Structural Approach”, in Crotty, William J., ed., Approaches to the Study of Political Organization, Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1968, p. 50.

²Samuel J. Eldersveld, “A Theory of the Political Party,” in Crotty, William J., ed., Political Parties and Political Behavior, Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1966, p. 42.

individuals and groups, the charisma and emotional appeal of certain leaders, desires for social interactions, strivings to express personal dissatisfaction, and so forth.... [N]o stable social roots or party pluralism have appeared.”³ Despite their not serving a traditional function (in Western eyes), Soviet political parties did create a sphere of political activity in which constituencies began to be represented by an increasingly heterogeneous system of parties and party-like organizations.

The role of popular opinion in shaping the activities of Soviet political parties was for all practical purposes negligible during this formative stage of political activity. There is little evidence that parties strove to find issues that would garner them support within the population as a whole; rather, it was more common for a group to propose a platform on behalf of some group or social class, assuming that it reflected the societal interests of that group. Thus, the question arises about the degree to which Russian “parties” reflected popular attitudes or popular policy desires, or even attempted to do so. In the Western sense, parties tend to reflect the wishes of broad slices of society (liberal or conservative, Marxist or Capitalist, and so forth). In Russia, rather than there being large segments of society in search of a political voice, it almost appears as if political voices are in search of segments of society to back them.

Parties can be considered both a cause and a symptom of modernization. As David Apter notes about party formation in modernizing countries, “because political activities bring the parties into direct contact with the population, they, more than the civil service, army, or even the government itself, have the most immediate impact in developing communities.”⁴ As a symbol of political modernization, parties show that there are choices in society, different options to be followed. It is important to remember that the very existence of independent, political organizations in the Soviet Union was taken as the sign by many Soviet and Western observers that the *ancien*

³Lilia Shevtsova, “Political Pluralism in Post-Communist Russia”, in Dallin, Alexander, ed., Political Parties in Russia, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993, pp. 52-3.

⁴David E. Apter, The Politics of Modernization, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965, p. 183.

régime had begun to crack and soften. As a cause of modernization, political parties constantly push at the limits of accepted activity, broadening the popular conception of their capabilities and of what their proper sphere of activity is. In both senses, parties are a critical part of the modernization process. “Whatever the form, parties are important not only in the ‘circulation of elites,’ to employ Pareto’s phrase, but also as an instrument of political education and socialization that shapes the habits and attitudes of a people toward government.”⁵

A variety of organizations existed in the Congress of People’s Deputies, many of which acted as political parties yet did not explicitly represent constituencies or broader social movements. Political parties will be used as an umbrella label referring to deputies groups, fronts, movements, associations, and other political organizations that arose during the USSR Congress of People’s Deputies.

The interactions among and between these political parties is a second area in which Soviet political parties differ from Western concepts . The first three years of party formation and interaction in the USSR were characterized primarily by rapid and unpredictable coalitions and splits among political groups. According to Michael Urban, writing about the political changes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe from 1989-1992, coalition building was the only way for these political groupings to achieve political success (a characteristic that is equally appropriate to the situation in Russia today):

[T]he parties that are now appearing may well be passing phases of a larger process of party formation characterized by tendencies toward both organizational integration and disintegration. Indeed, the multitude of parties and proto-parties that dot the political map at the moment bespeaks a condition in which coalition is essential to achieving any particular purpose, and the lines separating one party from another often remain or become correspondingly blurred.⁶

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 189.

⁶Michael Urban and John McClure, “Discourse, Ideology and Party Formation in the Democratic Left in the USSR”, in Urban, Michael, ed., *Ideology and System Change in the USSR and East Europe*, New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1992, p. 93.

In the coalition building process, coalitions were formed more frequently on the basis of political expediency than on common ideological or political goals. Since parties in an organized way had not yet formed, there was not much of a tendency for an individual to be affected by existing group affiliations. Thus, a group or individual could simultaneously be a member of several alliances or unions having mutually opposing goals. Political parties have more appeal to voters than do factions; this perhaps helps to explain the fluid coalition-building process within the CPD. As William Nesbitt states, “faction politics tend to remain murky for the voter, prone to *ad hoc* combinations or majorities in decision-making which shift uncertainty from issue to issue, and thus ill-equipped to provide clarity of electoral choice or democratic accountability.”⁷ While the situation in the USSR was somewhat different--the parties at this time had not and were not preparing to face the electorate as parties--there was clearly a desire to present a unified front, to oppose the CPSU, and to try to belong to some form of organization that would help promote the aims of individual People’s Deputies.

The Movement for Democratic Reforms, provides an interesting example of the kind of opportunistic coalition-building which characterizes the CPD. The Movement for Democratic Reforms, headed by radical reformer Yurii Afanas’ev, was a coalition of Nikolai Travkin’s Democratic Party of Russia (a pro-reform group), the Republican Party of Russia (a centrist group which grew out of the CPSU’s Democratic Platform), and the People’s Freedom Party (a component of the Russian National Assembly, a patriotic movement which favored a revival of great Russia and believed that territory in dispute between Russia and other republics or nations--South Ossetia, the Kiril Islands, and the Crimea, for example--should be made a permanent part of Russia).⁸ The groups were ostensibly united around support for “democratic reforms,” although

⁷William Nisbet Chambers, “The Concept of Party: An Analytical Model”, in Crotty, William J., ed., Political Parties and Political Behavior, Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1966, p. 71.

⁸Kenneth J. Varnum, “Political Blocs, Factions, Movements, and Parties”, unpublished manuscript, Washington, DC: American Committee on U.S.-Soviet Relations, 1992, pp. 9, 4, and 11-12.

it might be argued that at least the People's Freedom Party did not support the same direction of reform as the Democratic Party of Russia, for example. The confusing network of alliances among very different parties brings new definition to the old phrase "politics makes strange bedfellows." Characterizations of the political landscape are very difficult because party interactions were both unpredictable and transient.

A third area of discord between Western theory and Soviet practice centers on ideology. Given the fluidity of both party interaction and the rapidity of the evolution of what was permissible in democratic action, ideology had little chance to clarify itself and become attached to a specific group. Rather, groups frequently issued new platforms in connection with a new alliance or a split. As an added discouragement to developing a firm ideology, the concept itself had taken on a negative connotation because of the overwhelmingly ubiquitous prevalence of the Communist Party's ideology in Soviet society. Soviets had become so thoroughly disillusioned with the importance attached to ideological views and positions by the Communist Party and the Soviet government that they tended to place very little credit in a group's ideological stand, preferring to rely on other factors such as who claimed membership in that group.

A party's or group's popularity was often linked directly with the popular status of its most well-known individual members. Parties even came to be known by the name of their leader; for example, the Democratic Party of Russia was almost universally called "Travkin's Party." When a key individual left one group for another, the deserted group often lost a noticeable amount of support because the people tended to view personas as more important than ideology. Some of the more cynical rising politicians understood this phenomenon well. Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, the right-wing political figure and head of the neither liberal nor democratic Liberal-Democratic Party, proponent of a reunified Union and a capitalist, centralized Russia, and surprise winner in the December 1993 Russian election, responded to a question about his party's

program in 1989 by saying, “My program? It is like everybody else’s: *perestroika*, a free market, and democracy.”⁹ Zhirinovskiy’s glib response reveals a clear understanding on his part of the negligible importance of a clearly defined program, especially before the collapse of the Soviet state and the Communist Party, and the significance of appearing as an opposition figure, an alternative to the political center.

