1994-11

Short Term Stability: At What Cost?

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http://hdl.handle.net/2144/3512

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The unexpectedly good performance of Vladimir Zhirinovsky's Liberal Democratic Party in the December 1993 Russian parliamentary elections intensified debates inside Russia and in the West about the unpredictable nature of the country's politics and strengthened the argument of those who hold the view that Boris Yel'tsin's team could soon be replaced by an extreme nationalist government. It has been argued that a new constitution, also adopted in December 1993, that gives almost unlimited powers to the president could be used by an extreme nationalist leader of Zhirinovsky's type to revive strict and effective authoritarian rule in Russia.(1)

Those speaking about unpredictability in Russia's politics could point to the weakness of the country's political parties, its poorly developed political institutions,(2) corruption, and socially disruptive economic changes. All these are reminiscent of the situation in modernizing countries in Latin America and Asia, where military coups and other violent upheavals are common. To the surprise of many observers, however, this year in Russia has been marked by trends towards increasing stability compared to 1993. The signing of the Civic Accord in April 1994 by Yel'tsin, other top government and state officials, politicians (including a number from opposition movements), and representatives of Russia's republics and regions, was the first time Russia's elite groups met in an attempt to forge a consensus since the communist system started to collapse. The new parliament, despite the high number of extreme politicians among its members, is on the whole more ready to cooperate with the executive than the old parliament had ever been. Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin's talent for working with a variety of political groups has a stabilizing influence. In 1994, Moscow's regional
policies have shown increased effectiveness. The signing in February 1994 of the Treaty on the Delimitation of Spheres of Authority and the Mutual Delimitation of Powers by Russia and Tatarstan considerably reduced the likelihood of Russia's disintegration.

The questions of how long this stability can last and by what means this stability has been achieved naturally arise. It seems that the current stabilization owes much to the revival of traditional governing methods, which has entailed the abandonment of many earlier democratic experiments:

- First, the role of appointed officials has increased. With few exceptions, Russia's governors (i.e., the heads of regional and local administrations) and city mayors are appointed either by the president in Moscow or by top regional executives and are thus not accountable to the population. Moreover, as stipulated by the new constitution, the role of those executive organs has increased at the expense of legislative bodies at all levels; the regional and local legislatures now play virtually no meaningful role in politics.(3)

- Second, the president, with all his powers, relies less on the government than on parallel and largely unconstitutional bodies within the presidential apparatus. The period following the December 1993 parliamentary elections and constitutional referendum witnessed "a substantial increase in the number of officials and organizations shielded from independent oversight and responsible only to the president."(4) Among the changes introduced by the president following the adoption of the new constitution were, for instance, the abolition of the Security Ministry and the creation instead of the Federal Counterintelligence Service, directly subordinated to the president, to assume most of the ministry's functions. Furthermore, most legislative initiatives still come from the president in the form of presidential decrees, sometimes contradicting the constitution. This does not enhance the rule of law in the country, especially since many of the decrees are ignored both in Moscow and in the periphery.

- Third, in practice, Moscow's regional policies are not aimed at federalizing the country. In violation of the main principle of federalism, the new constitution allows
the powers of regional governments to be unilaterally changed by Moscow. Current regional policies are producing a situation similar to that in Russia before the February Revolution of 1917: a unitary state incorporating autonomous ethnic territories with broader powers of self-government. The current status of Tatarstan, for example, can be compared to that of Finland in Tsarist Russia in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.(5) Some observers argue that Russia's republics and regions have acquired enormous powers to manage their own affairs. While it is true that several are far more powerful than before, many of their powers have no legal basis and, as Yel'tsin's decrees disbanding regional and local legislatures in the fall of 1993 have shown, could be curtailed by Moscow.

