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E.O. 12356: DECL:OADR
TAGS: PGOV, PNAT, PREL, PARM, ECON, CIS, RS
SUBJECT: BORIS NIKOLAYEVICH YEL'TSIN:
A MID-RANGE POLITICAL ASSESSMENT

1. CONFIDENTIAL - ENTIRE TEXT

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SUMMARY

2. ON THE EVE OF BORIS YEL'TSIN'S MEETING WITH THE
PRESIDENT AT CAMP DAVID, THE RUSSIAN LEADER IS FIRMLY IN
THE DOMESTIC POLITICAL SADDLE. DESPITE CRITICISM BY
SOME PROMINENT FIGURES (INCLUDING HIS OWN VICE PRESIDENT
AND THE PARLIAMENTARY SPEAKER) AND POPULAR RESENTMENT OF
SOARING PRICES, THE OPPOSITION TO YEL'TSIN IS
FRAGMENTED, LACKS FOCUS OR BROAD PUBLIC SUPPORT, AND IS
OFTEN POLITICALLY INEPT. THE RUSSIAN PRESIDENT RETAINS
THE SUPPORT OF THE GREAT MASS OF THE RUSSIAN PEOPLE, AND
WILL USE THAT SUPPORT TO STEER HIS ECONOMIC REFORM
PROGRAM THROUGH THE DIFFICULT MONTHS AHEAD. THE FIRST
TRULY "RUSSIAN" (AS OPPOSED TO SOVIET) LEADER IN LIVING
MEMORY, YEL'TSIN CONTINUES TO STRUGGLE WITH THE RESULTS
OF THE IMPERIAL BREAKUP HE HELPED BRING ABOUT AND WITH
THE GARRISON STATE HE INHERITED. HE WILL REMAIN THE KEY
LEADERSHIP FIGURE IN THE REFORM PROCESS IN RUSSIA. WE
SEE NO CREDIBLE SUBSTITUTES WAITING IN THE WINGS.

REVIEW AUTHORITY: Geoffrey Chapman, Senior
Reviewer

END SUMMARY.

3. YEL'TSIN IS OF THE GENERATION OF SOVIET POLITICAL FIGURES WHICH CAME TO PROFESSIONAL MATURITY IN THE KHRUSHCHEV YEARS -- YEARS OF CONTROVERSY AND REFORM. THIS GENERATION (WHICH INCLUDED GORBACHEV, SHEVARDNADZE, LIGACHEV AND OTHERS) TOOK THROUGH THE BREZHNEV YEARS OF STAGNATION THE BELIEF THAT THE SOVIET SYSTEM COULD BE RENEWED, COULD BE MADE TO WORK. IN DIFFERING WAYS, THE MEMBERS OF THIS GROUP ADVOCATED REFORM RATHER THAN REVOLUTION WHEN THEY CAME TO POWER SEVEN YEARS AGO --
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YEL'TSIN AMONG THEM. ONE OF GORBACHEV'S POLITICAL BLINDSPOTS WAS THAT HE CONTINUED TO PREACH SYSTEMIC REFORM TO YOUNGER GENERATIONS CONVINCED THAT THE OLD SYSTEM WAS ROTTEN TO THE CORE AND MUST BE JETTISONED. IN CONTRAST, DURING HIS YEARS IN THE POLITICAL WILDERNESS AFTER REMOVAL AS MOSCOW PARTY BOSS, YEL'TSIN LISTENED TO THE YOUNGER "RADICALS", FOUND HE AGREED WITH THEM, AND ALLIED HIS POLITICAL INSTINCTS AND MASS APPEAL WITH THEIR PROGRAMS FOR A MARKET ECONOMY. WHEN GORBACHEV'S ASSOCIATES AMONG THE "CONSERVATIVE-REFORMERS" TRIED TO HALT THE TIDE OF CHANGE IN THE AUGUST PUTSCH, THE ROAD WAS CLEARED FOR THE YOUNGER "RADICAL-REALISTS" WITH THE POPULIST-REVOLUTIONARY YEL'TSIN AT THEIR HEAD.

