

The Russian Presidential Election: Prospects and Implications

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This paper looks at the candidates in the Russian presidential election, the first round of which is due to take place on 16 June 1996, and also at the issues raised and their implications. Preliminary results are expected by mid-day on 17 June, but the final result may not be known for several more days. The most likely date for the second round is 7 July.

**Richard Ware
International Affairs and Defence Section**

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I The Presidential Election

The Russian presidency was created in 1991 when the Russian Federation was still a constituent republic of the Soviet Union. Boris Yeltsin won the first presidential elections on 12 June 1991 with 57.3% of the vote. There were five other candidates on that occasion, including the former Soviet prime minister Nikolai Ryzhkov who came second with 16.8%, and Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, who came third, with 7.8%.

At the formal dissolution of the Soviet Union in December 1991, Yeltsin became president of a separate sovereign state without a further election. The Russian Federation then had a provisional constitution adapted from that of the Soviet period. With the introduction of a new constitution in December 1993 the presidency took on a stronger executive role. While Yeltsin had been elected for a five-year term in 1991, the new constitution (article 81(1)) lays down that in future the term of office will be four years.

The first round will be held on 16 June and if no candidate wins more than 50%, there will be a run-off between the two highest placed candidates. This can take place only after the results of the first round have been formally declared - probably on 7 or 14 July. In the second round voters will have the right to vote against both candidates and, under Article 56 of the election law, the result will be valid only if the votes cast for the more popular candidate exceed the votes cast against both. There has been some speculation that in the present climate of disillusionment on the part of the electorate a "double negative" result is a real possibility, in which case the whole election process would have to begin again.¹

II Presidential candidates and their supporters

A. The Candidates

The deadline for registration of candidates was 16 April 1996. In the preceding months several dozen possible candidacies had been canvassed, often without the formal assent of the proposed candidate, but only 11 candidates were finally registered. A twelfth candidate, Galina Starovoitova, who would have been the only woman in the contest, was denied registration on the grounds that some of her supporting signatures were not authentic. Her subsequent appeal to the Supreme Court failed. One of the 11 candidates, Aman-Geldy Tuleyev, dropped out of the contest on 5 June, calling on his supporters to back Zyuganov.

¹ S Chugaev, "Vtoroi tur presidentskikh vyborov mozhet prodolzhat'sya beskonechno" [The second round of the presidential elections could go on forever], *Izvestiya*, 7 May 1996.

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The leading contenders are Boris Yeltsin (no party, but backed by Our Home is Russia), Gennadi Zyuganov (Communist Party of the Russian Federation), Vladimir Zhirinovskiy (Liberal Democratic Party²), Grigori Yavlinsky (reformist Yabloko party) and General Alexandr Lebed (former commander of Russian forces in Moldova and member of the patriotic Congress of Russian Communities).

The other candidates have no chance of success and are standing either to promote particular causes or else to influence the result indirectly. They are Svyatoslav Fedorov (eye surgeon and promoter of a centrist "third way"), Mikhail Gorbachev (the former Soviet president and initiator of *perestroika*, now offering himself as the potential head of a "third force" coalition³), Vladimir Bryntsalov (businessman allied with former Duma speaker Rybkin, against Zyuganov), Martin Shakkum (businessman promoting "third way" alternatives) and Yury Vlasov (writer, former weight-lifter).

The most prominent non-candidate is probably the prime minister, Viktor Chernomyrdin, who seemed likely to assume Boris Yeltsin's mantle as the champion of gradual economic reform had the latter decided not to stand again. Chernomyrdin's political party, Our Home is Russia, received only 10.13% of the vote in the December 1995 parliamentary elections and he now seems unlikely to remain prime minister, even in the event of a Yeltsin victory. However, as long as he retains the office, he would be the automatic interim president in the event of the actual president dying in office or becoming physically incapacitated.

The following sections provide brief sketches of the top five candidates, their priorities, and the interests which they represent.