Narrative Description of Events

One of the key elements in Gorbachev’s plans for economic and political reform was the creation of a rule-of-law state that would deprive the Communist Party of its ability to rule by decree. The USSR Congress of People’s Deputies, elected in March 1989, was meant to be a legislature which derived its authority from the Constitution, not the whim of the Party, and which would codify political and economic changes as law. The CPD was hampered from the start both because the elections were only partially democratic (contested), and because of inexperience with parliamentary procedures and organization--in a one-party state, there is little need for parliamentary groups.

The elections to the USSR CPD were the first direct experience most Russians had ever had with democracy. As a first attempt, they showed that Russians, although unaccustomed to electoral politics and candidate choice, quickly realized the importance of the moment even though the overall outcome of the elections was virtually predetermined by the CPSU. The Party had structured the elections in such a way that two thirds of the 2250 seats were filled by appointment--i.e., by Communist Party members. The remaining one third was subject to open balloting in which local organizations could nominate candidates to run against a CPSU candidate. Communist candidates were able to win some of the seats in these openly-contested districts,

⁹Gleb Pavlovskii and Nina Belyaeva, “Opposition and Multiparty Politics”, in Pribylovskii, Vladimir, Dictionary of Political Parties and Organizations in Russia, Washington, DC: CSIS, 1992, p. ix.

meaning that the non-Communists ended up with something under 750 Peoples Deputies being elected, so the overall ideological slant of the USSR CPD was predominantly in favor of the CPSU.

The meaning of these elections has been the subject of much discussion among scholars, some of whom view it as a victory for democracy and others, like Brendan Kiernan, who view it as little more than “a type of *matreshka*: a clever set of nested institutions that reflect changes in the political climate [and] were fun to look at, but [which] served little practical purpose.”¹⁰ The importance of the USSR CPD elections lies somewhere in the middle. While far from being a textbook example of democracy in action, the elections were important because they established for Soviet society that the CPSU was not automatically the people’s choice. On the contrary, in contested elections non-Communists and, more notably, individuals with actively anti-Communist stances, proved able to win seats.

Another unexpected result of these elections was that voters showed that they were surprisingly able to discriminate among candidates, expressing preferences for certain candidates over others. This was surprising because for so long there had been no contested elections; there was simply a slate of candidates for whom one voted, no questions asked. The preferences expressed by the voters, though, were not particularly sophisticated. Voters frequently rejected the Communist candidate in favor of an opposition candidate simply because there was an opposition candidate. In other cases, in districts with only one (i.e., Communist) candidate, voters crossed out his name, effectively voting against him. In the old-style Soviet system of voting, ballots were printed with the single candidate’s name on them. To vote for the candidate, a citizen would simply drop the ballot into the ballot box. To vote against the candidate, the voter would have to go into a booth across the room from the ballot box and cross out

¹⁰Brendan Kiernan, The End of Soviet Politics: Elections, Legislatures and the Demise of the Communist Party, Boulder: Westview Press, 1993, p. 73

the official candidate's name--an act considered a blatant form of dissidence and protest. The voting procedure has remained the same up through the present day in Russia.

Now that the rules of the process had changed so that they was not only allowed, but encouraged, to vote against a candidate, Communist or not, voters did so. There were 2895 candidates running in 1500 electoral districts; 1352 districts had just one or two candidates. (See Table I.) Faced with a situation in which almost three quarters of election districts had more than one candidate, Soviet citizens went to the polls and frequently voted the official Communist candidates out. The composition of the CPD was ultimately 85 percent Communist (two thirds of the total number being appointed, directly or indirectly, by the Party), meaning that less than a quarter of the deputies could be considered oppositional.¹¹ Nonetheless, Soviet voters felt considerable pride in having actually selected their representatives.

Aside from introducing a new process to the Soviet electorate, the 1989 elections strongly affected the way independent political organizations operated. The political sphere became significantly more complex, for the simple world of one candidate and one platform had been replaced by the more complex universe of candidates and platforms--and this was even before alternative political groups were allowed to formally exist. The new organizations had to learn to cope not only with the electorate, but with each other. The 1989 campaign, according to Kiernan, "marked a turning point in Soviet electoral politics. Competitive elections forced candidates, for the first time, to grapple with the complexities of campaign strategy and tactics."¹² Furthermore, the elections "gave independent activists a chance to form electoral blocs, organize individual campaigns, and, in general, prepare more thoroughly" for future elections.¹³

¹¹Geoffrey Hosking, *The Awakening of the Soviet Union*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1991, p. 165.

¹²Brendan Kiernan and Joseph Alstrup, "The 1989 Elections to the Congress of People's Deputies in Moscow", in *Soviet Studies*, vol. 43, No. 6, 1991, p. 1062.

¹³Kiernan, p. 161.

Many of the changes in party activity, hinted at through election results, became pronounced once the CPD was in session. A chronic difficulty experienced by these first groups was a severe lack of cohesion. In the early stages, most groups (like the Inter-Regional Deputies Group) considered themselves a sort of loyal opposition; that is, they claimed to want to work within the existing framework to encourage reform. And in fact, in the first year or so, they rarely pushed the limits set by Gorbachev and the Communist Party.

TABLE I.
NUMBER OF CANDIDATES PER DISTRICT
1989 USSR CPD ELECTIONS¹⁴

Number of candidates	Number of districts	Percent of Districts
12	1	0
11	1	0
10	0	0
9	9	0.6
8	0	0
7	1	0
6	4	0.3
5	12	0.8
4	27	1.8
3	109	7.2
2	953	63.5
1	399	26.6
Totals	2895	100.0%

One of the most significant stumbling blocks to party formation was the nature of the newly elected parliament. As noted above, a significant majority of the Congress was still Communist; the opposition, though, was far more vocal than at any time in the past and could rely on the power of having been popularly elected. Opposition-type figures were elected not so much because of what they thought about specific issues, but because of their reputations for dissidence or their stalwart characters. Voters had not yet reached a stage of sophistication at which they would discriminate among

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 67.

candidates based on issues; rather, a reputation as a dissident was sufficient to set a Yeltsin apart from a party *apparatchik*; even candidates with little or no actual association with Yeltsin could benefit themselves by claiming they were close to him.

According to Kiernan, the most important point for voters was not a candidate's political viewpoint but the candidate's political biography and what Kiernan calls the "Yeltsin effect."¹⁵ The "Yeltsin effect" describes the success enjoyed by candidates who signed a telegram protesting the investigation into Yeltsin's campaign by the Election Commission. The deputies who jumped on the Yeltsin bandwagon did relatively well in the elections; of those candidates who signed the telegram, 46 percent were elected; of those who did not, only 26 percent were elected.¹⁶

David Apter writes about a tendency in politically modernizing nations for the individual politician to play a central role in the party development process. He believes that "in the area of political modernization, no single role is of greater importance than that of party politician. This is because political parties are themselves historically so closely associated with the modernization of Western societies and...have become the instruments of modernization in the developing areas."¹⁷ The personification of the political scene was "one of the most noticeable elements of the transition period" and "encouraged both voters and analysts to forget that the interwoven incentive structures of a modern political democracy depends on the creation of a party state."¹⁸ The emphasis on the individual complicated unified action, group "leaders [having] won parliamentary seats not by virtue of their party affiliation [which was largely unknown or underdeveloped] but by riding on the crest of the democratic wave, with voters unable to distinguish between the various contenders."¹⁹ This tendency toward personification was all the more striking because Soviet society

¹⁵Kiernan and Alstrup, p. 1062.