4. SIX MONTHS AFTER YEL'TSIN'S GREAT TRIUMPH AGAINST THE COUP PLOTTERS, THERE IS CERTAINLY A DEGREE OF RESENTMENT IN THE RUSSIAN PARLIAMENT OF THE DOMINATING -- AND OFTEN DOMINEERING -- FIGURE OF THE RUSSIAN PRESIDENT. NONETHELESS, THERE IS NO COHESIVE "OPPOSITION" BLOC IN THE LEGISLATURE; RATHER THERE ARE MANY FACTIONS WHICH FORM SHIFTING ALLIANCES DEPENDING ON ISSUES. NONE OF THESE FACTIONS HAS ANY REAL ANSWERS TO THE COUNTRY'S PROBLEMS; NOBODY IN PARLIAMENT WANTS TO ACCEPT RESPONSIBILITY FOR DEALING WITH THE COUNTRY'S CRISIS; NO RIVAL LEADER HAS A TENTH OF THE POPULAR SUPPORT OR CHARISMA OF THE RUSSIAN PRESIDENT, AND NONE HAS THE PRESTIGE OF YEL'TSIN'S ELECTORAL MANDATE. YEL'TSIN SETS THE AGENDA; OTHERS REACT TO IT. WHEN NECESSARY, YEL'TSIN HAS ADJUSTED HIS POLICIES TO DEFUSE CRITICISM OR TO CORRECT DEFICIENCIES. THESE ADJUSTMENTS
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ARE PART OF THE RUSSIAN PRESIDENT'S STRENGTH: WHILE HE IS GENERALLY VERY STUBBORN, HE IS NOT SO STUBBORN NOT TO KNOW WHEN TO GIVE A LITTLE.

5. THE RECENT DEBATES IN PARLIAMENT ABOUT THE COURSE OF ECONOMIC REFORM HAVE BEEN DIRECTED AT YEL'TSIN'S

GOVERNMENT RATHER THAN AT THE RUSSIAN PRESIDENT HIMSELF. AS AUSTERITY MEASURES CUT EVER DEEPER INTO LIVING STANDARDS, THERE UNDOUBTEDLY WILL BE INCREASING PARLIAMENTARY PRESSURE FOR THE GOVERNMENT TO RESIGN. WHILE YEL'TSIN IS SHORT ON ECONOMIC SAVVY AND DOES NOT CLEARLY UNDERSTAND WHAT A MARKET ECONOMY REALLY ENTAILS, NO ONE EVER ACCUSED THE RUSSIAN LEADER OF LACKING DETERMINATION AND GRIT. WHEN YEL'TSIN CHOSE TO BE HIS OWN PRIME MINISTER, HE EXPLICITLY TIED HIS OWN POLITICAL FUTURE WITH THE FATE OF HIS PROGRAM. YEL'TSIN IS CONVINCED OF THE RIGHTNESS OF THE ECONOMIC REFORM COURSE HE HAS CHOSEN -- AND HE HAS STRONGLY DEFENDED THE TEAM HE PICKED TO CARRY IT OUT. THERE MAY BE SOME MID-COURSE CORRECTIONS IN PROGRAM AND PEOPLE, BUT YEL'TSIN HAS THE POLITICAL STAMINA TO TOUGH OUT THE DIFFICULT LATE-WINTER AND SPRING PERIOD. BEYOND THAT, WE BELIEVE YEL'TSIN IS POLITICALLY STRONG ENOUGH TO REPLACE HIS CURRENT ADMINISTRATION AND CONTINUE AS PRESIDENT IF SHORTCOMINGS IN HIS PROGRAM LEAD TO A SHARP INCREASE IN POPULAR OR LEGISLATIVE DISCONTENT.