1. Gennadi Zyuganov

Gennadi Zyuganov was born in 1944 in a village in Orel region. His parents were both school-teachers and he also began to train as a teacher, but became involved in Communist Party and Komsomol (Young Communist) work while on military service in the 1960s and made a full-time career as a party official. He was transferred from Orel to the Central Committee apparatus in Moscow in 1983 and served in the propaganda and ideology departments. In the late 1980s he was one of those who opposed Gorbachev's reforms and

² Despite its name, the Liberal Democratic Party is a populist party of the nationalist right - see the section on Vladimir Zhirinovskiy.

³ Opinion polls suggest that Gorbachev now has the support of barely 1% of the electorate. This can be explained by a number of factors, including the fact that he has no significant party behind him and does not have a clearly-defined programme. Many Russians now blame him for the collapse of the USSR and for the economic hardship of recent years. His attempts to placate the party and KGB diehards in 1990-91 also undermined his credentials in the minds of convinced reformers and led them to transfer their allegiance to Boris Yeltsin.

tried to preserve a communist party structure by re-founding a Russian Communist Party. For most of the Soviet period the other national republics had separate communist party organisations, but the over-arching structures of the CPSU⁴ served for the Russian Federation.

The CPSU was dissolved following the failed coup against Gorbachev in 1991 and its assets passed to the Russian government. While most of the leading figures of the old CPSU either retired from active politics or joined new parties, a group of mainly junior and provincial officials launched the Communist Party of the Russian Federation and Zyuganov became its chairman in February 1993.⁵

Throughout Soviet history there was a tension within the CPSU between Russian patriotism and Marxist internationalism. The conscious association of communism with Russian national symbols came to the fore in war-time (as in Eisenstein's Alexander Nevsky film) and again during the long rule of Leonid Brezhnev, when films and novels extolling traditional Russian peasant values and culture became common-place. Since the collapse of the Soviet state and the CPSU, many of the leading exponents of Russian nationalism have abandoned all pretence of adherence to Marxism and have turned instead to openly anti-semitic and quasi-fascist positions, but this has not prevented the emergence of a so-called "red-brown" alliance of communists and nationalists in the Duma and on the streets. David Remnick has commented on Zyuganov's election meetings:

The strangeness of this enterprise was nicely symbolised at meetings at which there were two flags in evidence - the red Soviet banner, and the black, yellow, and gold of the tsarist era - thus reconciling the enemies of the civil war. Add to that a few black-shirted neo-Nazis guarding the podium and you begin to get a sense of these meetings and the new wave in general.⁶

The fusion of communism and nationalism in Russia is less improbable than it might seem. Before the importation of Marxism from Germany at the end of the nineteenth century, Russia had both populist socialists who believed in traditional Russian peasant institutions as models of egalitarianism and conservative intellectuals who believed in the mystic unity and world mission of the Russian people. The collapse of communist power in 1990-91 has led to the comprehensive rejection of the imported elements in Marxism-Leninism, such as internationalism and the "scientific" periodisation of history, but the underlying belief in a uniquely Russian form of collectivism persists and reinforces the sense of grievance acutely felt by many of Zyuganov's supporters. The development of a new private enterprise economy in Russia is seen as benefiting a small minority at the expense of the great majority.

⁴ Communist Party of the Soviet Union

⁵ David Remnick, "Hammer, Sickle, and Book", *The New York Review of Books*, 23 May 1996, p46.

⁶ *ibid*

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On 3 June Zyuganov said in a TV broadcast:

Another two or three years of these policies, and we shall lose not just a collective or a state farm, not just a factory or an enterprise, but our Fatherland, the country that has been created by our ancestors over 1,000 years, that has been protected and defended by them - and they will just damn us for letting this happen.⁷

Zyuganov has promised that, if elected, he will preserve a plurality of forms of ownership of economic enterprises, including private ownership, but, as a communist, he expects that "the leading role of socialist forms of ownership will clearly come to prominence". In an interview for Russian TV on 12 May he went on to explain how this belief was linked to the Russian national character:

What is determined by the national character is that since Peter the Great the Russian economy has always been run primarily by the state... It is no secret to anybody that we have a number of national traits: we are collectivists; we are community-spirited. That is how we are born, since the times of Christ.⁸

Zyuganov has also cultivated the support of the Orthodox clergy and believers. In early April he visited Yelets in Central Russia, a town famous for its Orthodox churches and traditions, told large crowds of supporters that he had great respect for religious believers and visited the Cathedral of the Assumption to see its treasured holy relics.⁹

Gennadi Zyuganov started the presidential campaign with the most solid party base of any of the presidential candidates. The CPRF gained 22.3% of the popular votes and took 157 seats out of 450 in the State Duma. On many issues the communists have sufficient allies in the Duma to dominate proceedings and the communist Gennadi Seleznev, a former editor of *Pravda*, was elected Speaker of the Duma on 17 January 1996. While 22% will not be enough to win the second round of the presidential contest, it was also clear that in the parliamentary elections the overwhelming majority of votes were cast against the Yeltsin-Chernomyrdin administration.¹⁰ This suggested that there could well be a majority for a presidential candidate able to present himself as an alternative to the Yeltsin/Chernomyrdin team, provided that he could focus the various strands of opposition into a sufficiently coherent programme.

⁷ *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts*, SU/2630 A/1.

⁸ *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts*, SU/2611 A/3.

⁹ *The Guardian*, 13 April 1996; *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts*, 15 April 1996.

¹⁰ The major party most closely associated with the president and government, Our Home is Russia, received barely 10% of all the votes cast.

Zyuganov has promised not to create a narrow communist party-based administration if he wins the presidential election. He has said that he will offer ministerial jobs to presidential candidates Yavlinsky, Lebed and Fedorov and would involve other prominent non-communist politicians from the Duma. He has also promised not to sack non-communist civil servants.¹¹ Zyuganov's opponents draw attention to the fact that in many cities and regions the communists have already begun to re-create the network of party committees which used to manipulate all governmental bodies and make use of non-communist "fellow travellers" as window dressing.

2. Boris Yeltsin

Boris Yeltsin (born 1931) has dominated Russian politics since 1990, using his occupancy of the presidency to overshadow all other non-communist politicians. He rose to prominence as the communist first secretary of his native Sverdlovsk, then as head of the central committee department in Moscow supervising the construction sector, and as a reforming Party Secretary for Moscow (1985-87). In the later 1980s he became a fierce critic of the dogmatic conservative wing of the Communist Party and was dropped from senior party posts as a result, but he bounced back as the first genuinely elected chairman of the reconstituted Russian Federation parliament in 1990, and, finally, as the first directly elected president of the Russian Federation in 1991.

Since the collapse of the old-style Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1990-91, Yeltsin has made no serious attempt to found a political party of his own, but has tried instead to present himself as a guiding figure above party politics. Similarly he has often distanced himself from the implementation of government policies and of the military campaign in Chechnya, demanding that his ministers take responsibility for their actions. In a French magazine interview he explained his reason for seeking re-election:

... as a man who advocates democratic and reformist views, I personally think it is essential for me to resist the danger of a Communist backlash in Russia in every possible way... the ideas which are now being propagated by representatives of the communist parties, are undoubtedly threatening for Russia, its citizens and the international community.¹²

During his five years as Russian president, Boris Yeltsin's political profile has substantially altered from one of enthusiasm for political and economic reform to one of cautious gradualism, with emphasis on the restoration of national dignity and state power. He still insists that the reforms already commenced should be carried through to the end, despite the often painful side-effects of a harsh economic transition, and seems to have given Viktor

¹¹ *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts*, SU/2633 A/3, 8 June 1996.

¹² *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts*, SU/2600 B/1, 1 May 1996.

