

Finita la Comedia?
*If Democracy Is to Survive,
Yeltsin Must Learn to Compromise*

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All things considered, the United States is experiencing the initial shock caused by the results of the parliamentary elections in Russia in December 1993, where Communists and Russian nationalists received a majority of the seats. The time has come to put emotions aside and analyze the causes and consequences of what has happened.

Without a doubt, the election results reflected an extremely difficult economic situation, a sharp decrease—three decades' worth—in the living standard, as well as social tensions caused by the severe economic stratification of society, which only two years ago had a balanced across-the-board income. Now in Russia, two percent of the population has a legal income 400 times exceeding an average salary (and illegal income is even higher). By voting, the population was protesting against the authorities' helplessness in combating hundreds of criminal groups that terrorize the people and now feel themselves masters of the streets. People are demoralized by the monstrous corruption and injustice, constant lies and extortion by local authorities and police. Even those who plunged into the new economic policies are also unhappy, said Valery Neverov, president of Hermes, one of the largest private corporations in Russia. He called Russia's current government “very anti-free market.” Only in 1993, more than 200 prominent Russian business people were killed, dozens of offices were bombed, and not one “murder for hire” was investigated.

Of course, everyone understands that the country is experiencing profound reforms and thus many problems need to be viewed with some objectivity. But unfortunately, too many bad decisions have been made by Yeltsin and his team—too many mistakes and lies that have forced the people to stop believing and trusting them. Prior to the parliamentary elections, the voting rules were constantly changing (the last change was published 48 hours before the start of the voting) and unequal regulations for campaigning were created. Most frequently seen on the television screens were the leaders of the pro-Yeltsin bloc, Russia's Choice, with Yegor Gaidar and Vladimir Shumeiko. Many people had abandoned Yeltsin after the artillery attack on the old Parliament in October 1994, with the ensuing falsification in the number of casualties, and after the temporary dissolution of the Constitutional Court. And then he retracted his promise to conduct a new presidential election in the summer of this year, which

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again demonstrated that he is a “master of his word.”

The people are very irritated by the unabashed bureaucratization. For example, in the past, when the country was twice as large, the Council of Ministers of the Soviet Union, the Supreme Soviet, the Presidential Council, the residence of the president of the USSR along with the Cabinet, aides, and advisors were located on the Kremlin grounds. Now only President Yeltsin occupies the Kremlin. His administration is located on a large campus—a complex of buildings of the former Central Committee in the center of Moscow. The Russian government is now in the newly renovated White House. The lower house of the new Parliament, the State Duma, is now across the street in the towering edifice of the former COMECON; and the upper house, the Council of the Federation, will be in the old Press Building—an eight-story landmark in a historical Moscow neighborhood. Furthermore, still more space will be needed for joint sessions of both houses and a new building will be constructed in a hurry. As far as the number of ministers, Russia has returned to the pre-Gorbachev era, and has also exceeded the number of generals and army officers compared to the Cold War period.

But this, of course, is not everything. Election results reflected a strong political ignorance in Russian society, an inability to distinguish between demagoguery and populism, the desire to receive simple and fast answers to very complicated questions, and political fatigue and apathy. Many Russians, even those who had voted for Zhirinovskiy's Liberal Democratic Party, were shocked by the election results. No one in Russia had expected his victory. The people were so certain that the pro-Yeltsin Russia's Choice would win that they felt compelled to vote for the opposition so that Yeltsin's victory would not be so absolute, which seemed dangerous as well.

A student of Moscow State University interviewed her friends who had voted, as she had, for Zhirinovskiy. It turned out that many people had voted *against* Yeltsin but not necessarily *for* Zhirinovskiy. “There are so many naïve fools in Russia,” she later lamented. Therefore, it would be incorrect to think that those who voted for Zhirinovskiy will continue to follow him. Many people have a strong desire to take back their votes (yet, they would not give their votes either to Yeltsin or to the Communists). However, continued criticism and mockery of Zhirinovskiy in the Russian and world press have provided him with increased sympathy and “love of the people.” Furthermore, the intentional lack of acknowledgment by Vice-President Al Gore and then by President Bill Clinton during their visits to Moscow has further distanced him from the democrats and given him the opportunity to declare that the U.S. is *already* afraid of him, *already* “does not respect” the will of the Russian people and the new Parliament. All this gives Zhirinovskiy new ammunition.

It is necessary to understand two reasons that make Zhirinovskiy a potentially important player in the political game of chess in the former Soviet Union. First

of all, he is neither a joker nor a fool, as the Russian press often portrays him. This sort of journalism misleads the public into minimizing the danger of this man taking a powerful governmental position. He is one of the most intelligent, powerful, and ruthless Russian politicians of the new generation. He is the only one who conducted his election campaign in a purely Western fashion and as a result his personal victory had assured success for his party. Secondly, Zhirinovskiy represents a (although considerably distorted) mirror of contemporary Russian society. More “Zhirinovskys” have appeared throughout the NIS.

Referring to Zhirinovskiy and his politics as fascism is clearly misunderstanding the situation. It is similar to discovering that an AIDS patient has symptoms of cholera and then diagnosing him as sick with cholera merely because it is known how to treat cholera, but not AIDS. Zhirinovskiy is more dangerous precisely because he represents a completely new, unknown phenomenon. He is neither a fascist nor a Communist nor a democrat. He is a Russian nationalist-federalist who does not directly reject democracy in the political process or market values in the economy. He does not fit into any political theory and cannot be explained by any traditional analysis, which makes Zhirinovskiy twice as dangerous.

