

# Russian Presidential Politics Today

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"People in our country are not masters of their fate. We cannot say that democracy is in power. There is no democracy here."<sup>1</sup>

—Alexander Solzhenitsyn  
July 1994

"We do not live in a democratic country—it is authoritarian. It may be soft, pro-Western and pro-market, but it is still authoritarian. The structure of the government depends most not on Parliament but on the president and the games around the president."<sup>2</sup>

—Russian citizen  
December 1993

Within the context of Russian/Soviet history, the institution of the president is a very new one. Its shallow roots only reach to February 1990, when Mikhail Gorbachev won USSR Congress of People's Deputies approval for the new post of Soviet president; the first Russian president—Boris Yeltsin—was elected that June. Both posts attempted to duplicate the French and American democratic models in which the president is head of state, but they were created in a country without deep democratic roots and in a time of intense economic, social and political turmoil—conditions which continue to weigh on Russian politics and influence the development of its political institutions. Since December 1991, when Yeltsin both forced Gorbachev out of office and hastened the dismantling of the USSR, the Russian president seems to be unable to escape the Russian historical legacy of one-man rule.

With the end of the Cold War and its bipolar politics, old labels—democracy and communism—do not always fit. Yet many commentators have been quick to label as democratic the political systems and leaders of the newly independent countries, like Russia. But if democracy is the

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voluntary participation of citizens in shaping a just political community, then Russian democracy exists only in embryonic form. While there is a verbal and written commitment by Russia's president to democratic institutions and methods, the day-to-day reality of political life often falls far from any accepted model of democracy. The purpose of this article is to consider Russian political reality—and particularly Russian presidential politics—in the light of democratic ideals.

Some argue it is a mistake to point a finger at President Yeltsin, claiming that a strong strain of anti-reform, nationalist sentiment among many

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Russians—as evidenced by the December 1993 elections—may be pushing the Russian leader away from democratic values. This event, they argue, poses a devilish dilemma for Yeltsin: Either he accepts the will of those Russian citizens who participate in the political

system, and work with their representatives, or uses his power to subvert them and to support pro-reform democrats. In other words, Yeltsin's undemocratic actions are justifiable because they are done in the interest of strengthening democracy. However, as the following pages will argue, ends cannot be used to justify means. The employment of undemocratic methods, particularly on the part of a state's chief executive, will only result in the perversion or destruction of democratization efforts. Yeltsin is, in fact, motivated by habits forged in Soviet times, as are many participants in that country's political life.<sup>3</sup> Russia will never reestablish itself in a democratic mold if its chief executive does not first undergo a reformation of his own.

#### The December 1993 Elections

Yeltsin's term as president has been notable for bitter clashes with Russian legislators and others who oppose him politically. In October 1993, after the bloody dissolution of the Russian Congress of People's Deputies, the Russian president banned over a dozen political organizations as well as a number of newspapers and magazines.<sup>4</sup> At this same time Yeltsin also published a decree calling for elections to a new legislature, a two-tiered Federal Assembly comprised of a 176-seat upper house, the Council of the Federation, and a 450-seat lower house, the State Duma. In the Council of the Federation, deputies (two from each of the 68 regions and 20 republics) were to be elected. On his ballot form, each voter was to choose two of the candidates; those two gaining the largest number of votes were to become that territory's Council of the Federation representatives. Candidates to the Council of the Federation could not also stand for the State Duma. Meanwhile, 450 deputies were to be elected to the State Duma, half of whom were to be elected proportionally on the basis of nationwide lists of candidates put forward by political parties and blocs.<sup>5</sup>

To qualify for the national ballot, political parties had to register with a minimum of 100,000 signatures. This was a difficult task given the brief time

between Yeltsin's decree and the 12 December election date and suggests an effort on the president's part to control the number of groups participating. In a roster published in November 1993, only thirteen of the dozens of politically active parties or organizations qualified.<sup>6</sup> One notable feature of Russian election politics is that the 13 political blocs—rather than publish a Western-style political platform outlining their views—represented themselves almost entirely in relation to the Yeltsin administration and its policies.

Shortly after Yeltsin's call for the legislative elections he issued a second decree calling for a plebiscite on a new constitution. Yeltsin and the Congress of People's Deputies had been wrestling over the drafting of a new constitution for months, particularly over issues of division of powers. The draft put forward for the vote in December 1993 outlined a political system which, in contrast to a balance-of-powers structure, overwhelmingly favors the presidency.<sup>7</sup> The Constitution, in fact, devotes eight of its articles to the powers of the president, with little mention of those of the other branches. Of all the presidential powers, one of the most troubling is the right, should the State Duma three times reject the president's candidate for prime minister, to dissolve the Duma. As a result, Duma Deputy Vladimir M. Lysenko predicted, ". . . The legislative branch can have a stable existence only if it becomes a rubber-stamp parliament . . ." This situation, Lysenko points out, recalls the history of the Russian Dumas of the late tsarist period when Nicholas II "changed the electoral rules at his pleasure" and dissolved each of the Dumas when the latter attempted to act as a force in Russian politics.<sup>8</sup>

The role Yeltsin played in designing the new Russian political system is interesting from the standpoint of democratic ideals. As political philosopher John Rawls explains in *A Theory of Justice*, design of a just society ideally requires that those creating it have no prior knowledge of their future place in the new system. Only in this way can citizens determine how to structure the new system in a way which is fair to all its members. Significantly, the democratic notion of a balance of power meant less to Yeltsin and his entourage than their desire to control political events and guarantee their place at the head of the new system.