6. DESPITE THE RUSSIAN PRESIDENT'S DOMINATION OF THE POLITICAL PROCESS IN THE CAPITAL, MUCH OF THE SUCCESS OR FAILURE OF POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC REFORM IN RUSSIA IS OUTSIDE HIS CONTROL. MOSCOW IS NO LONGER THE
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ALL-POWERFUL "CENTER". MANY PARTS OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION CARRY OUT INSTRUCTIONS FROM MOSCOW ONLY WHEN THEY WANT TO; UNWELCOME DECREES ARE IGNORED THE REGIONS AND LOCALITIES ARE UNDERGOING THEIR OWN TRANSFORMATIONS, BASED ON LOCAL CONDITIONS IN THE ABSENCE OF STRONG CENTRAL GOVERNMENT. THERE IS A GREAT DEAL MORE POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC FERMENT IN THIS COUNTRY THAN TELEVISION VIEWERS IN THE WEST IMAGINE. CERTAINLY, IN MANY PLACES OLD-LINE FORCES ARE TRYING TO ADAPT TO NEW CONDITIONS JUST TO PRESERVE THEIR POWER AND PRIVILEGES, BUT ACROSS RUSSIA NEW GENERATIONS OF POLITICIANS AND ENTREPRENEURS ARE PRODUCING GENUINE INITIATIVES IN GOVERNMENT, IN SOCIAL POLICY, IN BUSINESS, AND IN TIES WITH THE OUTSIDE WORLD.

7. MOST REFORMERS IN RUSSIA AND OTHER PARTS OF THE FORMER SOVIET UNION ARE LOOKING ABROAD RATHER THAN TO MOSCOW FOR GUIDANCE, FOR MODELS, FOR PARTNERSHIPS, FOR INVESTMENT, AND FOR AID. TO INNOVATORS IN RUSSIA TODAY, MOSCOW IS THE LOCUS AND SYMBOL OF FAILURE: THE PLACE WHERE ALL THE WRONG DECISIONS WERE MADE FOR AS LONG AS ANYONE CAN REMEMBER. IN THE PROVINCES PEOPLE AT THE SAME TIME ADMIRE AND SUPPORT YEL'TSIN WHILE REVILING THE BUREAUCRATIC AND GOVERNMENTAL STRUCTURE HE INHERITED. IN CONSEQUENCE, THE FATE OF REFORM IN RUSSIA DEPENDS ON THE EFFORTS OF MANY LOCAL REFORMERS AND NOT ONLY ON A SINGLE LEADER, HOWEVER DYNAMIC. THE GORBACHEV REFORMS

AND THE AUGUST PUTSCH WEAKENED MUCH OF THE OLD APPARATUS OF CONTROL, AND YEL'TSIN'S POLICIES HAVE CONTINUED THIS PROCESS. THE BATTLE CONTINUES, BETWEEN STILL-ENTRENCHED REPRESENTATIVES OF THE OLD SYSTEM AND IMPATIENT
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ADVOCATES OF THE NEW. DECREES AND LAWS FROM MOSCOW CAN CHANGE THE CONTEXT IN WHICH THE BATTLE IS FOUGHT (AS BY REMOVING ARTIFICIAL PRICE CONSTRAINTS AND BY GUTTING BUREAUCRACIES), BUT ULTIMATELY THIS IS AS MUCH A REVOLUTION FROM THE BOTTOM UP AS FROM THE TOP DOWN. JUST AS WELL. WHILE YEL'TSIN'S MACROECONOMIC STABILIZATION POLICIES ARE OF KEY IMPORTANCE IN THE MONTHS AHEAD, BOTTOM-UP CHANGE IS THE ONLY TYPE OF REFORM LIKELY TO ENDURE IN RUSSIA.