¹⁶Kiernan, p. 63.

¹⁷Apter, p. 179.

¹⁸Kiernan, pp. 11-12.

¹⁹Pavlovskii and Belyaeva, p. ix.

had for so long emphasized the primacy of the collective over the individual; the system was not geared toward individual actors.

Interestingly, the one actor who potentially could have benefited most from individual action was committed to preserving the old system--even though he could have used his popularity to create a movement independent of the CPSU. Mikhail Gorbachev himself is unquestionably the pivotal figure in the reform process; he also strangely remained outside that process. Throughout this early period of party formation and interaction, including the growing tensions and divisions within the CPSU, Gorbachev tried to stay above this new arena of political activity. Gorbachev was such a significant political actor that he filled the available political space at the center of the spectrum, thereby forcing others to take up positions to his the liberal and conservative sides. Since he was not able (or did not choose) to take the initiative in creating a new reform party, but instead tried to reform the center of the CPSU, other individuals filled this political vacuum, radicalizing the process to a greater degree than might otherwise have occurred.²⁰ Russian President Yeltsin has been widely criticized for making the same tactical error that Gorbachev did--that of not forming an independent political party around himself, and thereby taking advantage of the popularity he wielded, at least initially in his presidency.

Once the CPD had been elected, it began the complex and painstaking process of debating policy and creating legislation. This process was, like so much else about the USSR CPD, utterly novel to the Soviet public. The first sessions of the Congress in the summer of 1989 were televised live. The spectacle of elected officials openly questioning Gorbachev, the Party, and past decisions was spellbinding for most Soviets and they stayed home from work and school in such vast numbers to watch that work productivity dropped dramatically for the duration of the first session of the Congress.

²⁰I am indebted to Lucinda A. Hotchkiss for pointing out the importance of Gorbachev's position at the center of the political spectrum.

(Subsequent sessions were taped and rebroadcast in the evening hours to prevent high worker absenteeism.) Among the topics brought up from the floor of the Congress in the first weeks of the in the summer of 1989 were the Soviet government's use of military force in breaking up a demonstration in Tbilisi in April 1989, the Chernobyl disaster, and the Communist Party's monopoly on power. Watching as popularly-elected deputies questioned decisions of the Soviet government in so public a forum as the nationally-televised sessions of the CPD brought a new sense of political power to the Soviet people--democracy, to some degree, worked for them.

Democracy, however, did not necessarily work that well. Having passed the initial formative stage, the Congress began to take up the nitty-gritty work of organizing itself and debating legislation. During the first year of its existence, the beginnings of party formation gradually took place, as deputies banded together in loose-knit groups and somewhat tighter factions. The status of such groups remained vague, from both the legal and practical viewpoints. Factions and independent political parties remained illegal until the repeal of Article 6 of the USSR Constitution in April 1990. The lack of a legal basis, it must be noted, did not stop these groups from forming; rather, it made it more difficult for them to organize into true political parties. Some of the groups eventually made the transition from parliamentary group to political party, but many others found themselves unable to operate beyond the confines of the Hall of the Soviets where the Congress met.

Neformal'nye and the Political Process

THE ORIGINS OF THE *NEFORMAL'NYE*

At first glance, it would appear that there could be no basis for independent political action in a country that had been under the oppressive thumb of the one-party Communist system for 72 years. This view has been shown to be incorrect by a number of scholars, including Jerry Hough, Moshe Lewin and Geoffrey Hosking. Lewin, in particular, has closely examined Soviet society and concluded that, contrary to popular conception, there was a nascent civil society, which, in his definition, is the “aggregate of networks and institutions that either exist and act independently of the state or are official organizations capable of developing their own spontaneous views...and then impressing these views on their members, on small groups and, finally, on the authorities.” Furthermore, the very existence of such a civil society means that “one-dimensional ideas about the Soviet system and its past, present and future must be discarded.”²¹

Thus, social structures independent of the state had begun to appear during the Brezhnev regime in the late 1960s and 1970s. These *neformal'nye*, or informals (called “informals” because they did not officially register with the authorities but existed without any kind of official backing or approbation), were the major victors in these first elections. Such structures were highly decentralized and locally organized interests groups, clubs, and discussion circles which came into being quietly during the 1970s. According to Geoffrey Hosking, youth found themselves with increasingly better educational backgrounds but, at the same time, with increasingly poorer opportunities

²¹Moshe Lewin, The Gorbachev Phenomenon: A Historical Interpretation, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991, pp. 80-1.

to obtain challenging work since many of the best jobs were handed out as *nomenklatura* appointments. These dissatisfied youths sought an outlet for their energy, an outlet they found through the creation of informal groups--*neformal'nye*--which were essentially clubs based on personal interests such as sports, theater or math and science.²² These groups had surprising, albeit limited, influence even before Gorbachev's arrival on the political scene and the verbalization of *glasnost'* and *perestroika*.

In the late 1970s, under Brezhnev, some of these groups, particularly the ecologically-oriented ones, succeeded in shutting down heavily polluting industries on the shores of Lake Baikal. In other cases, though, they were not successful because they were not sufficiently well organized--for example, Klub 81, a Leningrad group of people interested in poetry tried to prevent the destruction of the Hotel Angleterre, which aside from being an architectural landmark was the place where the Russian poet Yesenin committed suicide in 1925.

The early successes of coordinated actions, combined with the failure of individual acts in other cases, prompted the *neformal'nye* want to become better organized. A group of Leningrad informals, for example, set up an umbrella organization called Epicentre which published a monthly samizdat publication, Mercury, to keep local groups apprised of what all of them were doing.²³ Mercury, incidentally, survived until the 1990s, eventually becoming an independent news service with the same name.

Although their origins as sports clubs and common-interest groups were modest, once Gorbachev came into power the influence and importance of *neformal'nye* grew dramatically. Their numbers grew at a tremendously high rate--from an estimated 30,000 in 1988 to twice that just one year later.²⁴ These numerous, yet unofficial and

²²Hosking, pp. 69-70.

²³*Ibid.*, p. 71.

²⁴*Ibid.*, p. 70.

unsanctioned, groups became increasingly involved in less purely social activities, branching out into quasi-political fields of interest. In 1989, the number of informal publications tripled to over 600. After Gorbachev's relaxation of control over the central media, their many voices began to be heard both more frequently and more loudly. These bodies, especially the "progressive-democratic" ones, were most influential at the grassroots level, even though some tried to expand to the Union level.²⁵ During the 1989 USSR CPD elections, informals were the key force backing alternative (non-Communist) candidates against the Communist candidates in contested electoral districts.

