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Will Russian Democracy Be Put on Hold?

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Popular Sentiment and Russian Policies

Conclusions

- Although establishment politicians in Moscow insist that Russia is now on the way to recovery, public support for the central government is weak. In fact, the gap between popular sentiment and government policy makers is widening.
- This development causes anxiety for those in power, who fear that the 1995 and 1996 elections will put them out of office. The crux of the problem, from their point of view, is that their political future rests in riding the coattails of a popular president.
- The anxiety coincides with a heightened awareness of Yeltsin's liabilities as a national leader. Consequently, establishment elites are searching for a way to stay in power without submitting either the Yeltsin leadership or its policies to the judgment of the voters.
- One solution being considered is replacing Yeltsin. This desperate search for a strong leader explains the instant political prominence of General Lebed, whose defiance of both Yeltsin and Defense Minister Grachev led many to view him as a presidential candidate or alternative to Yeltsin in an authoritarian succession.
- Another solution being considered is retaining Yeltsin as president by postponing presidential elections until 1998 or beyond. Advocates of such a delay are fully aware that the West may view their plans as a setback to democracy, but are attempting to cultivate U.S. support for this strategy by arguing that a hardline win in 1996 would mean a complete reversal of democratization and marketization in Russia.
- If establishment elites succeed in prolonging their tenure in power through non-democratic means, the long-term outlook for political stability is bleak. Unless the regime modifies policies to minimize the widening gap between establishment goals and popular aspirations, heightened social discontent will necessitate increased reliance on repressive measures to retain order.
- As in the past, the key to any successful attempt by government insiders to keep their positions illegally is the military. However, the political role of the military under such circumstances remains difficult to predict.

Many members of the establishment elite in Russia—eager to attract foreign investment—paint a relatively benign picture of Russian developments and the popular mood. While acknowledging the poverty of some parts of the populace and the persistence of Soviet-era thinking among the older generation, establishment insiders portray this group as a small and declining minority. They claim that a new middle class is emerging in Russia. Most Russians, they insist, want to be "new Russians" and reject a return to the past. Moreover, many establishment politicians have adopted an upbeat assessment of the Russian economy, insisting that the lives of most Russians are improving and the worst is now behind them.

The real picture, however, is more complicated and far more volatile. A new privileged class of "new Russians" is indeed emerging, primarily those youthful, well-educated urbanites (including some former party elites) able to take advantage of the new system. They are the main consumers of the new, expensive stores and Western-style restaurants and nightclubs now dotting Moscow streets and creating a boom-town atmosphere. The new-found wealth of this privileged class, however, has created a widening gap between the haves and the have-nots, between "new Russians" and "old Russians."

Only a small minority of Russians (10 to 20 percent, according to public opinion polls) see themselves as beneficiaries of the changes introduced by Yeltsin. The remainder—who feel that they have no possibility of becoming "new Russians"—are growing increasingly nostalgic for the certainty of the old Soviet era. Survey results indicate that a large majority of Russians want some version of the old union to be restored—60-80 percent depending on which former republics would be included. Most feel that it would have been better if everything had stayed as it was before 1985. Only a tiny minority (5 to 15 percent, depending on the wording of the survey question) would prefer to live in today's Russia.

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Moreover, most Russians do not view the economic changes touted by establishment elites or by "new Russians" as improvements. Nor is the populace particularly optimistic about the near-term future. In a recent nationwide survey, 60% said they anticipate no improvements over the next 12 months; 57% said that the worst times were still ahead. Only 5% thought that the worst times were behind them.

It is impossible to predict with confidence whether popular dissatisfaction will translate into social unrest. It is also difficult, given Russians' propensity to vote for personalities rather than policies, to be sure how these views would be reflected at the ballot box. In this sense, the widening gap between regime policies and popular attitudes introduces elements of uncertainty and volatility into Russian politics.

A Replacement For Yeltsin

Establishment insiders see replacing Yeltsin as one solution to popular dissatisfaction. However, establishment elites have been unable to agree on an alternative to Yeltsin. Last year, radical reformers were confident that—given a year or so—they could develop another reform-minded candidate who could carry the "democratic" banner. The intervening months (in particular, the disappointing reformist showing in the December 1993 elections), however, have only made them more desperate.

This desperation has increased as Yeltsin's liabilities as a national leader have become more evident. Yeltsin's behavior during the August troop withdrawal ceremonies in Germany (his obvious inebriation during his departure press conference, his impromptu attempt to conduct a German band, and his loud, off-key rendition of "Kalinka") remained the talk of the town in Moscow several weeks after the events. The predominant reaction is not just that Yeltsin was drunk and disorderly in public, but that his inability to control his behavior during a sensitive foreign visit disgraced Russia.