Chernomyrdin his backing in the attempts to introduce order and restraint into public finance. However, Yeltsin's underlying philosophy seems to have changed significantly since the days of *perestroika*. Whereas then the emphasis was on liberalisation, westernisation and modernisation, since the upheavals of 1992-3 Yeltsin seems to have been intent on trying to reimpose central authority and order on Russian society, while rebuilding the Russian Federation as a great power with interests and values different to those of "the West". The aspiration is probably in tune with the mood of most of the electorate, but the attempt has so far enjoyed scant success. Far from reasserting Russian strength, the mishandled Chechnya conflict has exposed Russian weakness, there is still a perception that Russia is being slighted and humiliated on the international stage and many Russians feel that their society is in a state of advanced decay, marked by crime, alcoholism, depression and confusion. Yeltsin's personal standing has also suffered in the past from his unpredictable behaviour and frequent bouts of ill-health, though he has been notably energetic during the election campaign and his health appears reasonably strong.

Whereas in June 1991 Yeltsin enjoyed the enthusiastic support of campaigners for democracy and reform, and this support was to be offered even more keenly when he stood up to the organisers of the attempted coup in August 1991, in 1996 the reformist camp is divided between those who still offer reluctant support and those for whom the Chechnya campaign has been the last straw in a bitter disillusionment. An opinion poll among people who said that they would be voting for Boris Yeltsin has indicated that only 53% positively supported him, while 42% were mainly concerned to stop Zyuganov winning and 5% could not explain their motives.¹³

3. Grigori Yavlinsky

Grigori Yavlinsky (born 1951) has been a declared presidential candidate for two years and has campaigned over a much longer period for an alternative programme of economic and political reform. As an economist, he was involved in drawing up the abortive "500 days" programme of reform for Mikhail Gorbachev, but, unlike his main rival in the liberal reformist camp, Yegor Gaidar, he has not served in government since 1990 and cannot be blamed for the failures and painful side-effects of the reform process carried through by first Gaidar, and then Viktor Chernomyrdin.

Like Boris Yeltsin, Yavlinsky has veered towards a more statist, "patriotic" position in the last 2-3 years and he has found some common ground with two other "third party" presidential candidates, Svyatoslav Fedorov and Aleksandr Lebed. In March the three men made a series of joint statements and seemed to be moving towards an alliance, but this has not come about,

¹³ Yury Levada, "Rossiskii izbiratel mezhdru dvumya krainostyami" [The Russian voter between two extremes], *Izvestiya*, 28 May 1996.

and it now seems unlikely that any agreement could propel one of the three into the second round of the election. Lebed commented on 6 May:

Most probably, there will be no agreements on creating a coalition, because the pyramid does not have a top, a single coalition candidate.¹⁴

Yavlinsky's economic programme includes ensuring the prompt payment of wages and raising pensions and child benefits. He proposes to pay for these measures by halting the war in Chechnya, by abolishing the fiscal privileges of the big monopoly industries such as oil and gas, by imposing controls on the export of capital and by reducing the size of the civil service. He also has a tax reform plan aimed at reducing rates of tax while increasing the efficiency of collection.¹⁵

4. Aleksandr Lebed

Aleksandr Lebed (born 1949) is the former commander of Russian forces in Moldova. He belongs to a new breed of Russian politicians who trade on populist slogans and a reputation for personal heroism. Lebed is credited with preventing an all-out conflict in Moldova, while defending the Russian-speaking population there from Moldovan/Romanian nationalism. He has made a particular issue out of the plight of Russians "stranded" in the newly independent former Soviet republics and believes that Russia should use the economic dependency of these states to protect the interests of its fellow-countrymen.¹⁶

In the presidential election Lebed is campaigning for a third way, which is "neither red nor white". He claims that his highest priority is to avoid civil war and that he is ready to talk to communists or democrats about anything. On the ownership of the means of production he has stated: "There will be neither privatisation carried out dirt cheap in one fell swoop, nor expropriation without compensation. Enterprises of all forms of ownership have the right to existence and to state support."¹⁷

During 1995 Lebed was taken seriously as a potential "strong man" presidential candidate untarnished by past failures, but his performance in the parliamentary elections (4.3% for the Congress of Russian Communities of which he was joint leader) was disappointing and he has failed to establish momentum. He now stands no real chance of success in the election, but, like the other "third" candidates, may have some bargaining power with the victors of the first

¹⁴ *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts*, SU/2606 B/8.