The December 1993 process was a complex one. Russian voters received four ballots: one for the draft Constitution, one for the Council of the Federation, one for the State Duma single-mandate seats, and one for the State Duma party-list seats. In some regions, where local elections were being held, a fifth ballot was also issued. Moreover, for the Constitution to be legally adopted, 50 percent of registered voters had to cast ballots. The turnout for the December parliamentary election and the constitutional plebiscite was low. As recent opinion polls have suggested, popular interest in politics—or in democracy in general—has dropped off precipitously in the past several years (a survey jointly taken by the All-Russian Center for the Study of Social Opinion and the weekly *Argumenty i Fakty* found that only half of Russian citizens feel democracy is needed in Russia; 19 percent believe the country is currently run by democrats).<sup>9</sup> Although the Constitu-

tion seemed to squeak by with about 55 percent of the vote, questions were soon raised as to whether a sufficient number of voters went to the ballot box.<sup>10</sup>

In terms of the proportional vote, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy's Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) drew 22.79 percent of the vote, overwhelming other competitors and seizing the headlines in the Western press. Russia's Choice, headed by Yegor Gaidar, received 15.38 percent while the Russian Communist Party garnered 12.35 percent.<sup>11</sup> Surprisingly, the LDP's showing

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stunned many observers, even though the right-wing nationalist did receive six million votes in the 1991 Russian presidential vote (regional pre-election polling also registered the popularity of the LDP). The tremendous amount of air time (220 minutes) the LDP purchased to deliver its message

out to the voters also should have gotten more pre-election notice.<sup>12</sup> Given the brief campaign period, television proved to be the most influential campaign media.<sup>13</sup> Another factor which strengthened the LDP's showing was Yeltsin's fall 1993 ban on a number of other right-wing political organizations which, says Professor Michael Urban, “deprived a large, if amorphous, patriotic constituency of its many familiar beacons and left it with no other appropriate outlet for its sentiment . . . .”<sup>14</sup>

#### **The New Russian Parliament**

The LDP's showing sparked fears among some Russian and Western observers that the new Parliament would prove anti-democratic as well as anti-reform. In the State Duma, though, the distribution of the party list and single mandate seats ended up giving pro-reform Russia's Choice the most seats, followed by New Regional Policy Alliance and only then the LDP.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, thus far, the Russian Parliament appears to be the most democratically functioning official body on the Russian political scene today. Russian law gives the Council of the Federation and the State Duma the right to determine their internal procedures and to appoint committees to debate critical issues. In many ways, both its houses have usually followed democratic procedures even when tackling divisive issues. For instance, the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, Agrarian Party faction, and the LDP joined forces to ensure the election of their choice of speaker, Ivan Rybkin. The formation of State Duma committees also is interesting. Despite strong conservative and reactionary factions in the State Duma, chairmanships of many key committees (e.g., Defense, International Relations, the Affairs of the CIS and Russians Living Abroad, Issues of Federalism and Regionalism, Information Policy, Taxation, and Privatization) went to radical and moderate reformers, suggesting the willingness of the majority to tolerate some variety of viewpoints among legislative leadership.

The process leading to the State Duma's decision to grant amnesty to the leaders of the 1991 coup, those responsible for attacks on police in May 1993, and the leaders of the October 1993 uprising, illustrates the body's ability to debate and to achieve a consensus on sensitive issues. After convening in January 1994, the State Duma had debated two kinds of amnesty proposals; one a criminal amnesty aimed at minor offenders and the other a political amnesty for the 1991 coup plotters and participants in the October uprising. The legislative package which resulted was a compromise: moderate reformers supported the amnesty after conservatives agreed to abandon their drive to create a State Duma commission to investigate the October incident.

All these examples suggest an ability in the State Duma to use democratic processes and to compromise. This is significant because the State Duma contains a broader spectrum of political factions than did the Russian Congress of People's Deputies. But even more important, they signal that the State Duma is able to unite and thus limit Yeltsin's ability to enforce his will, a point which Yeltsin was hardly likely to miss. Without the capability to unify on key issues such as the amnesty vote, the Duma would be a mere debating society. The ability of the State Duma to unite is also important because so many potential sources of tension exist between the president and the Parliament. This is true even in the apparently more moderate upper house, the Council of the Federation. Regional efforts to increase local authority predate the December elections but have intensified in 1994. Despite the fact that Yeltsin appointed thirty-six of the forty-three regional administrations chiefs elected to the Council of the Federation, their votes—combined with those of the four presidential envoys in that house—are not nearly enough to ensure the passage of Yeltsin's political and economic agenda when local interests are at stake.

In addition, the Council of the Federation has among its powers the right to decide changes in borders in the Russian Federation and to approve presidential decrees on martial law and emergency rule and the use of military force outside the Russian Federation. If Yeltsin tries to use force in subduing regional political and economic aspirations in the name of preserving federation unity, he is likely to come head to head with Council of the Federation resistance. If he tries to override this body's policy towards regional autonomy, he could easily be accused of ignoring the will of the people (via their elected representatives) and suppressing the democratic process in Russia.

Contrary to some early reports, it is a mistake to assume that certain key leaders in the Council of the Federation are necessarily pro-Yeltsin. For instance, Vladimir Shumeiko's selection as chairman of this body was portrayed in the Western media as a political victory for the Russian president. Although Shumeiko supports reform in Russia, he is a "techno-

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crat"—that is, from the same group which produced Russian Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin (and Gorbachev's long-time prime minister, Nikolai Ryzhkov). When push comes to shove in Russian politics, Shumeiko is likely to side with Chernomyrdin rather than with Yeltsin.

In his relationship with Parliament, the Russian president is wavering between confrontation and conciliation. Yeltsin's response to the State Duma's amnesty vote suggests that his desire to interfere with the legislative process was overcome only by the pressure of Western and public expectations that he follow democratic rules. After the State Duma amnesty vote, Yeltsin's aides claimed that the president had prepared a decree overruling the decision. In the end, though, Yeltsin acquiesced in the decision—but was careful to make the point publicly that he remained "in full control of the social and political situation" in Russia.<sup>16</sup>

The April 1994 signing of the Agreement on Civil Accord failed to alleviate doubts about the president's democratic commitment. It remains to be seen whether the Agreement will actually keep the presidential apparatus, the government, and the Parliament from clashing on key issues. Such conflict is inevitable in any democratic system which separates powers among the governing branches. In any event, it is debatable as to whether eliminating such conflict truly contributes to the encouragement in Russia of democratic processes.

