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# Russia Has a New Socialist Movement AN...

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Russia Has a New Socialist Movement

AN INTERVIEW WITH

MIKHAIL LOBANOV

The big winner in Russia's recent election was the Communist Party, which jumped to almost 20 percent support. The party is today being transformed by a new wave of democratic socialist activists opposed to Vladimir Putin's rule.

Mikhail Lobanov at a campaign rally. (Courtesy of Sofia Kalinina)

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INTERVIEW BY

Ilya Budraitskis

The parliamentary elections in Russia held on September 17-19 brought another nominal victory for President Vladimir Putin's United Russia party. Yet the most remarkable result was the leap in support for the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF), which came in second with 19 percent of the vote.

Despite the usual fraud favoring Putin allies, the KPRF managed to win over a new electorate especially young people in large cities who regarded voting for the party as their only opportunity to say no to the existing order. Since the 1990s, the KPRF's official program has remained rooted in a mixture of Stalinism, nationalism, and social-democratic paternalism. However, in the last few years, a generation of young regional leaders has emerged within the KPRF, turning it more to the rhetoric of defending democratic rights, social equality, and ecology.

One of the most telling parts of the election in this respect was the campaign by Mikhail Lobanov, a thirty-seven-year-old mathematics instructor at Moscow State University. Mikhail was nominated by the KPRF but positioned himself as an independent democratic socialist. He beat Putin's United Russia candidate by over ten thousand votes (a 12 percent margin) though the tally was then manipulated to deny him election to parliament.

The popular vote for candidates like Lobanov was, nonetheless, a real breakthrough for the radical left showing its potential to voice popular discontent even in the difficult political conditions of present-day Russia. For example, activists from the Russian Socialist Movement and a number of other radical left-wing groups traditionally critical of the KPRF played a significant role in his election campaign.

Ilya Budraitskis, a leftist political writer in Moscow, spoke to Mikhail Lobanov about the result for Jacobin.

IB

Tell us a bit about your political background.

ML

At school I enjoyed reading history books, though they were just historical novels, mixed with more scientific books. At university, already as a maths student, I spent my free time in libraries and bookshops, and through reading fiction I decided that I needed to read Marx, Lenin, and Trotsky. For example, I picked up *The Revolution Betrayed* at Moscow State University [MSU] library.

In 2006, I attended a Marxist student seminar, held at MSU by activists from the Socialist Movement "Vpered" ["Forward," the Russian section of the Fourth International]. For the next year and a half, I took part in various actions against the commercialization of education and in defense of labor rights with Vpered. Party meetings were held in the office of the Confederation of Labor of Russia, and this is how I got to know the Russian independent trade unions.

IB

How did a group of activists emerge at Moscow State University?

ML

We were looking for areas of struggle within the university. In 2009, the administration wanted to tighten the rules for access to the dormitories. We started a protest campaign, collected seventeen hundred signatures and eventually succeeded in getting these new rules canceled. As a result of this three-week campaign, we formed a core of university activists, about thirty people. We solved everyday problems, but it was obvious that this was not enough to take us to another level of organization.

Then we started to cooperate with the university's Communist Party branch which included both teachers and students. In 2011, the administration decided to tighten up the dormitory rules again, and we managed to organize a really powerful and successful protest campaign. It directly involved hundreds of people and our core became larger. It was just at that time that large-scale protests began after the Duma [parliamentary] elections, which had been rigged in favor of Putin's United Russia. At the university level, this culminated in a struggle between our own Initiative Group and the official MSU Student Council, closely associated with the ruling party.

We were also actively involved in independent observation in the parliamentary elections, and at the polling station in MSU's main building, we defeated United Russia heavily, despite the mobilization of administrative staff.

We also actively participated in all the protest rallies of 2011-12 in Moscow, and a lot of students who came out to protest but were not ready to join any particular political force joined our contingent.

This experience prompted, among other things, the Confederation of Labor raising the issue of creating the "University Solidarity" trade union. So, we began to help groups of students and teachers in other universities through the union. We were also actively involved in campaigns to preserve the park around the MSU buildings, which constantly attracted developers' interest. Through this we came into contact with local councilors and residents actively engaged in neighborhood issues. We held joint events, especially in the Ramenki area. The university authorities tried to fire me twice for these activities, in 2013 and in 2018.

IB

How did you decide to stand for election this year?

ML

Over those ten to fifteen years, a very wide network of contacts has developed, including with the university branch of the KPRF. I was invited to run for the KPRF nomination in almost every local election. But I refused because this stood far from my own main agenda of higher education as this field is instead tied to the federal laws and budget

passed by the Russian State Duma.

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In 2020, it was clear from communication with the KPRF members at the university that they were ready to offer me a nomination to the State Duma. And I felt that if I went to the MSU district and mobilized the connections I had built up, I could win. I had a feeling that enough enthusiasm could be stirred up for this campaign. But I didn't have a precise idea of how to make that happen and what specific actions needed to be taken in the elections, as this was something different from what we had been doing before. But since my intuition told me it could work, I decided to give it a try.

For a few months we had discussions and debates about the first steps; there are very few people on the Left who have electoral experience. The KPRF does have such experience, but it is very peculiar. It doesn't recommend asking people for money, but instead relying on funding from the party, and perhaps looking for some other sponsors. We understood that we had to act differently.

IB

What is your constituency like?