8. YEL'TSIN'S PERSONAL CONTRIBUTION TO THE REFORM STRUGGLE BEYOND MOSCOW LIES IN THE UNIQUE CHARISMATIC LINK THE MAN CONTINUES TO ENJOY WITH THE GREAT MASS OF THE RUSSIAN PEOPLE. WE BELIEVE THE BASE OF YEL'TSIN'S POPULAR SUPPORT IS INTACT DESPITE GRUMBLING ABOUT PRICE HIKES; INDEED, IT IS REMARKABLE THAT OVERT REACTION TO PRICE REFORM HAS BEEN RELATIVELY MUTED THUS FAR. YEL'SIN'S POPULAR MANDATE IS REAL; HE DID NOT RECEIVE THE VOTES OF FIFTY MILLION OF HIS COUNTRYMEN LAST JUNE SIMPLY FOR LACK OF VIABLE ALTERNATIVES. RUSSIANS APPRECIATE YEL'TSIN'S FORCE OF PERSONALITY, HIS DOWN-TO-EARTH APPROACH TO ISSUES, AND HIS DETERMINATION TO EFFECT BASIC CHANGE. RUSSIANS MAY HAVE ADMIRERD GORBACHEV'S WILLINGNESS TO OPEN UP THE POLITICAL PROCESS, BUT THEY BECAME VERY WEARY OF GORBACHEV'S CLINICAL AND DIDACTIC STYLE, AND OF HIS UNSWEARVING BELIEF IN THE RIGHTNESS OF SOCIALISM. THE RUSSIAN PEOPLE DO NOT WANT ANOTHER LENIN AT THEIR HEAD; THEY WANT A TSAR WITH THE COMMON TOUCH. IN YEL'TSIN THEY HAVE ONE. THERE IS A BASIC WARMTH AND UNDERSTANDING BETWEEN LEADER AND POPULACE, AND A GREAT RESERVE OF
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PATIENCE AMONG THE RUSSIAN PEOPLE TO LET YEL'TSIN PURSUE HIS REFORM COURSE. THIS RESERVE IS NOT LIMITLESS, BUT YEL'TSIN IS NOWHERE NEAR EXHAUSTING HIS MANDATE.

9. WITH THE OTHER REPUBLICS YEL'TSIN IS ON MUCH LESS CERTAIN GROUND THAN HE IS WITHIN THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION. YEL'TSIN'S PRESTIGE AND ELECTORAL MANDATE COUNT FOR LITTLE BEYOND RUSSIA'S BORDERS. THE POWER OF NATIONALISM IN THE OTHER REPUBLICS AND THE PASSION FOR "INDEPENDENCE" (OFTEN ILL-DEFINED) ARE CURRENTLY FAR MORE POTENT THAN IS THE LOGIC OF ECONOMIC INTERDEPENDENCE. MOST NON-RUSSIANS OF THE FORMER SOVIET EMPIRE TODAY ARE BEHAVING AS THE BALTS DID A YEAR AGO:

SEEKING TO ATTAIN AS MUCH REAL FREEDOM FROM MOSCOW AS THEY CAN, BECAUSE THEY ALL BELIEVE A RESTORED AND POWERFUL RUSSIA IN THE FUTURE WILL ATTEMPT TO REESTABLISH ITS SWAY BY ONE MEANS OR ANOTHER. UKRAINIANS, AZERIS, UZBEKS AND OTHER NATIONALITIES WANT TO SEIZE THE HIGH GROUND OF SOVEREIGNTY TODAY, SO THEY CAN HOLD ONTO IT TOMORROW. SHOWING THEM THE EXAMPLE OF WEST EUROPEAN INTEGRATION OR TECHNICAL ARGUMENTS ABOUT INTER-LOCKING ECONOMIES WILL NOT GET VERY FAR. CENTURIES OF RUSSIAN DOMINATION HAVE CONVINCED THESE NATIONS THAT FAIR WEATHER FOR SELF-DETERMINATION DOES NOT LAST.

10. AS A RESULT: THE COMMONWEALTH OF INDEPENDENT STATES. THE MINSK ACCORDS REPRESENT THE LOWEST COMMON DENOMINATOR ACCEPTABLE TO THE LARGEST NON-RUSSIAN STATE -- UKRAINE. FOR THE GOVERNMENT IN KIEV, THE COMMONWEALTH IS SIMPLY A TEMPORARY EXPEDIENT, A LEGAL
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COVER TO WORK OUT ITS COMPLETE SEPARATION FROM THE FORMER UNION, AFTER WHICH THE COMMONWEALTH WILL NO LONGER BE DEEMED NECESSARY FOR A EUROPEAN-ORIENTED INDEPENDENT UKRAINIAN STATE.