#### **The President After the December 1993 Elections**

A distinctive feature of the Russian presidency in the post-election period is the element of continuity with the Soviet past. Despite the numerous changes in Russian politics since the December 1993 elections, in many ways a Soviet mentality is still in evidence there. In his just-released memoirs, Yeltsin himself admits: "We must finally admit that Russia comprehends democracy poorly—not merely for global, historical reasons but for rather prosaic ones: the new generation simply cannot break its way into power. The socialist mode of thinking has left its imprint on all of us . . ." <sup>17</sup>

Despite Yeltsin's awareness of this phenomenon, his own presidential apparatus reflects the theme of Soviet continuity. According to a sociological study, almost 80 percent of Yeltsin's staff of Kremlin advisors and officials entered government service under Soviet leaders Leonid Brezhnev and Mikhail Gorbachev. Only 10.5 percent of the Russian president's entourage entered state service since Yeltsin's election as president.<sup>18</sup> In addition, under Yeltsin personnel transfers and removals continue to be prompted both by personal associations and power politics. As in the Soviet era, promotions are based on patronage associations while "enemies" (critics) are dismissed.

The Russian president personally has worked to undermine governmental officials who disagree with his views. The career of Sergei Shakhrai (chairman of the Party of Russian Unity and Concord, or PRYeS) in the government apparatus illustrates the struggle between the presidential and governmental leaderships. Shakhrai's close ties to the Russian prime minister damaged his relationship with the president. His complaints against

the president also led to numerous vacillations in his standing in the Russian government and presidential apparatus. Furthermore, in 1994 Yeltsin dismissed from the Presidential Council both former Russian Prosecutor-General Alexei Kazannik and Russian Movement for Democratic Reforms Chairman and former Moscow Mayor Gavriil Popov, each of whom criticized the president on several issues, including how he handled the State Duma's amnesty vote (specifically, Kazannik sought to prepare an investigation in the Kremlin's abuse of power in its October 1993 assault on the government building when it was occupied by then-Vice President Alexander Rutskoi and Supreme Soviet Chairman Ruslan Khasbulatov).<sup>19</sup>

Also reminiscent of Soviet times is Yeltsin's use of decrees, rumors and manipulation to control political events. Urban, in fact, describes the new

Constitution as "the product of a highly manipulated process," noting, for instance, Yeltsin's threat to ban from Russian television and radio during the campaign those political parties which criticize the draft document.<sup>20</sup> Even the president's "vacations" can be seen as part of a pattern of political maneuvers. Yeltsin may suffer from a

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variety of ailments, but he returns from his retreats over-ready for battle. For instance, during recent "rests," he arranged new appointments to the presidential apparatus, worked on his State of the Federation message, wrote his latest memoirs, and promulgated various decrees.

Some of Yeltsin's reorganization sparked a power struggle within the president's apparatus, another example of a persisting Soviet political mentality in the executive branch. Between January and March 1994, the appearance of a decree on changes in the apparatus was delayed due to sharp debates over two rival plans. Yeltsin's staff was divided by two factions: one led by Chief of the Presidential Staff Sergei Filatov, the other by Chief of the Presidential Advisors Viktor Ilyushin. This suggests that Yeltsin—in Soviet fashion reminiscent of past general secretaries—may be maintaining parallel structures in the presidential apparatus as a means of enhancing presidential control by eliminating the information monopoly by any one part of the state apparatus.

Even more "Soviet" is Yeltsin's proclivity for restructuring the state by decree—thus eliminating government or legislative participation in the shaping of Russian political institutions. For instance, Yeltsin eliminated the post of vice president from the draft of the Constitution, a significant change in Russia's political structure which was made without any form of legislative debate. Yeltsin has also assembled or altered a number of state organs to ensure his control of the intelligence community, the government and the media. His 10 January 1994 edict "On the Structure of Federal Organs of Executive Power" subordinated to the presidential apparatus key governmental bodies<sup>21</sup> (bodies included in the decree are the ministries of

Defense, Internal Affairs, and Foreign Affairs, the Main Guard Directorate, the Foreign Intelligence Service, the Federal Counterintelligence Service, the Federal Agency for Government Communications and Information, the Federal Border Service, the Federal Service for Television and Radio Broadcasting, and the State Archive Service). By taking direct charge of former KGB special services, Yeltsin precluded the possibility of them being controlled by the government or Parliament (one could even argue that Yeltsin seized the counterintelligence organs in order to spy on the government and the legislative branches). Interestingly, Yeltsin signed the decree before the State Duma began its work, presumably to preclude legislative debate over his actions.

In addition to creating the Federal Counterintelligence Service and the Federal Border Service under the Office of the President, Yeltsin formed a Judicial Chamber of Information Disputes which could be used to strengthen his control over the media (the body issues warnings to publishers and broadcasting media management if they violate "acceptable ethical norms").<sup>22</sup> In February 1994, Yeltsin created a Directorate of the Federal State Service of the President under his Cadres Policy Council in order to supervise federal employees throughout the government. Finally, Yeltsin changed the Russian Security Council's (SBR) composition to give himself a power base outside of the government. In the aftermath of the December election, Yeltsin ousted radical reformers from the SBR and replaced them with more conservative members. This seems to have been done in part to reflect the new composition of the government since the elections but also because Yeltsin shares with these new members a predilection for assertiveness in "near-abroad" affairs and other foreign policy issues. In addition, Yeltsin upgraded the SBR's role to allow it to act as a counterweight to both the government and the Parliament. Since then a competition between the Russian Foreign Ministry and the SBR has erupted. For instance, Russian Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev complained bitterly about his lack of knowledge of an SBR invitation to former U.S. President Richard Nixon to visit Russia.<sup>23</sup>

In some ways, the Yeltsin administration has outdone its Soviet predecessors. In November 1994 Yeltsin ordered a major staff reduction (with functions transferred to the administration of Viktor Chernomyrdin). Apparently in the past three years the chief executive's administration had mushroomed, Soviet-style, until it reached 40,000 employees—a number which, says the Radio Free Europe-Radio Liberty *Daily Report*, "is several times higher than the staff of the Central Committee of the CPSU in the Soviet period."<sup>24</sup> Many Soviet habits, it seems, are difficult to break.

