

Voronezh Businessmen Go Communist to Rebuke Ruling Party

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VORONEZH — There is little love lost between Mikhail, a successful Voronezh businessman in his 50s, and the Communist Party.

Back in 1991, he took to the streets to support then-President Boris Yeltsin against a putsch by Communist Party hardliners. In 1996, he sided with Yeltsin again, casting a vote for him in the famous runoff to the presidential election, when Yeltsin narrowly defeated Communist contender Gennady Zyuganov.

But Mikhail is voting Communist this Sunday.

"I didn't go to vote in Soviet times when there was only one candidate [on the ballot]. Today we [also] have no politics, we have no rule of law, and no one cares about our opinion," he told The Moscow Times in an interview.

Mikhail asked not to be identified by last name, saying it would do harm to his business enterprises, including a popular Voronezh restaurant.

But he is going to do what he can to spoil the party for the ruling United Russia, which is struggling to maintain its grip on the State Duma in the elections on Sunday.

He is far from a black sheep among the middle-class denizens of Voronezh, a city of 980,000, situated 450 kilometers south of Moscow in the famously fertile "black earth" zone.

The city is part of the Communists' traditional stronghold or "red belt." But now, even many of Voronezh businesspeople are saying they are voting for the country's No. 2 party in protest of United Russia's corruption and nepotism.

"Call it good or bad, but the Communist Party is real opposition today," said Konstantin Ashifin, 41, a regional lawmaker with the leftist party.

"Some blame the Communists for trying to start a revolution. But we say that if certain steps are not taken, there will be a revolution anyway," Ashifin said.

Ashifin is a case in point himself. A successful entrepreneur with an MBA in finance, he used to be a member of the liberal pro-business Union of Right Forces until the party folded in 2008.

His own political views are closer to European social democrats than Soviet-era Communists, and he joined the Communist Party in protest against the economic policies of the Kremlin, which had imposed this year a stifling 30 percent social tax on small businesses.

"We wanted to create a market economy, but created an oligarchy monster," Ashifin said about the Russian economy, dominated by mammoth state corporations.

"When we watch television and then go out in the streets, it looks like we and the ruling authorities are living on different planets," said Ashifin, who is deputy head of Voronezh legislature's budget committee.

The Communists and the Liberal Democratic Party are traditional alternatives to the ruling party, but some local experts say the public is tired of both and may opt for A Just Russia, a relatively new entry in the field.

Created in 2006 with the Kremlin's blessing, A Just Russia has gone rogue this year, attacking the United Russia and the ruling establishment in general.

Communist heavyweight Sergei Rudakov, another regional lawmaker, said he remained unconvinced by his rival's harsh rhetoric, calling A Just Russia "pseudo-opposition."

But he admitted that the party has a good shot at the third place in the region's polls, behind United Russia and the Communist Party, but ahead of the Liberal Democrats.

None of them, however, expect to topple the ruling party, which has a secret weapon — regional governor Alexei Gordeyev, for whom even vehement opponents of United Russia in Voronezh admit grudging respect.

"We know that he is a part of the power vertical, but he is a strong personality and a smart system manager," Ashifin said of Gordeyev, a former deputy prime minister and agriculture minister who has been governing Voronezh since 2009 and heads United Russia's regional party list.

"The governor and United Russia are not the same," Rudakov said.

"We're trying not to attack him, things have started to move under him. But the problem is that he leads United Russia, the party of crooks and thieves," said Just Russia's regional official Yury Shershnyov.

With United Russia's rating continuing a glacial downward slide nationwide, the party is banking it all on the 56-year-old governor in Voronezh.

Gordeyev is the cornerstone of United Russia's campaign in both the city and the region, said a political operative working for his campaign staff. He spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to talk to media.

The effort is hard to miss. Posters urging the populace to "Support Gordeyev, Vote for United Russia" are everywhere in the city, from billboards to buses. Window of shops and restaurants trumpet the call, and you cannot even ride an elevator without facing a Gordeyev ad.

The governor himself is spending the pre-elections week touring the region in what was officially his regular working schedule, which critics have called pure campaigning for United Russia.

The opponents are wisely not trying to field a direct contender. Advertisements for Communists and the nationalist-populist Liberal Democrats are few and far between and sport no names of candidates, going instead for general campaign slogans such as "The Liberal Democrats for Russians."

The Moscow Times could not find a single street billboard for A Just Russia in Voronezh. Local television has also refused to air party commercials calling "For Russia without crooks and thieves" — a derogative slogan used for United Russia.

But the party is not idle. Its staffers are working hard spreading the party newspaper combining political coverage with cooking recipes — a hit with housewives. Even A Just Russia's enemies admit it to be a clever strategy.

By contrast, the ruling party is doing its best to tout its practical achievements. Most of its billboards depict successful real estate projects, including a local drama theater and a important bridge linking two parts of the city, that were renovated under Gordeyev.

Economic statistics also speak in the governor's favor. Budget revenues have grown 8 percent from last year, and unemployment fell 18 percent, according to data from the Voronezh branch of the State Statistics Service.

This does not mean the region is a paradise on Earth: Salaries remain low, with a bookstore clerk telling The Moscow Times that he earned just 6,000 rubles (\$190) a month.

On the other hand, Gordeyev even helped the city to resolve a problem with the tap water, a shortage of which has plagued Voronezh for the last two decades. Under the new governor, whose Kremlin connections make it easy for him to attract federal funding, the city has begun a massive overhaul of its sewer system.

"If Gordeyev leaves, the flow of money might be cut off. We've got used that many things are done through personal connections," said Galina Desterlo, a local journalist.

Gordeyev called rumors of his possible departure "lies" and told local reporters on Monday that he intends to stay on the job until at least 2021. "It's enough to achieve everything that's in the cards," he said.

Unlike other governors who might suffer if United Russia does not score well at the ballots, Gordeyev has nothing to worry about, experts said.

United Russia is using governors and other senior officials as "locomotives" for regional party lists throughout the country, said Alexander Kynev, a regional politics analyst with the Foundation for Information Policy Development.

But the tactics works better in Voronezh than elsewhere because of Gordeyev's popularity, Kynev said by telephone Thursday.

Gordeyev ranked in the top three in a recent "governor survival rating" by the St. Petersburg Politics think tank, along with Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyanin and Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov.

The governor's spin doctor said the party's objective is win at the ballots in Voronezh, but "without fanaticism."

"The task's not to take Berlin, but to get a simple majority," he said, referring to the storm of the last fascist stronghold by Soviet forces in 1945, one of the biggest military operations in history.

And yet it looks like even a former deputy prime minister is not enough. Several Voronezh residents told The Moscow Times that United Russia is resorting to the same voter pressure that it is widely accused of employing nationwide.

A handful of state employees, including law enforcement officers, said their bosses explicitly urged them "to make the right vote" and tick off United Russia at the ballots. All asked not to be identified, fearing reprisals.

Some also said their superiors asked them to take absentee ballots and turn them in — allegedly to be used at polling stations by other people to vote for the ruling party.

There are traditionally few observers at elections in Voronezh, and so local officials are used to rigging the vote and are likely to try it this time as well, said Alexander Boldyrev, an activist with Golos, the country's sole independent watchdog.

"The bigger the turnover, the bigger the violations," he predicted.

Many voters share his pessimism. "The elections have already been predetermined," white-collar worker Dmitry said gloomily during a lunch interview at a city restaurant.

But Dmitry, who did not give his last name, said still would vote, though as of Tuesday, he remained divided between "two opposition parties." He refused to name them.

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