ML

The whole of Russia is divided into 225 districts, with an average of five hundred thousand voters each. Our constituency is in the West of Moscow. In the previous elections, it was seen as quite a protest-oriented district, and the KPRF had previously done fairly well here. At the same time, however, the liberals from Yabloko have always been a real force there, too, and this time they put up a strong candidate.

There is a university in the district, so, purely statistically, this district has a higher concentration of MSU graduates and employees than in Moscow. There was a sense that the MSU brand in this district adds something of itself. I'm a mathematician, not a politician, and that could play positively.

Mikhail Lobanov. (Courtesy of Ivan Afanasyev)

It was in February, I think, that we knew who our main rival would be. It was announced that United Russia was going to field Russian television talk show host Yevgeny Popov. He is a TV propagandist who broadcasts Kremlin stances about hostile Western countries and the terrible Ukraine, trying to shift people's attention from internal problems to external confrontation and stirring up hatred between nations. His manner is arrogant, but a lot of people really like it, I have even met them.

IB

How was the campaign organized? How far did it depend on the KPRF?

ML

Surprisingly, the KPRF had no tight political control whatsoever we wrote our program ourselves, without consulting the party. The KPRF allocated less than 15 percent of our total campaign budget. They held training sessions, meetings for candidates, where they told them how to run a campaign. They told us, for example, not to engage in crowdfunding; they wouldn't give us any money anyway, it could cause problems. We did not take this advice, however, and ended up raising about 6 million rubles (more than \$80,000) during the campaign.

Compared to what United Russia or the liberal opposition spends, this is not much at all. However, political motivation played a major role most of the activists were committed to socialist views, and everyone had an

expectation that we could really beat United Russia. So, we had about two hundred activists taking part in our campaign, broken down into several divisions in different parts of the constituency.

IB

Tell about your election agenda.

ML

Our main slogan was: "The future is for everyone, not just for the chosen few." In Russia, there are a bunch of people who have seized all the political and economic resources and they are building the future for themselves alone. We want a redistribution of income, of political power, in favor of all. Around this central thesis, we have built detailed demands regarding the problems of the district and of the country as a whole. Important points included the fight against barbaric commercial development in Moscow; compulsory recycling of garbage; protection against the closure of schools and hospitals; and of course labor rights and the need for strong trade unions.

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We went to the electorate with this agenda, and apparently we built up a good image of a candidate and his team, who was dealing with various problems with enthusiasm, who was trying to convince everybody, to gather resources, to get organized. This resonated with people. The experience of a university candidate, a mathematician with public campaigning experience, talking about trade unions, defending green spaces.

People liked it, but also had a dilemma: in Russia many look at the vote as an opportunity to show the authorities their protest. For them, it is important that an opposition candidate could win, regardless of his views. Since in my constituency there was a campaign for a liberal candidate with vast resources, many people were watching until the last moment and guessing who they should support in the end.

IB

What was the result?

ML

We beat the United Russia candidate by more than a third of the votes. He ran a very expensive campaign, his banners were everywhere, he was supported by the local administration. But despite this, we defeated him handily. The whole situation was turned upside down by the results of the electronic voting the next morning.

IB

In terms of numbers, how much did you get in the polling stations and how much in the e-vote?

ML

I got forty-six thousand votes in the regular vote, twenty thousand in the electronic vote, and TV propagandist Popov got about thirty-four to thirty-five thousand in the regular vote and forty-five to forty-six thousand in the electronic vote. But we do not believe in the results of the electronic vote: they were rigged in the interests of the authorities.

IB

You were supported by "Smart Voting" a tactical, anti-Putin vote proposed by supporters of Alexei Navalny. What do you think of this strategy in general? And how do you feel about Navalny himself?

ML

It is a tool that works in big Russian cities. The strategy boils down to voting for the opposition candidate who has the best chance of defeating United Russia. Opposition voters are urged to vote for that candidate regardless of their views. Navalny and I have big ideological differences, of course, as I stand on the radical left. Navalny used to stand on the Right, but in recent years he has shifted, which is to be welcomed, as he has a great media influence.

The fact that his supporters have started to raise social issues such as minimum wage and praise trade unions has had a positive effect. But we still stand on different positions, and besides, Navalny's circle is more right-wing than Navalny himself. You can see that in the situation where he ended up in prison. But the important thing is that he's been imprisoned for his political activities. I oppose this and believe that he should be released. I believe that an honest discussion with him and a clash of ideological positions is necessary.

IB

What are your political plans after the elections? You personally, and what do you think should be the strategy for the Russian left, for your campaigners?

ML

We are now thinking about how to keep the team we have built up, because it was very large. It will be harder from now on, but we see the demand for further activity. Those who participated had great highs: it was a victory, and everyone perceives it as a victory. What seemed possible only in theory, we managed to do, which means that we can do a lot. We were counting on the real resources of the State Duma, we wanted to run a campaign and keep the collective on the basis of the State Duma. But it did not work because of the falsifications.

*IB: Will you take part again?*

ML: There are guys on the team who would like to try themselves out in local elections. I am more cautious about it because it could be a dissipation of energy. We need to think, if we win the municipal elections in several districts, how we can consolidate ourselves. I am more interested in how we can channel our energy into developing the trade union movement and self-organization in universities. Elections might also be a good idea, but I don't have the feeling that that's all we should be doing. After all, I also saw the last election primarily as an opportunity to tell people about ideas I believe in.