#### **The President and the Prime Minister**

Although Yeltsin has attempted to control the flow of Russian politics, Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin has succeeded in forming his own independent apparatus and linking himself to key parliamentary factions opposed to the Russian president. In fact, because of Yeltsin's political manipulations, the Office of the Prime Minister appears to be the only

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political body now capable of legally challenging presidential dominance of the Russian political system.

Despite Yeltsin's political machinations of the past year, Chernomyrdin's government is not subordinate to Yeltsin's presidential apparatus and the Russian prime minister has made pronouncements which counter Yeltsin's policies. For instance, the Russian prime minister has stressed that Russia needs access to Western markets, not just aid, and that Russia's interest in following a purely Western model has dwindled. In addition, Chernomyrdin has chosen anti-Yeltsin members of the military-industrial complex to specific posts in the government, including Russian Deputy Prime Minister Nikolai Travkin, head of the Democratic Party of Russia. The Russian prime minister has also established important links to the State Duma. The promotion of the chairman of the Party of Russian Unity and Concord, Sergei Shakhrai, to the rank of deputy prime minister until his dismissal in May 1994 gave Chernomyrdin added clout in the State Duma. Moreover, in the first post-election struggle over resources, Chernomyrdin and Deputy Prime Minister for Agriculture Alexander Zaveryukha joined forces with the State Duma's Agrarian faction to support state subsidies for collective farms, a direct rebuff to Yeltsin's reform program.

While few would argue that Chernomyrdin is a shining example of democratic leadership, his ability to limit Yeltsin's control of the government means the prime minister plays an important role in the establishment of democracy in Russia. Some experts see Chernomyrdin as a skillful politician underrated by Western observers. In a recent *Foreign Affairs* article on Russia's economic successes, Anders Åslund offers this assessment of the prime minister: "To a large extent, it is by his own design that Chernomyrdin has persistently been overlooked and underestimated both at home and abroad. He uses his low profile to reinforce his power . . . . Wherever the political center is, Chernomyrdin occupies it, but he consistently tries to form broad coalitions."<sup>25</sup> An important issue for consideration in another article is Chernomyrdin's commitment to political democracy, particularly if he succeeds Yeltsin as Russia's president.

#### **The Impact of the Elections on Russian Foreign Policy**

Certain pre-existing trends in Yeltsin's foreign policy have accelerated since the December elections. Even before December, for instance, Yeltsin was attempting to restore "Russian greatness." Since the election, two major themes have dominated Yeltsin's rhetoric. One is the issue of anti-Russian discrimination in the "near abroad." The other concerns the proper role of post-Soviet Russia in world affairs.

Yeltsin signaled his attitude towards the former Soviet republics when in

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September 1994 he commented "Yesterday we all lived in the same house, the Soviet Union. There is no Soviet Union [any more] but these republics are our blood."<sup>26</sup> Yeltsin's foreign minister, Andrei Kozyrev, has attacked the West for failing to acknowledge Russia's legitimate role in world affairs. Kozyrev (who before the elections had already made a dramatic turn in his attitudes toward the "near abroad" and the West) insisted in January 1994

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that Russia maintain its military presence in the former Soviet republics to prevent anti-Russian forces from filling a "security vacuum."<sup>27</sup> Before the election (and as early as February 1993, before Zhirinovskiy seized the issue), the Russian president sought recognition of dual citizenship for Russians living outside the Federation. At the 24 December 1993 summit of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), Yeltsin request-

ed special status for Russians living in the other former republics (the other CIS leaders rejected the request). Nevertheless, Moscow continues to play the role of "protector" for ethnic Russians in the "near abroad" and has its troops in Moldova, Georgia, and Tajikistan, a role over which the United States and Yeltsin are increasingly at odds.

Since the fall of the USSR, Yeltsin has insisted on recognition of central Europe as a vital Russian national interest. The Russian president stated that Russia would join NATO's Partnership for Peace Program as long as the West would take into account Russia's "role and place in world and European affairs—the military strength and nuclear status of our country." Moreover, he insisted that Russia's relationship with NATO "must have a character distinct from that of other countries."<sup>28</sup> Despite Russia's reaffirmation in May 1994 that it would sign the Partnership without setting conditions, Moscow announced that it wanted to sign a separate deal with the alliance on issues such as control of nuclear weapons. Russia made noises that it wanted special consultation rights with NATO, something that greatly worried central European states. After much negotiation, Russia did at last join the Partnership for Peace; it seems, though, this decision was made in order to avoid isolation from other nations also joining the program.

To a certain extent, Yeltsin's post-election assertiveness in foreign policy can be attributed to new demands on him by domestic audiences, particularly the military (to whom he owes his October 1993 triumph over Rutskoi and Khasbulatov). This in part explains Russian officials' eagerness to mediate between the United States and Iraq in October 1994, despite the risk of annoying or alienating the U.S. and its allies.

Russian civil-military relations have changed dramatically since late 1993. Of course, the Russian military is not running the country and has no desire

to take power in the near future, although they can constitute a powerful lobby that Yeltsin needs to address. The first extensive survey of senior military officers in Russia reveals a group deeply disenchanted with Russia's present place in world affairs—and with their own place in Russian society. The poll showed that the officers overwhelmingly favor a “strong hand” approach to governing and that they feel such firm leadership is lacking.<sup>29</sup> While on an inspection tour of Moscow Military District, Defense Minister Pavel Grachev sensed “extreme bitterness” on the part of servicemen recently returned from Germany, central Europe and the Baltic states. Most live in substandard housing and are derided by other Russian citizens. Some, humiliated by the Russian withdrawals, are in “a strongly revanchist mood” and even “prepared to return with tanks” to the former Baltic republics. Grachev has forbidden servicemen from having contacts with opposition political groups.<sup>30</sup> Consequently, according to *RFE/RL* (14 October 1994), Yeltsin created a ring of elite military units around Moscow that might be used to protect the government from revolts by dissatisfied units. In addition, military loyalty will also be ensured by a new Department of Military Politics attached to the presidential chief of staff's office. This office will assume the sort of political screening function once performed by the administrative bodies of the Communist Party.