¹⁵ *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts*, SU/2610 A/4, 13 May 1996.

¹⁶ *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts*, SU/2604 B/3, 6 May 1996.

¹⁷ quoted in *Guide to the Russian Presidential Election 1996*, BBC Monitoring, 4 June 1996, p10.

round. Lebed has been mentioned as a possible defence minister in a revamped Yeltsin administration.

5. Vladimir Zhirinovsky

Vladimir Zhirinovsky (born 1946) came to prominence in 1990 as a leader of the extreme right. He uses extravagant language, deliberately courts scandal and frequently contradicts himself, but there are consistent threads in his numerous speeches, books and articles: anti-semitism, a fascination with Hitler and national socialism, an attraction to violence, an obsessive interest in nuclear weapons, coupled with casual threats to use them against various countries, a desire to reassert Russian control over all of the territories settled by Russians in the past, including the Baltic and Zhirinovsky's native Kazakhstan. The title of his autobiography, *The Last Dash to the South*, reflects his belief in Russia's destiny to dominate the mainly Moslem territories which lie between the former Soviet republics and the Indian Ocean.

Zhirinovsky stood for the presidency in 1991 and came third with 7.8% of the vote. In December 1993 his "Liberal Democratic Party" emerged as the strongest single party, with 23% of the vote in parliamentary elections, provoking alarm around the world and comparisons with the rise of Hitler. Once established in parliament, however, Zhirinovsky found it difficult to sustain his electoral momentum. His parliamentary faction split and he found himself having to compete for the "patriotic" audience with the communists and more conventional nationalists. In the parliamentary elections of December 1995 his share of the vote was reduced to 11.2% - still substantial, but well behind the communists.

B. Opinion polls

There have been many opinion polls concerning the forthcoming presidential election, but the results must be treated with caution. Many are based only on interviews in a few large cities and do not reflect opinion in the countryside or remoter regions.¹⁸ A further problem is that the figures give little reliable indication of the preferences which voters might express in the second round of the presidential election.

¹⁸ There is also some doubt about the integrity of the polling organisations, some of which are alleged to have accepted payments to include particular parties in the list of those likely to exceed the 5% threshold for the parliamentary elections - see V Vilchek, "Lukavye sotsiologi na pepelishche vyborov-95" [Cunning pollsters rake over the embers of election '95], *Izvestiya*, 21 December 1995.

Until late April most polls showed Zyuganov ahead of Yeltsin. Then there was a scattering of polls indicating a narrow Yeltsin lead in the first round. A poll published on 5 May showed Yeltsin and Zyuganov neck and neck with 28% each in the first round, followed by Lebed and Yavlinsky, both on 7%, Fedorov on 6% and Zhirinovskiy on 5%. The same poll suggested that in a Yeltsin-Zyuganov run-off 40% would vote for the former and 36% for the latter.¹⁹

Another opinion poll published on 14 May put Yeltsin slightly ahead with 28% in the first round to 27% for Zyuganov. The same poll had Yeltsin winning the second round against Zyuganov by 45% to 37%. Yavlinsky, Fedorov and Lebed were given a combined first round vote of 22%, suggesting that, if Yeltsin were able to secure the endorsement of all three for the second round, he would be almost guaranteed victory.²⁰

While the apparent swing towards Yeltsin may reflect a genuine shift of opinion, it is not impossible that some of these polls have been manipulated to create the impression of momentum for the president. A poll published on 3 June put Yeltsin's lead at only 1% (26% compared to 25% for Zyuganov).²¹

III The final weeks of campaigning and events in Chechnya

In the final weeks of campaigning there has been intense speculation about confidential meetings between various of the candidates and about possible last-minute alliances. It seems unlikely that any of the major candidates will withdraw at the last minute and the public and private bargaining is probably concerned mainly with the advice which unsuccessful candidates will give to their supporters after the first round.