THE ROLE OF THE *NEFORMAL'NYE* DURING THE ELECTIONS

Vera Tolz, a researcher at Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, describes three major interests pursued by these informal organizations during the Gorbachev years, and links these interests with the geographical location of the group. Groups founded in the Ural Mountains and in Siberia tended to be conservative and nationalist, exhibiting "strong Russophile" tendencies. Groups in central Russia and the Volga River area were generally more concerned with ecological issues, perhaps because of the importance of agriculture to that area's residents. Finally, groups located in Moscow and Leningrad tended to be the most strongly pro-democratic in nature. It was primarily these groups which were the seeds of the party movement in the late 1980s.²⁶

According to Nina Belyayeva, a scholar at the USSR Academy of Science's State and Law Institute, in a 1988 interview, *neformal'nye* up to that time had not truly represented public opinion because of "the lack of a carefully considered legal basis and mechanism for expressing this opinion. But the 'vagueness' of the social basis of the movements themselves also has its effect," in allowing small groups appear larger than

²⁵Steven Fish, "The Emergence of Independent Associations and the Transformation of Russian Political Society", *Journal of Communist Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (September 1991), pp. 304-5.

²⁶Vera Tolz, *The USSR's Emerging Multiparty System*, New York: Praeger, 1990, p. 24.

they actually were and thereby inflating their importance.²⁷ Thus, *neformal'nye* at these early stages served more as channels for communicating public discontent or policy desires, than as creators of that opinion.

During the 1989 USSR CPD elections, *neformal'nye* were able to play a significant role in the outcome of an election at a national level. While these groups had previously been active in society, their activities had been almost exclusively confined to reactive measures, such as protesting a specific decision of the government or trying to halt some ecologically damaging project. It was not until 1988-89 that the *neformal'nye* found they could take the initiative and began to act in an overtly political way, aiming to foster new government programs and actively promoting specific policies. Leonid Volkov, a member of one informal group, the Democratic *Perestroika* Club, writing shortly before the 1989 USSR CPD elections, takes a positive view of the role of informals (an understandable position given that he is a member of one such group):

The club movement has also developed rapidly. After the euphoria of the new-found freedom of speech and the initial torrent of words, the clubs started to change...turning to more mature political activity..... In short, thanks to these clubs, the Soviets are learning to be citizens and are being initiated into independence, critical thought, and autonomous action. They are learning to take political risks and defend their positions in public, alone or collectively.²⁸

The reappearance and development of skills and abilities which had been suppressed throughout the Soviet era, were critical for the success of democratic elections, even if they had not yet been practiced beyond the most rudimentary level. During the elections, *neformal'nye* drew their power by “articulating the grievances of a disaffected intelligentsia [and] also by picking up and reflecting the resentment of broader masses.”²⁹ Despite of their increased activity, they still held no legal status

²⁷Interview with Andrei Fadin and Nina Belyayeva in *Moscow News*, 2 October 1988, pp. 8-9, as reported in FBIS, 18 October 1988, pp. 67.

²⁸Leonid Volkov, “Restructuring in the Clubs”, *Liberation*, 30 December 1988, p. 5, as reported in FBIS, 19 January 1989, p. 74.

²⁹Geoffrey Hosking, Jonathan Aves and Peter J.S. Duncan, The Road to Post-Communism: Independent Political Movements in the Soviet Union, 1985-1991, New York: Pinter Publishers, 1992, p. 205.

because there was no law on informal organizations. However, even when a legal framework for their registration was established, many informals chose to remain that way, preferring the known qualities of unofficial life to the possible benefits of official registration.

The role of the *neformal'nye* changed during the elections. According to Steven Fish, the months leading up to the USSR CPD elections were “the crucial take-off phase for independent political activity in Russia... [The] elections to the USSR CPD bolstered the self-assurance and radicalism of the new groups, some of which succeeded in having their ‘own’ candidates elected to the CPD.”³⁰ In addition to achieving the election of specific candidates to the CPD, the success of these *neformal'nye* had another effect. They were able to begin the gradual process of changing the negative connotations associated with the word “pluralism.”³¹ To describe someone or some group as “pluralist” in Soviet society was to conjure up a decidedly negative image. This understanding of pluralism arose from nearly 70 years of Soviet-style democratic centralism, in which the Party decreed, and the members agreed. Government policy decisions had been decided unanimously, first within the Party apparatus, and only then submitted to the ostensible government, the USSR CPD for approval. The old-style CPD only met once or twice a year, and routinely approved without dissent every piece of legislation submitted to it. Finally, these decisions were presented to the world as the will of a unified (and unanimous) Soviet people. By starting to chip away at the negative view of pluralism, the *neformal'nye* were quite successful at winning elections. The newly rediscovered positive side of pluralism marked a fundamental shift in public opinion about the kind of political system they were to have.

Furthermore, as Kiernan points out, these elections had played an even more important role in terms of the future of Russian political life: Russian politicians had

³⁰Fish, p. 304.

³¹Ronald J. Hill, “The CPSU: From Monolith to Pluralist?”, in *Soviet Studies*, Vol. 43, No. 2, 1991, p. 223.

demonstrated both a rudimentary sense of political strategy and an ability to develop tactics to suit various situations. Imaging, political endorsements, political alliances, mudslinging, and coat-tail effects were all part of the campaign. The surprising sophistication of some Moscow candidates suggests that they learned to interact with their political environment.³²

Kiernan states his views here with a bit of hyperbole; nonetheless, the essence of his opinion has merit. While it may have been only the Moscow voters and candidates who acted on such a sophisticated level, the fact is that at least some groups did work surprisingly like “real” political parties are supposed to, even in these first stages of evolution.

The Elections and the USSR Congress of Peoples Deputies

A process similar to the rise of the *neformal'nye* in society as a whole took place within the USSR Congress of Peoples Deputies after the March 1989 elections. Much as Russians had banded together in informal groups to express their opinions and increase their collective power, so did Peoples Deputies in the Congress to a degree not seen in Soviet politics since the 1917 Revolution. The process of translating the existing divisions within society to the elective Congress of Peoples Deputies began with the announcement that competitive elections for the CPD were to be held. The political groupings created during this period can not be called independent parties because independent parties remained illegal until the repeal of Article 6 of the USSR Constitution in April 1990. Nonetheless, informal factions and groups formed within the CPD throughout the first year of the CPD's activities, and continued to flourish once a legal basis for their existence was established the following year.

³²Kiernan and Alstrup, p. 1052.

THE 1989 CPD ELECTIONS

These political groupings within the USSR CPD gradually changed from being wholly unofficial bodies to being protoparties and deputies groups. Some of them existed only fleetingly, while others managed to stay cohesive for several years and then to make the transition from the Soviet parliament to the Russian. The ones that did not survive were not able to overcome the problems of creating a platform and attracting supporters. The long-term importance of some of these groups was essentially limited to the very fact of their existence, publicly acknowledged factions being an entirely new phenomenon on the Soviet political landscape.