Yeltsin has also been busy reenforcing Russian military capabilities in the “near abroad”—much to the delight of some senior defense officials. In April 1994, the Russian military pressured Yeltsin to accept a proposal on forming military bases on the territory of CIS countries. Although the acceptance was post facto (Moscow had already signed agreements with Georgia and Armenia to house Russian personnel and materiel), the presidential edict was symbolic of a new civil-military relationship in which the president is reluctant to challenge the military. As he noted in his latest memoirs, Yeltsin is aware that the military will not necessarily defend him should another overthrow of the president be attempted.<sup>31</sup> The change in Yeltsin's relationship with the military has already affected Russian foreign policy, as the preceding pages suggest. There are, in turn, clearly serious implications for the future of Russian democracy.

### **The President and Local Politics Since December 1993**

When Mikhail Gorbachev first organized the post of Soviet president in 1990, his move was quickly emulated at the local level. Soviet republics established a presidency and many city and regional governments (both within Russia and in the other Soviet republics) reorganized their local institutions as well. A city *duma* and assembly, for instance, was established in Moscow in June 1991.<sup>32</sup> Since the collapse of the USSR, the constituent members of the Russian Federation also have undergone considerable reorganization of their political institutions. Some parts have emulated the Yeltsin presidency in organizational detail and in spirit: a Russian journalist described the Chechen Republic president as “striving to achieve a presidential republic, to concentrate all real power in the hands of the presidential administration”—a clear allusion to Yeltsin's style of rule.<sup>33</sup>

Other parts of the Russian Federation have eschewed presidential forms of government.<sup>34</sup> In fact, despite extensive post-Soviet political reorganization at the local level, problems with Russia's republics, oblasts and krajs have been a major obstacle to many of Yeltsin's policies. The Russian president has made repeated efforts to increase his control over the regions, with limited success. Despite post-Soviet title changes, regional leaders are often the same as those who ruled under Gorbachev (or even pre-perestroika predecessors). Some areas of Russia (most notably the Chechen Republic) have sought to separate from the Federation. Most, though, have simply sought to wriggle out from under Moscow's thumb and practice greater autonomy in their affairs.

"Moscow has not yet developed effective mechanisms for toppling republic leaders who are objectionable to the center," observed *Segodnya* in February.<sup>35</sup> This has not been for want of effort, though. Since the collapse of the August 1991 coup against the Gorbachev regime, Yeltsin has attempted to appoint a number of officials to represent him and enforce his policy decrees in the regions. Despite such efforts, when the showdown came between the Congress of People's Deputies and Yeltsin in the fall of 1993, half of regional and republic legislatures supported the Congress.<sup>36</sup> At that time, Yeltsin moved in violation of the existing Constitution to dissolve the existing soviets at the lowest (city, raions and village) levels and moved to restrict krai and oblast soviet authority.<sup>37</sup> He also called for elections, to new, smaller legislative bodies, to be called dumas rather than soviets, in Russia's krajs and oblasts, okrugs and in the cities of Moscow and St. Petersburg.<sup>38</sup>

The local elections began in early 1994. While originally to be completed by the end of March, deadlines were repeatedly extended with at least one krai postponing them until fall 1994.<sup>39</sup> Those local elections which were conducted by spring 1994 were marked by high voter apathy and correspondingly low turnout. In some areas, the elections were deemed invalid because the requisite 25 percent of registered voters did not bother to cast ballots.<sup>40</sup> For those elections which were valid, the results reflected the December 1993 Federal Assembly elections: conservative, anti-reform (often pro-Communist) candidates dominated in most areas. This should not have come as a surprise to Yeltsin, for the regions had voted the same way for the federal Parliament in December 1993. According to ITAR-TASS, the acting head of the Administration for Work with the Territories, Sergei Samoilov, noted on 28 March the "unpleasant tendency" of the heads of the regional soviets to win seats in the new legislatures. However, as the State Duma has demonstrated, the policy direction of a legislative body cannot be predicted on the basis of election results alone.

#### **The Next Russian President**

The selection of Yeltsin's successor carries with it immense implications for Russia's future. The entire course of Russia's political and economic reform, regional and ethnic relations, and foreign policy is at stake. With the December elections and constitutional plebiscite passed, the selection of

presidential candidates is likely to prove the key political issue for the next eighteen months. Already the competition to succeed Yeltsin is underway.

There are (at least) two plausible scenarios which might upset the selection process for Russia's 1996 presidential race (if held on time). In one, a crisis due to government/Parliament efforts to block Yeltsin's reform program could lead Yeltsin to launch a putsch and seize all power. Of issue here is whether Yeltsin would be restrained from action by concerns over Western reaction; he may anticipate a replay of October 1993 when the United States and other Western nations threw their support behind him. In this scenario, Yeltsin might call for immediate presidential elections and put himself forward as a candidate to justify his actions. Clearly a putsch does not contribute to the creation of a democracy.

A second possible scenario concerns Yeltsin's health, which in recent months has been subject to much speculation. Throughout 1994, the issue of Yeltsin's heart and back problems, as well as his alcoholism, seemed to become a factor in Moscow politics. For instance, in February-March 1994, the Russian president began to miss important meetings with visiting leaders. Simultaneously, an article appeared in the Russian press claiming Russian governmental and military officials had attempted to oust Yeltsin on the pretext of ill health.<sup>41</sup> Although the

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*"Poor economic performance is the greatest threat to Chernomyrdin's presidential bid. Yeltsin recognizes this fact and, not surprisingly, has awarded him prime responsibility for the economy."*

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coup threat proved a hoax, the article's appearance raised questions about Yeltsin's ability to run for reelection as well as about the uncertainty of who might succeed him if he should be incapacitated before the next presidential elections. Rumors about Yeltsin's behavior before and after his trip to the United States in October 1994 also did not help the Russian president's reelection capabilities. Indeed, early presidential elections may occur if Yeltsin's health begins to affect his ability to govern. The Russian Constitution states that if the president dies or becomes incapacitated, the prime minister will become the new leader for three months and must call for new elections. Obviously, Chernomyrdin, or any future prime minister, is the heir apparent in this scenario.