It seems likely that Yavlinsky, Lebed, Zhirinovskiy and (possibly) Fedorov will each obtain at least 5% in the first round and they will have some influence over how these votes are cast in the second round. It is still conceivable that Yavlinsky might be persuaded to support Boris Yeltsin in return for specific policy concessions. Yeltsin indicated on 7 May that he is actively seeking the support of both Yavlinsky and Fedorov and he has subsequently hinted that he also expects Lebed to "join the president's team".²² Zhirinovskiy might conceivably endorse Zyuganov, but is more likely to advise his supporters to vote against both candidates

¹⁹ *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts*, SU/2605 B/11.

²⁰ *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts*, SU/2612 A/5.

²¹ *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts*, SU/2630 A/8.

²² *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts*, SU/2607 B/3 and 2610 A/1.

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in the second round. There were rumours in early June that Yavlinsky might also be persuaded to endorse Zyuganov in certain circumstances. To date Yavlinsky, the most courted of all the "third force" candidates seems set to maintain a stubborn independence.

President Yeltsin has begun to campaign very vigorously, dispelling the memories of his ill-health and erratic public appearances in 1995. Zyuganov has often appeared flustered and incoherent and he has committed a number of gaffes, but he has been warmly received in many regions away from Moscow and draws large crowds. Yeltsin's narrow lead in the opinion polls at the beginning of June could, of course, be lost rapidly should he unexpectedly fall ill or disappear from public view again in the final phase, or between the first and second rounds.

Events in Chechnya are also likely to feature heavily in the final phase of electioneering. Dzhokhar Dudaev, the former Soviet air force commander who led the Chechen Republic into secession in 1991 was killed by a Russian rocket attack on 21 April 1996 and replaced by Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev. Yandarbiyev was persuaded to travel to Moscow with promises of safe passage and signed a cease-fire agreement with President Yeltsin on 27 May 1996. Subsequently released film of the meetings suggests that there was no meeting of minds, but the two leaders appear to have "agreed to disagree" about all aspects of the conflict except the urgent need for a cease-fire and an exchange of prisoners. On the following day, while Yandarbiyev and his team were still confined to a safe house in Moscow, President Yeltsin flew to Chechnya and addressed Russian troops gathered at the military airfield at Grozny, telling them that "the war is over" and "the resistance put up by the bandits and separatists has been crushed".²³

As of 7 June, no exchange of prisoners had actually taken place and widespread violations of the cease-fire were being reported. Negotiations are now taking place in Ingushetia (the republic neighbouring Chechnya) about protocols which are intended to implement the Moscow agreements. The process is being supported and monitored by the OSCE, but the chances of success seem slight. The post-Dudaev leadership of Chechnya appears to be, if anything, even more committed to Russian withdrawal and independence and must feel that the Russian president's anxiety to avoid further casualties is a source of weakness. Presidential candidate Aleksandr Lebed is among those who have drawn attention to the embittered and potentially mutinous mood of the Russian soldiers based in Chechnya.

Since neither side to the conflict is able to compromise its basic position on the status of Chechnya and would forfeit its domestic support if it did, the only real chance of a settlement would be to "freeze" the sovereignty issue for a period of time and to regulate bilateral relations on the basis of specific pragmatic agreements. However, there are many obstacles

²³ *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts*, SU/2625 B/7.

to such an agreement, such as the attitude of the Russian high command and its extreme reluctance to concede that the Russian army has failed in its mission, and the continuing presence of a pro-Moscow Chechen leadership which appears to enjoy little local support but is recognised by Russia. Both participants in the conflict and external commentators recall that the Chechens have been resisting Russian rule for 200 years and have survived such setbacks as the capture of the great Chechen leader Shamil in 1859, a bloody defeat by the Red Army in 1920-21 and Stalin's brutal deportations. Given the bitterness of the last 2 years and the scale of casualties (about 30,000 Chechens and Russians killed) it seems unlikely that the conflict will end conveniently to suit the Russian electoral cycle, or that it will melt away before an incoming president.²⁴