While many of the political groupings that came into being during the 1989 CPD were fleeting, some of them proved their ability to endure and to influence the course of events, and a few of the more cohesive and consistent groups eventually made the transition to being fully-fledged political parties. A number of other groups came into being during this first year of the USSR CPD's existence, but most of them had little effect at the time, although some were able to transform themselves into political parties and organizations at the Russian level after the breakup of the Soviet Union. Among these are the Moscow Party Club, Democratic Union and the Social-Democratic Bloc. These organizations did not actively break with the Party until later, once it was possible (both legally and politically) to do so, and had varying degrees of success in creating political organizations that could interact with the CPSU and other groups. The Moscow Party Club was formed by CPSU members but did not actively seek to alter the CPSU itself. It was basically an independent political organization whose founders happened to be Communists. Democratic Union, one of the earliest political groups to come to public activity during *perestroika*, never was able to compromise,

according to Michael Urban, and maintained a radicalized, anti-center position.³³ In December 1989, a social democratic bloc arose, later to become the Social Democratic Party of Russia. The social democrats saw their role as leading the “new middle class,” which had arisen out of *perestroika* in its struggle against the nomenklatura. The social democratic group also opposed the CPSU’s having cells in the military, police and throughout other governmental bodies; however they soon began to duplicate these cells on their own.³⁴

A third group was the Moscow Party Club, a union of self-declared “progressive” deputies who met to prepare independent proposals for the first session of the USSR CPD. According to a spokesman for the group, “the Moscow Party Club believes, what is necessary during the current stage is not an improvement and upgrading of party structures and relations but a fundamental reform of the party presupposing a transition from the old model to a modern democratic model of a parliamentary-type party operating under the conditions of a multiparty system.”³⁵ Although open to all deputies and the most “progressive,” i.e., democratic, of the CPSU factions, it also had very little influence because the CPSU Secretariat thoroughly ignored its proposals. However, the main focus of activity was on the CPSU itself and the various organizations that developed within it and broke away from it.

All of the groups mentioned here were able to put forward platforms, work to shape future elections and, especially later, in the Russian parliament, support or oppose specific political and economic reforms. This minority of “successful” parties--those that substantially changed Soviet political life--arose out of essentially two related tendencies within the CPD as a whole. The first tendency was of the existing structure

³³Michael Urban, “Party Formation and Deformation on Russia’s Democratic Left”, in Hubert, Robert and Kelley, Donald, eds., *Perestroika-Era Politics: The New Soviet Legislature and Gorbachev’s Political Reforms*, Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1991, p. 132.

³⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 135-6.

³⁵V. Lysenko, “En Route to a Renewed Party,” *Argumenty i Fakty*, 20-26 January 1990, reported in FBIS 31 January 1990, p. 60.

to crumble. Throughout the period from 1989-1990, the Communist Party, once perceived as monolithic and wholly unified, began to show signs of internal stresses and divisions. As the CPSU gradually broke apart and lost its facade of unanimity, a number of groups rose out of its ashes. Some of these dissatisfied Party members stayed within the CPSU, creating factions with different goals and ideological views. The second tendency involved those individuals who thought that the democratization could best be achieved by creating political groupings outside the Party structure. The most important of these groups was the Inter-Regional Deputies Group (IRDG), which first coalesced as a loose voting bloc of liberal deputies within the Communist Party but eventually grew in importance and independence, despite never really making the transition from informal deputies group to true political party.

THE CPSU AND PARTY FRAGMENTATION

Since 1985, changes in the Soviet Union and Russia have become commonplace; it is easy to forget that not many years ago, any kind of alteration in the Soviet Union's behavior was notable just because it had taken place. Events unthinkable even a few months before happened became the norm. It is easy now to view the decline of the Communist Party's grip on power as an understandable, even predictable, outcome of Gorbachev's policies. However, when the first cracks started appearing in what had been viewed as a monolithic body, observers were not so sanguine.

In the late 1980s, open opposition to the CPSU was still sufficient cause for police action, if no longer arrest. In January 1989, three months before the elections to the USSR CPD, Democratic Union staged a rally in honor of Human Rights day which was broken up by the Moscow militia. One member of Democratic Union immediately afterwards spoke at a simultaneous rally of the People's Front Coordinating Committee which was taking place not far away. The author of a *Krasnaya Zvezda* article on the rally reported with some indignation that the man introduced himself as a member of

Democratic Union, explained that the militia had just broken up the rally, and then called on members of the People's Front to vote candidates proposed by Democratic Union in the upcoming elections or, if there were no "independent" (i.e., non-Communist) candidates, to vote against the Communist Party members.³⁶

The Communist Party was not as unified in this election as it had been in previous, centrally-controlled elections. A *Pravda* editorial in February 1989 lamented the newfound independence of some CPSU candidates: "...[Y]ou get the impression that some Communists nominated as candidate deputies have forgotten the general party platform: They do not explain its essence and substance to the masses, and they don't correlate their personal programs with its provisions--and in some cases *they even diverge from it* [italics added]." ³⁷ The editorial hints at the beginning of fissures in the once-unified structure of the CPSU. Once the reigns were slightly loosened, *Pravda* feared, with justification, given hindsight, control would soon be lost totally. Since *Pravda* was the official press organ of the CPSU, its editorial gives evidence that the center of the Party had realized how visible divergence of opinion within the CPSU had become.

It must be remembered that the CPSU, despite being considered both in the West and in the Soviet Union as being a unified, monolithic body, was in fact not. To start with, no group of 20 million individuals thinks with one mind on any subject. Furthermore, membership in the CPSU was a virtual prerequisite for appointment to any position of importance within Soviet society, in the state apparatus, industry, education or anywhere else. Party membership was the ticket to employment advancement and upward mobility. Many people joined the Party not because it represented their ideological views but because they really had no other choice. As

³⁶V. Kosarev, "Informal Groups--What Are They?", in *Krasnaya Zvezda*, 21 January 1989, p. 4, as reported in FBIS, 26 January 1989, p. 64. This article takes a distinctly anti-informal position; whether this is due to the author's personal opinion or that of the paper is difficult to tell.

³⁷*Pravda*, 15 February 1989, p. 1, in FBIS, 16 February 1989, pp. 49-50.

such, the Party contained a wide range of opinion and ideology, all of which was carefully masked over by the official “Party Line” until Gorbachev began to implement *perestroika*.

During the first sessions of the CPD, the previously-existing divisions within the Party came to the surface and were illuminated for all to see. It became possible to speak of different threads of ideology and thought within the CPSU. As Vera Tolz points out, these groups may have hoped to provoke a split within the CPSU, but in the first year or two of political activity were hesitant to break completely with the old system.³⁸ The reluctance to take a step away from the CPSU may be a consequence of Russia, as a nation, not having a clear conception of a final goal. Russia is unlike the other Soviet republics in that the other republican Communist Parties had already gone through internal divisions or had broken with the official line of the CPSU. Also, Russia was not trying to break free of the Soviet Union; in the eyes of many Russians (if not most), Russia was synonymous with the Soviet Union. At the same time, however, the Russian wing of the CPSU was undergoing a series of divisions based not so much on the fate of the USSR as a geopolitical entity as on the direction and speed of economic reform. “In the absence of the overriding, unifying factor of the desire for independence, there was a greater concern in Russia with ideological differences than in the non-Russian republics,” commented one observer.³⁹

The term “faction” had very strong negative connotations and its use was enough to make many people distrust and discredit the new groups which were for the first time openly declaring their differences of opinion with the main part of the Party. “Factionalism” had for so long been a mighty epithet against heterodox thought, and the practice of democratic centralism had brought the losing minority onto the winning side by passing all decisions unanimously. The following definition provides a useful

³⁸Tolz, p. 25.

³⁹Hosking, Aves and Duncan, p. 108.

insight into the typical conception of factions in Soviet society at the time. A critic of the Democratic Platform, writing in *Krasnaya Zvezda*, presented the following “well-known” definition of the word: “an isolated section of a political party with its own views and platforms that differ from the party’s views and platforms, with its own discipline and--this is the most unacceptable feature--engaging in a struggle against the party while remaining for a time within its ranks, splitting the party from within.”⁴⁰ However, Democratic Platform was neither isolated nor, according to its leadership, trying to split the party. Rather, its leaders averred, the Platform wanted to ensure a voice for a sizable segment of the Party’s membership in the time leading up to the Party Congress.