There are several possible contenders from national-level offices for the office of president. At this time, the politically active (e.g., voting) Russian populace appears to favor stability over the continuation of radical reforms. Therefore, if Russia's economic and social troubles continue or worsen, an experienced industrialist who understands the dynamics of Russian industry and its impact on society is likely to do better with the electorate than a pro-market reformer.

One of the leading candidates to succeed Yeltsin is Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin and he can rely on the government apparatus to support him in this endeavor. Poor economic performance is the greatest threat to Chernomyrdin's presidential bid. Yeltsin recognizes this fact and,

not surprisingly, has awarded him prime responsibility for the economy. If Chernomyrdin can forestall hyperinflation, Yeltsin will be forced to contend with a governmental official who succeeded where the Russian president failed. Although the October 1994 ruble collapse could have damaged the prime minister seriously, Chernomyrdin survived the episode with renewed vigor and strength.

A second leading candidate is former Vice President Rutskoi who represents conservative elements within the Russian political spectrum. Rutskoi—who was elected along with Yeltsin in 1990 and removed by Yeltsin in what many experts assess as an unconstitutional manner—has the ability and determination to unite the Yeltsin opposition. His party, the Russian Social Democratic People's Party, is already working to unite various political factions and Rutskoi is openly vying for votes. Candidate Rutskoi could embarrass Yeltsin and his supporters. Rutskoi will likely use events in 1993—such as the Yeltsin campaign to discredit the former vice president and the president's violent seizure of the White House—to condemn Yeltsin as a dictator. However, the former Russian vice president may lack the organization skills to win a presidential election. The scarcity of popular support for his attempt to claim the presidency during the October 1993 uprising showed an overestimation of his political strength.

A third leading candidate is the commander of the 14th Army, General Alexander Lebed. Lebed has already stood up to Yeltsin and Grachev and won. After Lebed criticized Yeltsin for weakness, the Russian president attempted to replace him through a typical byzantine maneuver by downsizing the 14th Army and transferring Lebed to Tajikistan. Lebed fought back hard and won with the support of key members of the Russian General Staff. Overall, Lebed and his supporters laud Chilean General Augusto Pinochet, who brought Chile through fourteen years of brutal dictatorship, but with the success of modernizing the economy. Lebed has been quoted as saying that Pinochet "saved the state from total collapse and put the army in pride of place. The loudmouths were forced, in a brutal manner, to shut their mouths." And asked once under what circumstances he could visualize the military taking over in Russia, Lebed replied "if Zhirinovskiy took power."<sup>42</sup>

One source of potential presidential candidates is the group of the relatively young influential leaders in the government. Since the December elections, Vladimir Shumeiko has become a contender. Although tainted by his position as Russian Federation deputy prime minister and accused of corruption last year, he is still in a position to remedy his tarnished reputation by negotiating resolutions among the regions. He could build up a base of support from the republics, oblasts and krais if he can make the Council of the Federation work.

State Duma Speaker Ivan Rybkin is another potential candidate. Rybkin has earned respect from his colleagues for his role in making the new State Duma work in a more effective manner than did its predecessor, the Russian Supreme Soviet. Another contender is Shakhrai who can tap into his Party for Russian Unity and Concord—whose local organizations

operate throughout the Russian Federation—for grass-roots support. Another State Duma official, former Acting Prime Minister Yegor Gaidar has vied to become Yeltsin's successor. Gaidar is interested in creating a political party which Yeltsin would not challenge; however, he lacks support among his contemporaries, including key democrats.

Another tier of potential presidential candidates includes nationalist and Communist extremists, and even a former Soviet leader:

—Vladimir Zhirinovskiy. Although he seems most intent on provoking political crises, much of what Zhirinovskiy states reflects a certain segment of popular opinion and the LDP has become a platform for his run for the presidency. His oratories capture the imagination of many Russians including those in the military. On the other hand, Zhirinovskiy offers no real program or solutions to Russia's economic and social problems and his star in the State Duma appears in descent. The LDP leader's future successes hinge on Yeltsin's failures.

—Gennady Zyuganov. The Communist Party of the Russian Federation chairman heads a large parliamentary faction in the State Duma which has tried hard to dissociate itself from its Soviet predecessor. However, Zyuganov faces a number of problems including a weak financial base and criticism from a significant portion of the population who blame Communists for ruining Russia.

—Mikhail Gorbachev. The former Soviet leader is a long shot for the Office of the President, but nevertheless he has refused to remove himself from the list of possible contenders. However, few Russians today are heard calling for Gorbachev's return to power. For him to be a serious candidate, Gorbachev would have to develop and sell a new political and economic platform.

Finally, we should not eliminate Yeltsin as a candidate in 1996 even though he vacillates on the issue. In late April 1994 Yeltsin stated that pressure from his associates in the presidential apparatus and the govern-

ment convinced him to seek a second term.<sup>43</sup> If a healthy Yeltsin is able to turn Russia's economy around, he is likely to win. In the wake of the December election results, however, it is important to point out that Yeltsin—like

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Gorbachev during his last year of rule—faces rapidly collapsing support. An inability to implement coherent economic reform and a foreign policy driven by domestic pressures suggest a weak candidate for 1996. This might be reason for the mid-1994 resurrection of the issue of postponing the election. This suggestion, supported by Rybkin among others, was sharply criticized by reformers and reactionaries alike. Such a move certainly would be a

dangerous precedent and could undermine the (already shaky) Russian Constitution. Lengthening the president's term could undermine people's confidence in democratic processes in general and in Yeltsin's commitment to them in particular.