11. THE COMMONWEALTH IS NOT A SUCCESSOR UNION TO THE FORMER USSR; IT IS LITTLE MORE THAN A LEGAL FRAMEWORK WITHIN WHICH GOVERNMENTS CAN WORK OUT BILATERAL OR MULTILATERAL DEALS. AS IT HAPPENS, SUCH A LOOSE FRAMEWORK WAS WHAT YEL'TSIN PUBLICLY ADVOCATED LAST YEAR IN PREFERENCE TO GORBACHEV'S PROPOSALS FOR A NEW UNION TREATY. AFTER THE AUGUST PUTSCH, THE MOMENTUM OF IMPERIAL DISINTEGRATION BECAME OVERWHELMING AND GAVE YEL'TSIN MORE OR LESS WHAT HE SAID HE WANTED: A FEDERATED RUSSIAN STATE WITH MAXIMUM FREEDOM OF ACTION IN DEALING WITH THE OTHER FORMER SOVIET REPUBLICS. THE DOWNSIDE -- WHICH HE MAY NOT HAVE FULLY ANTICIPATED -- IS THAT THE OTHER STATES, PARTICULARLY UKRAINE, WOULD BE SO AGGRESSIVE IN EXERCISING THEIR OWN FREEDOMS OF ACTION. DISMAY OVER THE BREAKUP OF THE SOVIET UNION (AND HENCE OF THE RUSSIAN EMPIRE) IS WIDESPREAD AMONG RUSSIANS. IF THE INCREASINGLY TENUOUS THREADS WHICH BIND THE COMMONWEALTH STATES TOGETHER SNAP COMPLETELY, YEL'TSIN MAY FIND HIMSELF THE TARGET OF A WAVE OF CRITICISM AS THE MAN RESPONSIBLE FOR THE LOSS OF LANDS WHICH IN MANY CASES HAVE BELONGED TO RUSSIANS FOR CENTURIES.

12. THE MOST DIVISIVE ISSUE AMONG THE COMMONWEALTH STATES IS WHAT TO DO WITH THE ARMED FORCES. IF, AS SEEMS INCREASINGLY LIKELY, RUSSIA MOVES TO ESTABLISH ITS
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OWN MILITARY (IN RESPONSE TO SIMILAR ACTIONS BY OTHER REPUBLICS), THE COMMONWEALTH WILL LOSE MUCH OF ITS REASON FOR EXISTENCE, SAVE AS AN AGENCY FOR CENTRAL CONTROL OF STRATEGIC NUCLEAR WEAPONS. NUCLEAR WEAPONS MANAGEMENT IS ONE OF THE FEW ISSUES WHICH KEEP THE BIG FOUR OF THE COMMONWEALTH IN ACTIVE COLLABORATION. THIS ISSUE PRESENTS THE WEST (INCLUDING THE UNITED STATES) WITH SOMETHING OF A DILEMMA. WE BADLY WANT THE CUSTODIANSHIP OF THE NUCLEAR ARSENAL OF THE FORMER SOVIET UNION TO RESIDE WITH RUSSIA ALONE. AT THE SAME TIME, BY ENCOURAGING THE DENUCLEARIZATION OF UKRAINE, BYELARUS AND KAZAKHSTAN, WE ARE ALSO ENCOURAGING POLITICAL DISINTEGRATION ON THE TERRITORY OF THE FORMER SOVIET UNION. ONCE ALL THE NUCLEAR WEAPONS ARE OUT OF UKRAINE AND BYELARUS, THESE WESTWARD-LOOKING STATES WILL FEEL LITTLE INCENTIVE TO REMAIN IN THE COMMONWEALTH IN MORE THAN NAME -- IF THAT.