As 1989 drew to a close, the CPSU became increasingly fragmented and found it progressively more difficult to maintain a unified front. A number of new factions and splinter groups came into being: Democratic Platform, Marxist Platform, and the IRDG were the most significant of these. Democratic Platform and Marxist Platform were factions within the CPSU promoting independent reform packages and basing them on differing interpretations of existing Communist Party dogma. Of these three groups, the IRDG was the one that came closest to becoming a true party, and will be discussed in some detail in the subsequent section.

Democratic Platform began as a conference, and later became an organized group of Communists who wanted more influence over the development of the CPSU Platform during the 28th Party Conference and who wanted to speed the course of democratic reform. Gavriil Popov, at the founding meeting of the Platform, said that most “of the ills of our *perestroika* over the last five years are connected precisely with the fact that we devote a great deal of thought to how to change where power is going, but devote no thought at all to whence we derive that power. As a result, we get one contradiction after another.”⁴¹ While it is unrealistic to expect that the democratization

⁴⁰V. Davydov, “Who Is Working Toward a Split?”, in *Krasnaya Zvezda*, 17 April 1990, p. 2, reported in FBIS, 17 April 1990, p. 64.

⁴¹Moscow Television, 21 January 1990, reported in FBIS, 31 January 1990, pp. 78-9.

process should have taken place in a coherent, organized fashion, there was so little agreement among different political groups, and those groups acted so independently of each other, that the process was made more complicated and disparate than it could have been, especially in view of the more cohesive democratic movements that arose in other former Soviet republics and in East Europe. Unlike these other transitioning states, in Russia no one party or conception coalesced out of the ranks of newly-formed political bodies.

The founding of Democratic Platform was a radical step toward the dissolution of the one-party system, and caused a great deal of political commotion on both sides of the political fence separating radicals from conservatives. The organization's program stressed the following points: transfer power from the apparatus to the soviets; repeal of Article 6 of the Constitution; adoption of the concept of democratic socialism to give priority to individual values over class values; rejection of democratic centralism; removal of party cells and control from the mass media; abolition of party bodies from the armed forces, KGB, and other state organizations.⁴² Within a year of Democratic Platform's founding, most of these goals had gained general acceptance; some, in fact, had already been implemented. By the time the Soviet Union collapsed in December 1991, all three of Democratic Platform's goals had become reality although Democratic Platform could not realistically take much credit for these changes. In 1990, though, these were quite radical proposals. Democratic Platform's founding conference was attended by 455 deputies, representing almost 60,000 CPSU members; a fairly small proportion of the total number (approximately 20 million) of Party members.

As radical as these proposals were, some Democratic Platform supporters felt that they did not go far enough. For example, Yurii Afanas'ev, at that time still a member of the CPSU and a supporter of Democratic Platform, thought that the group had stopped short of a correct position. Speaking to an Italian reporter, he said he "saw

⁴²*Argumenty i Fakty*, 17-23 February 1990, p. 8, reported in FBIS, 1 March 1990, pp. 72-3.

no alternative” to a split, because the “present party Central Committee is so conservative as to reject the mere hypothesis of any change that would reduce the CPSU’s power. Its aim is to conserve democratic centralism and iron discipline forever.”⁴³

The rest of Democratic Platform’s leadership, though, did not appear willing to go that far. The leader of Democratic Platform, Vyacheslav Shostakovskii, said that

We propose, as a way towards the radical renewal of the party...establishing in the party the power of the party mass, the formation of organizational structures and statute norms that would guarantee and ensure this.... I do not think this is a split. It is, all the same, an attempt to breathe new life into and galvanize the process of renewal of the Party.⁴⁴

Shostakovskii described Democratic Platform “not [as] a faction but as a platform, and it has not been structured organizationally, incidentally. Its main task is performing analytical work, in the primary organizations” of the Party structure. He continues to stress that the Democratic Platform is not trying to split the party: “A split in the party might occur not on the initiative of the ‘DP,’ but as a result of the passivity of the CPSU leadership. The Democratic Platform is creating...an opportunity for democratic communists to realize themselves through support for its basic ideas.... [S]ome people will leave the party [as a result of Democratic Platform’s activities] and create their own.”⁴⁵

Following Democratic Platform’s lead, a second alternative body within the CPSU, Marxist Platform, took up a position on the ideological spectrum to the right of the mainstream of the CPSU and in opposition to Democratic Platform. Marxist Platform was founded in April 1990 by the conservative wing of the Party. It still came out as reformist, but with a strong Communist element to the reforms. According to

⁴³Interview with Yuri N. Afanas’ev by Fiammetta Cucurnia in *La Repubblica*, 8 February 1990, reported in FBIS, 14 February 1990, pp. 64-5.

⁴⁴Moscow Television, 21 January 1990, reported in FBIS, 31 January 1990, pp. 78-9.

⁴⁵Interview of V. Shostakovskii by L. Timofeyeva in *Uchitelskaya Gazeta*, No. 11, March 1990, p. 5, reported in FBIS, 17 April 1990, pp. 60-1.

one member, D. Kiselev, “The movement arises from the federation of Marxist party clubs and supports the elimination of the existing model of the CPSU as a party of barrack-room communism, but it is not in favor of the elimination of the Communist Party itself. In other words, these Marxists would like to gain the right to a second attempt....”⁴⁶ The platform was further described by another member, Yu. Leonov, as supporting proletarian internationalism, democratic demands “if they correspond to the interests of the working majority,” an alliance with the intelligentsia and with those who agree that the liberation of the worker is the liberation of all.⁴⁷ The Marxist Platform’s program, such as it was, contains little more than clichés and formulaic statements that resonate of Brezhnev-era Party platforms. It is unlikely that there would be a favorable response to “democratic demands” that were actually in the interest of “the working majority”--the working majority would likely want a far greater say in the organization of the country than the elite would wish to allow them.

The combined effect of these two platforms, along with the plethora of new parties which had been appeared over the previous year, were enough to end the CPSU’s chances at becoming a true party of its own. With the creation of the Democratic Platform, later to become the Republican Party of Russia, many of the CPSU’s members who wanted the Communist Party to become a Western-type party had already left.⁴⁸ Marxist Platform’s foundation helped to polarize the remainder between conservative and middle-of-the-road members, with little room left for creating a parliamentary party out of the remains. It is somewhat ironic that the one party that had a firm, ideological position, the CPSU, was unable to preserve that stance.

⁴⁶Moscow Television, 14 April 1990, reported in FBIS 16 April 1990, pp. 48-9.

⁴⁷Yu. Leonov, *Argumenty i Fakty*, 7-13 April 1990, p. 8. reported in FBIS, 16 April 1990, pp. 48-9.

⁴⁸Kiernan, pp. 142-5.