#### **The Meaning of December 1993 for Democracy in Russia**

The December 1993 elections—characterized by a brief campaign period, low voter turnout and a hastily drafted and marginally debated constitution—will affect the Russian political system for years to come. The handling of these ballots—for which it seems neither the citizens nor candidates were prepared—also did little to enhance Russian democracy. Although the election was a major step forward in democratization, as Michael Urban notes, "There were strict limits on the extent to which Yeltsin and his coterie were willing to surrender power."<sup>44</sup> Yeltsin's attempts since December 1993 to restructure political institutions, increase his power, and generally manipulate the political process are bad signs for the future of democracy in Russia.

Of key concern for the future growth of democratic institutions is how Yeltsin will deal with the new leadership in the Parliament and in the regions. At a press conference on 22 December 1993, President Yeltsin described the significance of the election results as "difficult to overestimate." He apparently saw no problems in the way in which the elections and plebiscite were conducted. Despite the low turnout, Yeltsin spoke of the "victory" of the new Constitution, the true end of Soviet rule and the establishment of a new regime "founded on the bedrock of freedom and rights of man." On the other hand, Yeltsin noted soberly the "unexpected" results of the legislative elections: "Personally, I was not indeed expecting any hothouse conditions," he admitted, but then he went on to express his hopes that "extreme slogans and excessive promises with which people were tempted during the election campaign will be discarded." Yeltsin's final analysis was that "Russian democracy [has] not as yet grown out of its childhood." While Yeltsin did pledge cooperation with "a constructive opposition," he vowed to "resolutely dissociate myself from the odious provocative designs of extremists."<sup>45</sup>

Yeltsin's rejection of nationalist extremism is proper for a democratic president. Moreover one must sympathize with the immensity of the task before him: establishing democracy in a country with little experience in that form of governing. But questions remain as to how he might define constructive opposition. Those concerned with the development of Russian democracy cannot help but call to mind the circle of tanks at the Parliament building in October 1993. Yeltsin's reaction to the elections suggests a willingness to tolerate dissent but also signaled limits to his patience, limits which may or may not follow the guidelines of the new Constitution.

In the short term, the presidential powers awarded to Yeltsin by the adoption of the new Constitution means there is little change likely in his immediate policy goals. There are those who claim that Yeltsin's new powers mean Parliament will "hardly mean anything" for Russian politics.<sup>46</sup>



But the Parliament does function and Russians and Westerners alike need to acknowledge (even if they cannot endorse) its attempts to put democracy into practice, even when those attempts run counter to Yeltsin's reforms.

Perhaps the supreme importance of the legislature is how the president chooses to deal with it. This relates back to the question of what is democracy and whether democratic actions are those based on the will of the people—or the will of the voters. If it is the former—a legitimate definition—then once faced with an “unconstructive opposition” in the Parliament, there is the danger that Yeltsin may try a Nixonian defense, claiming he acts in the name of some “silent majority” which did not bother to participate in the December 1993 elections. Yeltsin is now walking a taut line: in October 1993 he was willing to use military force to get rid of his political opponents. Today he is tolerating the anti-reform winners of the recent elections.

Although some cynics assume all politicians are corrupt, we should not quickly dismiss the importance of the president's example for his country. A South African businessman recently visited his Russian business partner and listened to him explain the recent enterprise balloting which re-elected the partner as general manager. “Democracy is terrific!” the Russian exclaimed, failing to note his visitor's dismay that the ballots used by the workers required they fill in their names and addresses. But then how was the Russian to know that manipulation and intimidation are inappropriate tactics in a democracy?

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in the *Los Angeles Times*, 17 July 1994.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in “Will Yeltsin Turn Authoritarian?” *U.S. News and World Report*, 27 December 1993, p. 67.

<sup>3</sup> For more on Soviet echoes in contemporary Russian politics, see Michael Urban, “December 1993 as a Replication of Late-Soviet Electoral Practices,” *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 1994, vol. 10, no. 2, pp. 127-158.

<sup>4</sup> *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 6 October 1993.

<sup>5</sup> The upper house was to have two representatives from each of the 89 districts. The official outline of this structure was published in *Sobraniye Aktov Prezidenta i Pravitelstva Rossiiskoi Federatsii*, 27 September 1993, although certain details—including the number of seats—were subsequently adjusted. See Elizabeth Teague, “Yeltsin's Difficult Road toward Elections,” *RFE/RL Research Report*, vol. 2, no. 41, 15 October 1993, p. 1.

<sup>6</sup> “Monitoring of the Election Coverage in the Russian Mass Media,” *International Affairs* (Moscow), May 1994, p. 6; Urban states that about 21 political groups met the qualifying “hurdles” but the Russian Central Electoral Commission disqualified eight (Urban, p. 137).

<sup>7</sup> The draft constitution adopted in December was roundly criticized by legal experts. For instance, chairman of the Section on Public International Law of the Russian Constitutional Court at the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Diplomatic Academy, Bakhtiyar Tuzmukhamedov, speaking in Washington, D.C. in February 1994, described the document as vague and contradictory, a sign of the haste with which it was crafted. For his specific criticism, see “New Round of Russian Constitutional Reform Begins,” *Kennan Institute for Advanced Russian Studies Meeting Report*, vol. XI, no. 11.

<sup>8</sup> Vladimir A. Lysenko, “Toward Presidential Rule,” *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 5, no. 2, April 1994, pp. 9-11.

<sup>9</sup> Reported in *RFE/RL Daily Report*, 17 August 1994.

<sup>10</sup> According to some sources immediately after the election, about 55 percent of registered voters voted for the new Constitution. See *Izvestiya*, 14 December 1993; *Rossiiskaya Gazeta*, 21 December 1993. In May 1994 questions arose over the validity of the December vote and the State Duma, with the president's blessing, ordered a committee to investigate allegations

that voter turnout was falsified. The team claimed that 9.2 million votes were falsified and revealed that the real turnout was just 46.1 million, short of the 50 percent required. If confirmed, the referendum on the new Constitution and Yeltsin's expanded powers—and even the validity of the Council of the Federation and the State Duma—could be nullified. For more on the falsification reports, see *Associated Press*, 26 May 1994.