Fourth, attempts to revive the prestige of the army through official propaganda as well as its role in politics are increasing. Already in 1992 official media and members of the government began to refer to the army as one of the main pillars of Russian society (the other being the Russian Orthodox Church). Simultaneously, in late 1992, the army's role in implementing Russia's policies in the successor states to the USSR drastically increased. It is largely through the army that the Russian government is trying to assure Russia's influence and even presence in most parts of the former Soviet Union.(6)

Moreover, Yel'tsin is now in debt to Defense Minister Pavel Grachev for his support during the August 1991 putsch and the October 1993 disturbances, and there is ample evidence that the latter's wishes carry a lot of weight in the decision-making in Moscow. For instance, the president and the government are now trying to suppress a discussion in the media of corruption in the armed forces.(7) This new role of the army reduces the chances of its revolt due to frustration. However, this role, which is highly politicized, should be a source of concern to a government proclaiming democratization as its goal.

Fifth, neo-imperialist policies are gaining ground. Since 1992, Yel'tsin's leadership has condoned or promoted Russian military intervention in Moldova and a number of newly independent states in the Transcaucasus and Central Asia, taken a "tough
line" on the treatment of Russian minorities in the Baltic States, and exerted economic and other pressure on Ukraine in an attempt to appease the opposition, which is alarmed by the loss of Russia's status as an empire. Those policies are also aimed at boosting the current leadership's rapidly waning prestige with the public and at reasserting Russia's role as a great power in the international community. Leading politicians, including Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev, justify their demands for Russia's special role on the territory of the former USSR by referring to the Russians who, since the 16th century, sacrificed their lives to bring the region from the Baltic Sea to Central Asia under Russian control.(8)

- Sixth, not only Russia's pre-Revolutionary but also Soviet traditions are being glorified. To cite just one example, this year's celebrations of the Soviet Union's victory in World War II were accompanied by uncritical praise on state-run television and in other media of Russia's role in "liberating" Europe from fascism. Controversial aspects of Soviet policies during the war, widely discussed during the Gorbachev era, were largely ignored. In the words of John W. R. Lepingwell:

While the intelligentsia debates the meaning of "Russia," ... that identity is being created in an ad hoc fashion, partly because of the transformations in society and partly because of political expediency. The result is an odd, and perhaps, unstable, amalgam of the Russian past and the Soviet legacy.(9)

All those developments may well be inevitable at this stage. Until recently, the legitimacy of Russia's first postcommunist government was based almost entirely on Yeltsin as a charismatic leader. Now that his popularity is declining, other forms of legitimacy must be found. It would have been surprising if the current leadership--largely a prisoner of its communist past--had done other than attempt to revive elements of the Russian/Soviet tradition.

But while those policies have brought a degree of short-term stability, they do not tackle the roots of the problems and are thus unlikely to have positive results in the long term. Indeed, the current stability is strikingly fragile. Although the new constitution gives the
president almost unlimited powers, Yeltsin seems weak and indecisive. Yet there is no clear alternative to him in the democratic camp. The State Duma has been slow in adopting laws, thus hampering economic reform, and the brief period of economic stabilization appears to be coming to an end. Relations between the federal government and the periphery are still not clearly defined, and the leaders of a number of ethnic republics have stated that they will not abandon the sovereignty they had de facto acquired by late 1993, regardless of what the new constitution says. The deterioration in relations between Moscow and Chechnya in the summer and fall of 1994 and between North Ossetia and Ingushetia in November 1994 highlights once again the center's inability to deal with crises on its periphery. Few of those problems are likely to be solved by relying on past practices and traditions.

Notes:
2 Although the new Russian constitution divides more clearly powers between the legislative and executive bodies and the judiciary, it has serious shortcomings. It further reduces the powers of elected bodies in favor of those given to appointed officials. It also, among other things, fails to properly divide powers between the federal center and Russia's constituent parts.


10 Tolz, *op. cit.*

11 North Ossetia and Ingushetia are North Caucasian republics within the Russian Federation. The Ingush demand that North Ossetia returns a region which had belonged to the Ingush prior to their deportation from their homeland on Iosif Stalin's order during World War II. The failure of Moscow, which takes the side of North Ossetia, to resolve the problem has resulted in military clashes between the Ingush and North Ossetians.