13. THE FUTURE OF THE ARMED FORCES AND OF THEIR INDUSTRIAL ALLIES REMAINS THE MOST DIFFICULT DOMESTIC POLITICAL CHALLENGE YEL'TSIN MUST WRESTLE WITH -- MORE DIFFICULT EVEN THAN ECONOMIC STABILIZATION. ONLY THE MILITARY HAS THE POTENTIAL IN THE COMING MONTHS TO REMOVE YEL'TSIN FROM POWER AND TO REVERSE THE TIDE OF REFORM. MUCH OF YEL'TSIN'S RUSSIAN NATIONALIST RHETORIC (ON THE BLACK SEA FLEET, FOR EXAMPLE) IS DIRECTED AT WHAT HE KNOWS IS A DEEPLY DISSATISFIED OFFICER CORPS, DISSATISFIED NOT JUST AT LOSS OF PERKS AND PRESTIGE BUT AT LOSS OF EMPIRE AND MISSION. YEL'TSIN CANNOT SOON RESTORE SUPERPOWER STATUS OR GLOBAL REACH; AND IT WILL BE VERY DIFFICULT TO DEFINE A CONVINCING MILITARY

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MISSION CONSISTENT WITH FREEFALL IN MILITARY BUDGETS AND DRASTIC CONTRACTION IN FORCE STRUCTURE. THE RUSSIAN PRESIDENT IS SEEKING TO ASSUAGE THIS POWERFUL CONSTITUENCY WITH SYMBOLS (SUCH AS RESTORING THE PRE-REVOLUTIONARY RUSSIAN NAVAL ENSIGN) AND WITH SOCIAL WELFARE PROGRAMS FOR MEN IN UNIFORM AND THEIR FAMILIES. DESPITE THESE GESTURES, IT IS CLEAR THAT YEL'TSIN IS A LONG WAY FROM HAVING SATISFIED HIS CONSTITUENTS IN UNIFORM.

14. TO THE EXTENT INDIVIDUAL LEADERSHIP CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN THE GREAT POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC STRUGGLES TAKING PLACE ACROSS THE VASTNESS OF RUSSIA, YEL'TSIN IS THE VEHICLE FOR THIS HISTORIC MISSION. WE SEE NO CREDIBLE SUBSTITUTES WAITING IN THE WINGS. IT IS REMARKABLE WHAT THIS FORMER SIBERIAN PARTY BOSS HAS ACHIEVED IN ONLY A FEW MONTHS: THE DISSOLUTION OF SOVIET POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS; REAL PROGRESS TOWARD RULE OF LAW; INITIATION (AFTER SOME DITHERING) OF A RADICAL ECONOMIC TRANSFORMATION; AND A START IN BREAKING DOWN

THE GARRISON STATE INHERITED FROM THE SOVIET ERA
YEL'TSIN IS CERTAINLY NOT WITHOUT HIS POLITICAL
LIMITATIONS. IN ADDITION TO HIS LACK OF ECONOMIC
SOPHISTICATED, A SERIOUS WEAKNESS IN THE RUSSIAN LEADER
IS THAT HE OFTEN NEEDS A CRISIS TO INSPIRE HIS
LEADERSHIP SKILLS; HE GETS BORED IN THE FOLLOW-THROUGH
PERIOD AND IN PURSUING THE DETAILS OF A PROGRAM. IT IS
OFTEN SAID THAT BORIS YEL'TSIN IS AT HIS BEST WHEN
STANDING ON A TANK, RALLYING A CROWD WITH THE FORCE OF
HIS OWN CYCLONIC PERSONALITY. BY BACKGROUND AND
TEMPERAMENT, YEL'TSIN SEEMS CURIOUSLY UNSUITED TO THE
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JOB OF LEADING AN AUTOCRATIC SOCIETY TOWARD A DEMOCRATIC
FUTURE, BUT HE SEEMS DETERMINED THAT THE JOB BE DONE AND
BE DONE BY NONE OTHER THAN HIMSELF.

15. AMBASSADOR'S COMMENT: WHILE THIS ANALYSIS MAY BE
OVERDRAWN A BIT AT THE MARGINS, WE WANTED TO MAKE THE
POINTS VIVIDLY AND RESPONSIBLY.
STRAUSS

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