The desperate search for a strong leader explains the instant political prominence of General Alexandr Lebed, commander of the Russian 14th Army in Moldova's break-away Dniester region. Lebed, whose blunt talk had already won him the allegiance of the officers under his command, openly challenged the political leadership in a July *Izvestiya* interview, describing Yeltsin as a "minus" and endorsing the Pinochet model of military rule. When the Defense Ministry leadership (reportedly at Grachev's instigation) tried to fire Lebed by abolishing his command, the outspoken general and his officers flatly refused to comply

with the order. Grachev was forced to retreat in a humiliating episode which tarnished the Defense Minister's already tattered prestige even further.

Lebed's bold defiance catapulted him to instant fame in Moscow. Many Russians, alienated by the political struggles of the past several years, have rejected both Yeltsin and the current opposition to him. They are looking for a strong leader, untainted by corruption, who promises a return to the stability of the old days. Lebed, who is now described by both friends and foes as by far the most popular general in the army, seems (superficially, at least) to fit the bill. A wide variety of political groups looking for a charismatic figure to further their interests are actively courting Lebed. Even reformist groups reportedly have attempted to recruit him, despite his authoritarian and nationalist views and the fact that his economic policies are virtually unknown. Although Lebed's political prominence may be short-lived, the excitement he has generated in Moscow political circles attests to the desperate search for a strong ruler and a populist leader to take Yeltsin's place.

Postponement of Elections?

Another solution being considered is to postpone parliamentary and presidential elections until 1998 or beyond. Spearheading the campaign to postpone the elections is the reformist speaker of the upper house, Shumeyko, who unveiled a proposal in June to prolong the term of both parliament and president for an additional two years.

Reaction to Shumeyko's plan has tended to divide not along "reformist" - "conservative" lines, but along "insider" - "outsider" lines. Most attracted to the plan are establishment insiders—those who (regardless of political affiliation) see themselves as part of the current regime. By contrast, opposition outsiders—hardline leaders like Aleksandr Rutskoy who have been excluded from power—have denounced the plan as unconstitutional.

In between are those who may be called "opposition insiders." This group includes members of the opposition (like State Duma speaker Rybkin, leader of the Duma's Communist faction Zyuganov, and leader of the Duma's Liberal Democratic Party faction Zhirinovskiy) who have been elected to the legislature, but remain excluded from policy roles. They are publicly opposed to the election delay, but might be willing to accede to it in return for key positions in government.

Although Yeltsin himself has made several recent public statements opposing the Shumeyko initiative, many Yeltsin advisors are lobbying the President to endorse an

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election postponement. Yeltsin may well reverse himself on the issue and lend his support to an election delay, particularly if economic conditions and social disorder worsen. One Moscow reformist has said that even 1998 may be too soon for the next elections, suggesting that the scheme to extend Yeltsin's tenure until 1998 may be just the first step of a strategy to postpone elections indefinitely.

Fear of Hardline Victory

Those pushing for an election delay will attempt to package their proposal as a plan to promote stability rather than a scheme to avoid the judgement of the electorate. For this reason, election delay proponents are searching for a mechanism to legitimize the delay. The problem is that there is currently no constitutional way, short of adopting a completely new constitution, to approve an election delay. The current terms of office for president and parliament are specified in the transitional portions of the Constitution. The Constitution spells out rather stringent procedures for amending the Constitution itself, but does not specify how these procedures apply to the transitional provisions.

Proponents of an election delay will take advantage of this ambiguity to argue that current terms of office can be extended using less stringent procedures, such as approval by a simple majority of the legislature, followed perhaps by a nationwide referendum. Opposition insiders in Moscow, as well as regional elites, will attempt to extract the maximum political price for their acquiescence to this strategy.

Increased Reliance on Repressive Measures?

Regardless of whether and how establishment elites succeed in prolonging their tenure in power, the long-term outlook for political stability remains bleak. One major advantage of democracy is that regular elections tend to ensure a more responsive leadership: officials and legislators who must face their voters are more likely to adopt policies that accord with the values of the majority of the voters.

The basic problem faced by those in power in Russia—both Yeltsin himself and his leadership team—is that the goals they are pushing represent the interests of only a small minority of Russians. As long as this is true, in order to stay in power, Moscow's political elite will have to avoid the judgment of the electorate—even if they find a replacement for Yeltsin. Ironically, as long as the Yeltsin team believes it can cling to power without submitting itself to the voters, it is far less likely to modify its policies in such a way as to minimize the now-widening gap between establishment goals and popular aspirations.