<sup>11</sup> Figures quoted in McFaul, p. 6. McFaul gives his primary source as *Russia: Election Observation Report*, December 12, 1994, published by the International Republican Institute, 1994.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Louis Uchitelle, "Volgograd Seems to Want Slower Market Shift," *New York Times*, 12 December 1993. For Western reaction, see for instance, Elisabeth Rubinfien, "Zhirinovskiy, Victory in Russian Vote, Is Odd Duck, but Does He Goose Step?" *Wall Street Journal*, 15 December 1993; Jacob W. Kipp, "The Zhirinovskiy Threat," *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 1994, p. 75.

<sup>13</sup> Michael McFaul, "Explaining the Vote," *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 5, no. 2, April 1994, p. 5.

<sup>14</sup> Urban, p. 138.

<sup>15</sup> ITAR-TASS, 25 December 1993. Only 444 deputies were elected to the Duma since six single-seat districts elected no one. Vera Tolz, "Russia's Parliamentary Elections: What Happened and Why," RFE/RL Research Report, vol. 3, no. 2, 14 January 1994, p. 1. The New Regional Policy Alliance is made up of deputies from single-seat districts who "deliberately do not want to join any political faction." *Interfax*, 13 January 1994. The strength of parties and blocs in the Council of Federation is harder to determine because most candidates did not identify their party affiliation, if any, during the election. Finally, to date, the Federal Assembly's chief flaw is that its members do not reflect the sociological makeup of the society, a problem common in Western democracies as well. As a January 1994 *Rossiiskiy vestnik* report noted, the "average" deputy in the Federal Assembly is a Russian male Muscovite with a higher education.

<sup>16</sup> ITAR-TASS, 1 March 1994.

<sup>17</sup> Boris Yeltsin, *The Struggle For Russia*, New York: Belka Publishing Company/Times Books, 1994, pp. 290-291.

<sup>18</sup> *Associated Press*, 18 May 1994.

<sup>19</sup> Carey Goldberg, "Former Top Russian Official Blames 'Immoral Power' for Nation's Crisis," *Los Angeles Times*, 14 May 1994, pp. 10-11.

<sup>20</sup> Urban, p. 133.

<sup>21</sup> *Rossiiskaya Gazeta*, 12 January 1994.

<sup>22</sup> *Izvestiya*, 4 February 1994. The creation of this organization is part of a pattern of presidential intimidation and control of Russia's media which allows Yeltsin and his supporters "to shape the images and messages the public receives." Urban, p. 121.

<sup>23</sup> RFE/RL *Daily Report*, 11 March 1994.

<sup>24</sup> RFE/RL *Daily Report*, 2 November 1994.

<sup>25</sup> Anders Åslund, "Russia's Success Story," *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 1994, pp. 61-2.

<sup>26</sup> RFE/RL *Daily Report*, 30 September 1994.

<sup>27</sup> ITAR-TASS, 14 January 1994.

<sup>28</sup> RFE/RL *Daily Report*, 7 April 1994.

<sup>29</sup> *Financial Times*, 8 September 1994, p. 2.

<sup>30</sup> *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 20 September 1994.

<sup>31</sup> See, for example, how Yeltsin describes the October 1993 uprising and their aftermath in Yeltsin, *op. cit.*, pp. 271-283, 287.

<sup>32</sup> See Brenda Horrigan and Theodore Karasik, "The Rise of Presidential Power Under Gorbachev," in Eugene Huskey, ed., *Executive Power and Soviet Politics: The Rise and Decline of the Soviet State* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1992), pp. 116-120.

<sup>33</sup> Vitaly Portnikov, "The Faces of Power or the Power of Faces in Russia," *Segodnya*, 22 February 1994, p. 4.

<sup>34</sup> In many parts of the Russian Republic the Supreme Soviet chairman is considered head of state. One interesting case is that of Mordvinia in which presidential elections were held in 1991 but the post eliminated by that republic's supreme soviet in April 1993. Power now rests in the hands of former Communist apparatchik Nikolai Biryukov, the head of that republic's Supreme Soviet. In Karachay-Cherkessia, there is no president and the prime minister (rather than Supreme Soviet chairman) is recognized as the "uncrowned" head of state. *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Teague, 29 October 1993. Yeltsin, in particular, sought to redistribute power so as to favor his appointed heads of administration. Teague, 18 February 1994.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> *Rossiiskaya Gazeta*, 12 October 1993.

<sup>39</sup> Elections were postponed in Primorsky Krai until October, apparently due to the lack of local funds for holding an election. See *RFE/RL Daily Reports* for: 8 March 1994, 22 March 1994 as well as *Interfax* for 28 March 1994.

<sup>40</sup> For instance, the March 1994 elections in Samara and Magadan oblasts were invalid (*Moscow Ostankino Television*, 29 March 1994, reported in *FBIS-SOV-94-060*, 29 March 1994). In Lipetsk, no one voted at all in 19 of 38 constituencies. *ITAR-TASS*, 7 March 1994. In Kamchatka Oblast, "successful" elections were held in only nine out of 21 constituencies. *RFE/RL Daily Report*, 22 March 1994.

<sup>41</sup> "Variant One," *Obshchaya Gazeta*, 18-24 March 1994, p. 1.

<sup>42</sup> *The Oregonian*, 31 October 1994.

<sup>43</sup> *Interfax*, 29 April 1994.

<sup>44</sup> *Urban*, p. 151.

<sup>45</sup> *Moscow Ostankino Television First Channel Network*, 1200 GMT, 22 December 1993. Reported by *FBIS-SOV-93-244*, 22 December 1993, pp. 1-2.

<sup>46</sup> *Rossiiskaya Gazeta*, 31 December 1993.