THE INTER-REGIONAL DEPUTIES GROUP

As the CPSU was gradually becoming fragmenting throughout the summer and fall of 1989, the Inter-Regional Deputies' Group (IRDG) was coming into being. Founded at the end of July 1989 and led by such prominent figures as Boris Yeltsin and Andrei Sakharov, the IRDG viewed itself at its inception as a loyal opposition which would operate within the framework of the CPSU and existing power structures to promote *perestroika* and generally support Gorbachev's reform efforts. In an interview given just after the IRDG's creation, Konstantin Lubenchenko, one of its founders, said that the group had been formed for several reasons. First, the IRDG wanted to ensure that deputies had a structure within which to work--someone to provide legal and technical support. Second, it wanted to make the Parliament responsible for its own budget and apparatus--to gain an important measure of independence from the state. And third, the IRDG realized that the only way deputies could hope to make their opinions known was as a group, unified against the CPSU apparatus.⁴⁹ By taking the bold step of forming, the IRDG became the first opposition faction in the Soviet parliament since Lenin's prohibition of them in 1921.

Although it called itself a "loyal opposition," what it was opposing remained somewhat unclear. The IRDG positioned itself as a voting bloc in support of Gorbachev's *perestroika* and against the conservative opposition to it; sometimes it came out in opposition to Gorbachev, generally because he was moving too slowly. However, the IRDG opposed most of all the conservative *apparat*, even though it was the centrist, Gorbachev-led position that generally held sway in the Parliament.

Popular understanding of the IRDG reflected the IRDG's unclear middle position and was correspondingly unclear. It is also possible that the idea of an independently-

⁴⁹Moscow Domestic Radio Service, 30 July 1989, reported in FBIS, 1 August 1989, p. 43.

formed party was too far beyond expectations for some Soviet citizens. One, for example, N. Petrov from the Karelian city of Petrozavodsk, asked about the IRDG, “Who set it up and for what purpose? What questions will it resolve?”⁵⁰ It seems that Mr. Petrov missed the point that the IRDG was an independently created body, set up as a political organization, and not a committee created by the state to resolve some issue. Nonetheless, that popular miscomprehension about the role of such independent groups could occur is not surprising given both the novelty of the situation and that even its founders disagreed about its role and purpose. There were concerns among many deputies in the USSR CPD that the IRDG was going to cause a “split” of the Congress; a smaller number took the more unrealistic view that the IRDG was going to seize power. Neither of these two outcomes seems particularly plausible though, given that the IRDG never really operated as a unified, directed organization.

The members of the IRDG had only the most general programs in common. Responding to the above question about the IRDG’s purpose and unity, one of its members, Deputy Yaroshenko, responded that “all of us deputies have different convictions. I see nothing terrible in the fact that various approaches clash today.” Yeltsin, in a separate interview, explained that the IRDG did “not aim by any manner of means to split the Supreme Soviet, struggle for power, create opposition or block any bills sponsored by people’s deputies.”⁵¹ Several days later, though, Yurii N. Afanas’ev said of the IRDG that

we are or can become an opposition. There is nothing bad about that, it is quite normal and indispensable. Opposition does not mean enmity. It is rather a complementary factor, an alternative. Some people accuse us of causing splits. However, both the Supreme Soviet and the Congress of People’s Deputies had already split before our group existed. It is a consequence of the splitting, not the cause.⁵²

⁵⁰*Komsomolskaya Pravda*, 30 July 1989, p. 2, reported in FBIS 3 August 1989, pp. 42-3.

⁵¹TASS, 2 August 1989, reported in FBIS 3 August 1989, pp. 43.

⁵²Interview with Yurii N. Afanas’ev by *Der Spiegel*, 7 August 1989, p. 110, reported in FBIS, 22 August 1989, p. 73.

With its founders in relative disagreement about the IRDG's methods, role and program, it is no wonder that the group was unable to become a party of its own. The IRDG resembled much more closely a group of deputies looking for a cause to unite them than a group of deputies with a cause looking for support.

There was a more pressing concern about a split *within* the IRDG than that of the IRDG causing a split in the CPD or the CPSU. The deputies within the IRDG fell into two broad camps. One of the divisions, with Gavriil Popov and Anatolii Sobchak as its spokesmen, felt that if *perestroika* were to succeed, the state would have to separate itself from society and allow market forces to have freer reign. The other division, led by Aleksei Yablokov, a leading environmentalist and future Russian Minister of the Ecology, thought that the government should get more involved in many areas, especially those connected with the environment, and that the market would lead to further degradation of the environment.⁵³

A parallel division existed between liberal democrats, such as Popov and Sobchak, who thought that with the formation of the correct governmental structure, the system would work itself out, and the populists, such as Yeltsin and Nikolai Travkin, who thought that reducing the emphasis on institutions and increasing the importance of individuals was the key to healthy economic reform.⁵⁴ Thus, there was a fundamental conservative-liberal split though the IRDG which would need to be resolved if the group were going to effect the course of reform--which was, perhaps, its only unifying goal. The IRDG was not meeting expectations of the influence the population expected it to wield. One observer, Dmitriy Linnik, commented that "the Interregional Group is not nearly as effective in parliament as it was expected to be. I

⁵³Urban and McClure, pp. 112-13.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, p. 115.

mean, some of its members are prominent in the work of parliament, but it isn't very active as a group...."⁵⁵

The IRDG took until December 1989 to begin discussing becoming an actual political party, independent of the CPSU or of any other group. However, the process by which this took place was more than somewhat contentious. Yurii Afanas'ev made a speech during a session of the CPD on December 21, 1989, announcing the decision of 250 deputies to form an independent party and to call for the repeal of Article 6 of the Soviet Constitution.

I am empowered to read out to the congress a statement that, so far, has been signed by 140 people's deputies from the Interregional Group. I say 'so far' because it has not been signed by everyone who has expressed a desire to do so and who will sign it later.... I represent the position of at least 250 delegates, USSR people's deputies.... We are against the decreed leading role of the CPSU.... We are against the direct and straight intervention of the party apparatus, the Politburo, and the CPSU Central Committee in state, economic, and other spheres in the life of society.... Our common aim is to ensure effective parliamentary activity, indispensable conditions of which are the full-blooded functioning of parliamentary groups, the granting of the right to set forth and defend one's positions on all the matters at issue and to communicate them to the country's citizens through one's own press organs.⁵⁶

At first, it appeared that the IRDG had taken the major step of breaking with the past and reforming itself as a parliamentary faction. However, on subsequent days, it turned out that Afanas'ev had at least overstated the IRDG's position, if not acted unilaterally. A number of deputies, including Mikhail Poltoranin (future Russian Minister of the Press and Information Media), expressed amazement that their names had appeared on the statement, when in fact they had either never seen it or not signed it. Another IRDG member, a worker from the Urals, said that he had joined the IRDG "with an open heart," but then began to see power games and struggles being played out, to the point where "the leaders of the Interregional Group have begun to oppress

⁵⁵Interview of Dmitriy Volkov and Dmitriy Linnik by Marina Dimova on "Inside Report" on Moscow Radio World Service, 23 October 1989, reported in FBIS, 25 October 1989, pp. 59-61.

⁵⁶Russian Television, 21 December 1989, reported in FBIS, 22 December 1989, pp. 40-2.

me in precisely the same way” as the Khrushchev and Brezhnev regimes had oppressed him. “I want to be independent and to have my own opinion and position. The only thing I am seeking is respect for opinions.... Unfortunately, in the Interregional Group I see no basis for such activity. Afanas’ev’s statement is further confirmation of that.”⁵⁷ Afanas’ev hurt the IRDG in this move by creating an image of a clique-led group that did not pay heed to its members--hardly an auspicious step toward mass support.