In this scenario, heightened social discontent would necessitate increased reliance on repressive measures to retain order. Staying in power—particularly if the economic decline continues—almost certainly will entail major reversals of democracy: not just postponing elections and reverting to an authoritarian succession process, but banning rallies, closing opposition newspapers, and jailing political rivals as well.

Predicting the Military's Response

Increased reliance on coercion (whether or not it includes reversion to an authoritarian succession) would inevitably involve increased reliance on the military. Military reliability, however, remains a key uncertainty. Several recent surveys indicate that discontent within the military is growing. One study dramatized the increasing polarization within the military between the "haves" (those assigned to elite units or those who have enriched themselves through illegal sales of military property) and the "have-nots." The military sociologist who reported these results noted the emergence of three distinct social groups within the military: junior officers (who are simply searching for a way out of the military); staff officers at Defense Ministry headquarters (who are well-placed to take care of themselves); and field officers from major to major general (who have no alternative to military service). Within this latter group, doubts about the move to a market economy are strong. Around 40% of this third group are adherents of extreme nationalism.

Other surveys (some conducted officially in response to Defense Ministry orders and others conducted non-officially by moonlighting military sociologists) demonstrate increasing anti-Yeltsin sentiments among military personnel. One survey conducted by a military sociologist from the Humanitarian Academy in Moscow found that 45% of the officers voted for Zhirinovskiy's ultra-nationalist party in the December elections (compared to less than a quarter among civilian voters). Another survey, this time of senior officers, found less support for Zhirinovskiy, but high approval of General Lebed and strong distrust for both Yeltsin and Grachev.

Political insiders appear to fully understand the discontent within the military and worry about the military's reaction to an attempt to solve Russia's leadership problem through authoritarian means (such as postponing presidential elections). The military's reaction to past political crises indicates that it would not intervene unless conflict between political factions turns violent, in which case it would likely intervene on the side that the high command perceives as most likely to promote stability. The problem for both establishment insiders and opposition groups is that neither side can predict how the high command will view the next crisis.

The current political situation in Russia is very similar to the situation one year ago. The problem is: the use of force a year ago did not solve Yeltsin's problems. He did gain a new parliament that has been (at least initially) less combative towards him, but he and the new parliament have not been successful in garnering widespread support. Moreover, the opposition—and the Russian population as a whole—have become even more disenchanted with the current group of establishment insiders. Furthermore, the military, which resisted involvement last October, remains an independent political actor. If Yeltsin does decide to go along with those who advocate the unconstitutional postponement of elections—which he is probably inclined to do—he faces the real possibility that he will not only further delay the onset of democracy in Russia, he may also be initiating his own political demise.

Recommendations

Yeltsin's dilemma—and Russia's dilemma—also poses a challenge to the United States. The United States has made the democratization of Russia the pivotal issue in Russian-American relations. Any attempt by Russian political insiders to avoid a constitutional succession could threaten the cornerstone of that relationship. Since Yeltsin and his advisors will probably make a decision over the next six months on whether to adopt an election postponement strategy, the United States should start considering now how it might respond to such an eventuality.

If the United States decides that democratization must continue to be the cornerstone of Russian-American

relations, it should strongly advise President Yeltsin and other Russian leaders that circumventing democratic processes for leadership change will endanger further Russian-American cooperation on a broad range of issues—including economic support to Russia.

However, if the United States decides that our top priority is continued Russian-American partnership in the international arena—and (an important corollary) that the Yeltsin leadership is critical to this partnership—we should recognize that Russian democratization (while remaining a long term goal) is subordinate to other matters of more immediate importance, such as retaining the current regime in power.



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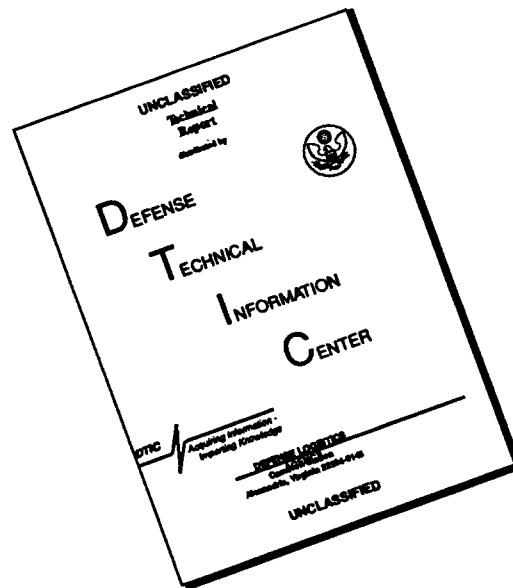


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