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YELTSIN AND THE STYLE OF RUSSIAN POLITICS

This note examines the background to Yeltsin's problems with the Russian parliament, and makes some suggestions.

The old Soviet Union was a system of networking *par excellence*. Those who rose to the top were very skilled politicians indeed.

The formal structures of the Soviet Union - the "most democratic Constitution in history", a directly elected Supreme Soviet, a Government with a Prime Minister and the normal complement of Ministers, a network of elected local bodies, and a full panoply of courts - all mimicked the institutions of a modern liberal state. They were all of course a sham.

The real network of power was the Communist Party, its Regional Secretaries, its Central Committee, the Politburo, and - with near dictatorial power - the General Secretary. Its "leading role" was enshrined in Brezhnev's revised constitution. But from the start it rigged every election, approved every appointment in industry as well as the administration, shadowed the Government at each turning. Whatever the formal appearances, nobody in the Soviet Union was ever in any doubt about where the real power lay.

Russia has no tradition of constitutional limits on the power of the executive, or of the rule of law: the Russian Chief of Police said in the 1830s that "Laws are written for underlings, not for their bosses". The central political proposition is that of autocracy ("tempered by assassination", as a 19th century observer remarked). Both the Tsars and the General Secretaries were careful to ensure that none of their advisers could combine to limit their power. They surrounded themselves with cronies - the Tsar's courtiers, Stalin's Georgian mafia, Brezhnev's Ukrainians - and deliberately set out to provoke rivalry amongst their entourage. There was no orderly system of Cabinet, nor even a properly organised secretariat for the autocrat himself. Business was conducted on the basis of personal relationships, intrigue in smoke filled rooms, and - in this century - with the bullet and on the telephone.

During the Communist period the Party structure provided a ready-made basis for networking throughout the country. It served for the conduct of corrupt business as well as politics. The typical Russian political phenomenon - in politics and in business - is the antechamber full of petitioners. It is the atmosphere which surrounded a mediaeval or Middle Eastern monarch. For all his break with the past, Gorbachev's style was merely a comparatively benign version of the way in which previous General Secretaries had run the Soviet Union.

Yeltsin, who is the same age as Gorbachev, grew up in the same tradition. His career differed little from that of any other Party bureaucrat: powerful regional boss, brought to Moscow in mid-career by the whim of the General Secretary, bringing his cronies with him from Sverdlovsk. His political style at that time was old-fashioned: bullying, impetuous, autocratic. To get where he did, he must have used the techniques of Communist networking as

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well as the next man. But his challenge to the Politburo in 1987, and Gorbachev's unprecedented willingness to let him retain a political foothold in Moscow, marked a crucial break with the Russian and Communist political tradition, which has never admitted the concept of a loyal opposition. Bukharin once remarked: "Of course we could have a two party system in Russia: but one party would be in power, and the other in prison". Gorbachev's reluctant willingness to accept that this tradition could change may turn out to be one of his main achievements.

Yeltsin played his role as leader of the "loyal opposition" from 1987 to 1991 with great skill. He was the object of a black propaganda campaign by Gorbachev designed to show that he was an irresponsible and erratic drunk. Not all the accusations were unjustified. But he was successful in distancing himself increasingly from the Party and appealing to Russian patriotic sentiment, while avoiding capture by the forces of virulent chauvinism and anti-Semitism which in Russia are never far below the surface. Ordinary Russians loved him precisely because he got drunk, fell into rivers, and hated the Communists - just like they did.

The problem today is that the decay of the networks provided by the Communist Party state within a state has not yet been matched by the growth of robust new political organisations on a national scale. At one time Gorbachev toyed with the idea of splitting the Communist Party into its liberal and conservative fractions, thus creating the basis of a two party system. The reactionaries within the Party prevented him; while the liberal politicians surrounding him - Shevardnadze, Yakovlev and others - failed to ally themselves effectively with the democrats who had got together into loose political groupings distinguished more by common anti-Communist rhetoric than by practicable common policy programmes.

Yeltsin has found the problem of politicking in the post-Communist world as difficult as Gorbachev did. There are no set structures and none of the organisational discipline formerly imposed by the rigid hierarchies of the Party: only the struggle for dominance between individuals and groups, and between Moscow and the provinces. Ever since Yeltsin came to power at the end of 1991 people have suggested forming a "President's party", or an effective democratic party, which could articulate and push through a coherent policy of reform. During the Congress last December Yeltsin announced that he would now set up such party.