There are a number of possible explanations for Afanas’ev’s actions. One is that the IRDG had decided to stake out a position, and see who followed. This does not appear very probable because the same result could have been achieved at the IRDG congress held just before Afanas’ev’s speech and would have caused a great deal less anti-IRDG sentiment. A second, more likely, possibility is that Afanas’ev could have been acting on his own, trying to raise an issue or stir up deputy sentiments for his own purposes. This explanation seems particularly plausible given Afanas’ev’s reputation as being a vocal proponent of reforms more radical than those supported by most of his fellow deputies. In 1993, he was among the first to resign from the Russian Supreme Soviet to deprive Ruslan Khasbulatov of a quorum and thereby throw the balance of power over to Yeltsin; virtually no one followed him in this more recent protest, either.

Conclusion

The development of political organizations in the USSR Congress of Peoples Deputies was the seed from which true political parties later grew in both the USSR and Russia. It was just a start and a great deal of evolution was necessary before the factions and groupings could become parties. They were hampered by poorly developed ideologies, poor cohesiveness, and the absence of legal base for their existence until the repeal of Article 6 of the USSR Constitution. The path of development followed by

⁵⁷Yu. Nikolayev, “Opposition Posture: Collective Assessment of the Statement in the Name of the Interregional Group”, *Sovetskaya Rossiya*, 24 December 1989, reported in FBIS, 2 January 1990, pp. 41-3.

these groups was loosely organized and directed, with parties changing platforms and directions as the political winds shifted in the Congress. However, despite their weaknesses as effective political bodies, some of these parties were able to survive and even flourish.

During this early phase of party development, ideology played a relatively small role among the newly-created independent political organizations. It was sufficient for them to be “pro-democracy” or “reform-oriented” because the public was more interested in the fact of opposition than in the nature of the groups doing the opposing. However, the situation was quite different within the CPSU. Ideological concerns became much more important as new platforms arose within the CPSU, each one claiming to represent the wishes of Communists. The developing political system in Russia took a different path than it did in most of the other Soviet republics, in that new political parties tried to stay within the CPSU, at least at first.

The scope of ideological differences was quite wide. At one end of this spectrum are appeals to concepts of man’s natural state of freedom. The following example, excerpted from Democratic Russia’s Declaration of 29 January 1989, resonates strongly of Rousseau:

Man is born free, and there is no single ideology, no single social ideal, which can make him lose that freedom. The primordial right of man is the right to doubt, to search, to disagree with the majority, to err, to establish his own concepts. In essence, freedom is the right to oppose. We have been gradually deprived of this freedom since October 1917, and while we have not yet been completely relieved of it, our entire country’s history warns of the coming future.⁵⁸

Appeals to nationalist tendencies within the population also took place, aiming more at capitalizing on popular fears and exploiting ethnic prejudices than at more lofty, philosophical ideals of democracy and independence. The appeal of the All-

⁵⁸“Declaration”, 29 January 1989, reproduced in RAU Press, Vol. 2, p. 56.

Russian National-Patriotic Bloc to the people of Russia sets a much different tone and is a strong example of its type:

Compatriots, Russian! Brothers and Sisters! The cup of our worries and troubles, our fears and humiliation, is overflowing. Our greatest worry, one beyond our strength to understand, is the fear of losing our Russian statehood. The state, which was created by the labor and sacrifices of our centuries-long history is today, during our generation, because of our tolerance and negligence, is in deadly danger.⁵⁹

The differences in these two excerpts clearly reflect the differences in the ideological leanings of the respective organizations. The wording of each text is such that few people beyond those already-converted would likely be attracted to the organization. The dichotomy between radical reformer and reactionary is clear, reflecting the sharp ideological differences between those seeking democracy and those seeking a strong, renewed Russian state. The broad middle ground, though, is much less clear, occupied by a variety of organizations, including large segments of the Communist Party and most of the political organizations that arose during the USSR CPD.

At the same time many groups based their existence on opposition to the Communist Party and the old system of government, relying more heavily on a simplistic ideology that is reducible, in essence, to “we are not Communists, we are reformers/democrats” (making it difficult to distinguish among them from an ideological basis and masking their differences), the Communist Party itself was fragmenting. Thus, political groupings based their existence on opposition to a perceived monolith that suddenly was revealed to be not only not monolithic, but by 1990, only loosely held together. This is one of the most significant legacies of the developing party system. By bringing existing divisions to the fore and creating new fissures within the system, the new political parties demonstrated both to themselves and to the population as a whole that the system could be changed, that there was a real

⁵⁹“Appeal to the Russian People,” 27 February 1991, reproduced in RAU Press, Vol. 5, pp. 4-5.

possibility for altering the *status quo*. In “discovering” democracy in this way, the Soviet Union also discovered the path to its dissolution.

The situation in Russia contrasts sharply with that in many of the other Soviet republics. The parties in other Soviet republics had something solid to hang on to, a nationalist, anti-Soviet movement that unified opposition parties against the center. Russia is frequently compared with East Europe and the former Soviet republics as a means of understanding the process of political party formation. This comparison is not particularly apt because it shows that Russia did not develop a single, national popular front or equivalent party, such as happened in the Baltic republics, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Hungary, and elsewhere. On the contrary, the broad anti-CPSU sentiment that existed was expressed not as *support for* a particular group or coalition of groups, but as *opposition to* the current system. Since many Russians view Russia as being the core of and synonymous with the Union, the opposition in Russia had a difficult time unifying because there was not a widely-held belief to serve as a unifying point. The one potential rallying point for democratic organizations was the abolition of Article 6 of the Soviet Constitution. However, when this Article was finally repealed in March 1990, creating a constitutional framework for the existence of other political parties, the one unifying force that could have united the “democrats” against the center was also very effectively removed.

By the time the USSR CPD lifted the ban on other political parties, the focus of political action had shifted to the Russian Federation, where elections were held to form for the first time a Russian Congress of Peoples Deputies in April 1990. Not enough time had yet passed for Russian politicians to form true parties. In the Russian CPD elections, “formation of political parties...was still at a rudimentary level, with no clear association between a candidate’s program, his organizational affiliation and his

subsequent behavior in the legislature.”⁶⁰ This is not to say that parties played no role in the later election; they did, but that role was diminished because the party system was still very weak. The electorate did not demand that candidates hold to their campaign promises, and candidates felt free to be opportunistic in shifting their alliances among political groupings.

Many of the parties that had first come into being in the USSR CPD either moved over to the Russian CPD or worked to create parallel structures there. Simultaneously, many of the other republics began abrogating power to themselves, declaring their own republican CPDs superior to the USSR CPD, and claiming sovereignty over their own territory. Tensions were further exacerbated by the “battle of laws” between the USSR CPD and the republican CPDs; as sovereignty declarations became stronger and stronger, many republics declared that no union-level legislation had effect on their territory unless approved by the republican CPD. Over the subsequent 18 months, leading up to the August 1991 coup attempt, the Soviet government lost increasingly more power to Russia and the other republics. The movement for party development in the USSR had shifted to Russia before the coup took place; the coup attempt, botched as it was, placed the final nails in the coffin of the Soviet experiment and ended that phase of political development. Party development, though, continues apace, as the process of political evolution marches on.

⁶⁰Stephen White, “Union of Soviet Socialist Republics”, in New Political Parties of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, Bogdan Szajkowski, ed., Harlow, United Kingdom: Longman Group, 1991, p. 262.

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