As we know, simultaneously with the parliamentary elections, a referendum on the new Constitution was also conducted, which brought out a very “raw” and little-known text. Even Russia's Choice proponents criticized it in their speeches. In a sociological survey published in a Russian newspaper, the question was asked: “Do you support the Constitution?,” to which 80 percent answered “yes.” Interestingly, only 16 percent answered “yes” to the question: “Have you read the Constitution?” People were especially dissatisfied, for example, with the lack of guarantees for a universal, equal education (article 43); with the enormous powers of the president—including his power to limit human rights (article 56). Russians immediately remembered an old joke about “socialist democracy”—Rule No.1: The boss is always right. Rule No.2: If the boss is wrong, refer to Rule No.1.

Incidentally, there was also a “social-democratic draft” of a constitution which garnered 1.5 million supporting signatures—more than enough necessary for including it during the referendum. President Yeltsin had suggested to forget about

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it, though. But the Communists will not let us “forget” about it. Yeltsin's draft won by receiving 52 percent of the vote, which was immediately evaluated by President Clinton as an important victory for the democratic forces in Russia. But that is incorrect. A referendum victory by such paper-thin margin does not carry any weight in Russia, where such victory guarantees neither legitimacy of the

new Constitution nor presidential policy. On the contrary, we can say that the glass was in fact 48 percent empty. It is worth noting that the Constitution contains all the possibilities for establishing a presidential dictatorship in Russia. Perhaps this is the reason why Zhirinovskiy did not criticize Yeltsin's draft?

The Parliament began its work during the time of President Clinton's visit to Moscow in January. The primary task facing the deputies was self-affirmation and the search for their niche in Russia's ever-changing political arena. It is clear that the role given to them by Yeltsin will not satisfy them. One of the first issues raised by the Parliament was to change its power vis-à-vis the president, which signifies the start of constitutional amendments. This will especially affect economic reforms, social issues, as well as foreign policy.

In order to weaken Yeltsin, the Parliament will attempt to schedule new presidential elections in 1994. The program of military conversion will be re-evaluated and slowed. Russia's new military doctrine will be modified and strengthened, especially in relation to neighboring countries. Without a doubt, the Parliament will attempt to change the make-up of the government by getting rid of many ministers. The resignation of key figures on the reform team following their electoral defeat (Yegor Gaidar and Boris Fedorov) is no longer a symptom, but the process in progress.

But the Parliament itself will face many complex problems. The first one is the ephemeral, temporary make-up of the Parliament (the Constitution stipulates that new elections be held every two years), which will force the deputies to be more cautious. A severe conflict could ignite between the Parliament and regional authorities, who will not give up the right to control their territories. This will happen not only in Russian republics. Many important Russian regions, such as the Tyumen, Primorye, Tamborskaya, and Voronezhskaya regions voted against the Constitution, which will give their leaders the opportunity to ignore central power "as needed."

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The Parliament's internal structure will depend on the balance of the political forces. Only one thing is for certain—the pre-election balance of powers has disappeared. Russia has no concept of party loyalty, and party "factions" (except possibly for the

Communists) will not exist for very long. Of course, the outcome will partially depend on the position of the centrist parties, but the biggest question of the day is whether Zhirinovskiy and the Communists will form a bloc. Zhirinovskiy is an anticommunist and the Communists are afraid of being accused of being fascist. In order to form this bloc, Zhirinovskiy needs to make a personal decision without being accountable to his party (he may not need to anyhow, as the LDP bestowed its leader with full dictatorial powers), whereas the Communists need

to approve it at the upcoming party convention. In any case, in order to prevent it from happening, Yeltsin must attempt to form his own alliance either with Zhirinovskiy or with the Communists.

The latter is more realistic and desirable, because Communists currently in the Parliament represent a more reform-minded group of the former Communist Party of the Soviet Union and somewhat resemble the leftists currently in power in Poland. But chances for such a bloc are slim because it contradicts Yeltsin's personality and political ambitions. But the question still remains whether the Communists or Zhirinovskiy would agree to a union with Yeltsin or other democrats. Many ranking Communists this author has interviewed, though, are categorically against such a bloc.

This is a question that will be answered in the near future. The fact remains that Yeltsin has been dealt a severe blow with Gaidar's departure. As a result, the Parliament will be more critical, less manageable, more aggressive, less predictable, more decisive, and less united than the one bombed in October. It is very likely that Zhirinovskiy will play the role played by Yeltsin during the Gorbachev years—criticize everything, break all agreements, and emphasize the president's inability to govern the nation. This road brought Yeltsin to the post of president two and a half years ago. It is even more apparent that today Yeltsin is rather lost, disoriented, and often simply incompetent.

It serves us well to remember that not long ago in Georgia, when Zviad Gamsakhurdia (who has recently committed suicide) came to power, he got rid of the opposition, thus creating a powerful opposition outside the Parliament, which quickly brought about civil war. All types of discussions must go on in the Parliament, not in the streets. But . . .

During many centuries of pre-Soviet Russia as well as during the post-Soviet period, *not one* supreme legislative body has died a natural death. All of them have been destroyed by government leaders. Are we finally going to break this tradition?