Nothing has yet come of it, for reasons which run deep. First, and most important, the lack of a democratic tradition means that Russians have no experience of setting up parties rather than conspiracies. The democratic experiment before the First World War failed partly because the democratic parties spent most of their time quarrelling with one another: the democratic groupings in the Supreme Soviet are doing the same. Second, many Russians rationalise this failure on the grounds that Russia has had too much Party government in the last seventy years, and that any attempt to create an effective new party will therefore be deeply unpopular.

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The essence of the constitutional struggle in Russia at present is rather different: it is whether the future political system should be "Presidential" or "Parliamentary". There is an analogy with the struggle between King and Parliament in England in the 17th century: it was only after this issue had been settled in favour of Parliament that modern political parties began to emerge in Britain. The same could be true in Russia.

In this contest, Yeltsin has not been ineffective. Like Gorbachev he certainly spends a good deal of time - perhaps too much - meeting people influential in current Russian politics. Operating through the "President's men" in the Supreme Soviet he has at least held his own with his main opponent, the Parliamentary speaker Khasbulatov. He remains vulnerable to biased and random advice from his cronies. He has recently sacked some of the most unpopular. But he still cannot rely on a coherent and effective body of support within the Supreme Soviet, and his popular appeal is inevitably diminishing as life in Russia gets harder. His position may not be much restored even if the people support Presidential government in the referendum in April, and even if the Parliamentary elections in 1995 sweep out the Communist old guard who were elected in 1990.

What can we do to help?

What follows is based on the assumption that it is in the West's interest that Russia should not descend into chaos, or reconstitute itself under an authoritarian and potentially aggressive regime.

Genuine political and economic progress in Russia depend on fundamental changes in the political culture. But significant qualitative change is already occurring: the people are now almost universally literate, they live in cities instead of villages, and they are in contact with the outside world through travel, television, radio, and the press. There is a great difference between the Soviet Union in Khrushchev's time and Russia today. Despite the difficulties Russia now faces, all this provides some ground for hope that Russia may indeed be at the beginning of an historic process of modernisation and that a reversion to old patterns of authoritarianism - the nightmare of liberal Russians - will be averted.

There is not all that much that foreigners can do to promote institutional change directly, and not much we can do to teach Yeltsin about political infighting in Moscow. The Russians are if anything getting too much advice. The ultra nationalists claim that the reformers are selling out to the West, which is simply exploiting Russia's present weakness for its own ends. There is the risk of a backlash.

But that does not mean we have to stand idly by. Western political mechanisms cannot of course be applied directly even in a changing Russian reality. But good and tactfully managed schemes are already in place: to give the ablest younger Russians - the rising politicians as well as journalists, academics, and people from the infant world of Russian commerce and finance - the opportunity to work and study in the West; to provide technical

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assistance and training programmes in Russia itself; and to offer discreet advice on Parliamentary and political management. One such scheme - on the reorganisation of central government machinery - draws on expertise from several European countries and had the backing of Yeltsin's Chief of Staff, Yuri Petrov, who has unfortunately recently been sacked. Another modest scheme is successfully helping the Russians to set up a nationwide employment service: vital when economic reform inevitably brings unemployment in its wake. Such schemes need to be multiplied, not only in Moscow but in the provinces as well.

The West must also continue to support the economic reform. This involves not only the provision of humanitarian aid (a short term alleviation of the hardship which reform brings), financial assistance, and debt relief. It also requires policy advice which takes full account of the Russian reality. Some of the advice which has been provided hitherto, by the IMF and others, has been dangerously superficial in its concentration on macroeconomic issues and its failure to grapple with the hideous difficulty of dismantling the Soviet Union's rustbowl defence industry. This accounted for a substantial proportion of the Soviet economy. An orderly scheme of restructuring, offering the hope of alternative employment to the millions of skilled and unskilled people who work in the sector, is a political as well as an economic imperative. The failure by Gaidar and his Western advisers to propose a convincing scheme helped to give the reactionaries their chance at the recent Congress. Western governments, who find it hard enough to dismantle their own rustbowl industries, should be well able to appreciate the underlying politics.

More broadly, we need to help the reformers in Russia demonstrate to their reactionary critics that cooperation with the West is not turning Russia into a mere satellite. It is very important that we should treat Russia as a great, if not a super, power; that we should ensure that Russia is seen to be fully involved in the international decisionmaking process on the great issues such as Bosnia and Iraq; and that the Russian leadership - particularly Yeltsin, Foreign Minister Kozyrev, and Defence Minister Grachev - should be seen by their own people to be treated as full equals by their Western counterparts. Gorbachev was greatly damaged in his last year in power by the popular perception in Russia that he had become a mendicant of the West.

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