Party political broadcasts on radio and TV began on 14 May and have been allocated equally to the 11 candidates. Apart from these official broadcasts, most media coverage tends to favour the incumbent president, Boris Yeltsin, both in tone and in the amount of coverage given. With the opinion polls suggesting a close outcome, there have already been many preemptive accusations about intended vote rigging. The communist party, which expects to be the victim on this occasion, has said that it will crowd every polling station with its representatives to ensure a fair poll. Some polling for special groups of the electorate, such as naval personnel at sea, has already taken place and suspicions were aroused when the defence minister, in defiance of the election law, announced triumphantly that on one particular vessel there had been a unanimous vote for Boris Yeltsin. Similarly, the Central Electoral Commission has condemned a resolution of the military council for airborne troops which called on them to vote for Yeltsin.²⁵

IV Will the election take place?

There has been speculation for more than a year as to whether or not the presidential election will actually take place. At various times it has been rumoured that either the events in Chechnya, or the possible union treaty with Belarus, or some unspecified emergency might be used as a pretext to suspend the election in order to forestall a possible Yeltsin defeat and extend his term indefinitely.²⁶ Among the presidential candidates, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy has regularly predicted that the election will be cancelled.²⁷ On 7 May 1996 the commander of the Moscow Military District said that he and his officers favoured a postponement:

²⁴ See, for example, Marie Bennigsen Broxup (ed), *The North Caucasian Barrier*, 1992 and Charles Blandy, "Cutting the Chechen Knot", *The World Today*, June 1996.

²⁵ *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts*, SU/2634 A/7, 10 June 1996.

²⁶ The presidents of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, elected, like Boris Yeltsin, in 1991 have both secured extensions to their respective terms of office by means of referenda.

²⁷ *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts*, SU/2606 B/7, 8 May 1996.

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We repeatedly discussed what the upcoming elections could turn into and always came to the same conclusion that this is the wrong time. The elections may lead to instability, splitting the Russian population into two camps ... When I look at those around the opposition presidential candidates and those who accompany them, it becomes quite clear to me that if they come to power, they will begin settling scores ...²⁸

The Zyuganov camp have naturally regarded such suggestions as being aimed at them and are insisting on the law and constitution being observed. The communist group in the State Duma has already made it clear that it will not connive in any attempt to legitimize a postponement. Excuses for a postponement could be provided by the proposed confederation with Belarus or some further development of the Chechnya conflict.

An alternative scenario could be that some combination of military and security forces might intervene, as they tried unsuccessfully to do in August 1991, to suspend constitutional politics altogether in the name of "national salvation". Judging by the events of 1991 and 1993, the organisers would probably represent some combination of senior figures in the armed forces, security ministries, defence industry and, conceivably, a few government ministers and parliamentary figures. The key components would inevitably be the leaderships of the main military and security forces, but, on past experience, neither group would be keen to take the initiative unless they were convinced that general disorder was about to break out. The failures of such ventures in 1991 and 1993 suggest that a serious and well-organised intervention is likely to be attempted only in extreme circumstances and that any more limited initiative would be likely to end in a fiasco.

The Russian political system has never had to deal with the kind of uncertainty which arises in a democracy when the top executive position, whether president or prime minister, is subject to an electoral contest and a top level transfer of power may become necessary. The anticipation already seems to be generating rumours about possible conspiracies and diversions and the uncertainty could increase if the outcome of the first round should put Zyuganov ahead of Yeltsin. Many of the factors which assist smooth transitions in other political systems are lacking in Russia: there is no neutral civil service or constitutional monarchy and no tradition of accommodation between government and opposition parties through the "usual channels".²⁹ Other institutions, such as the broadcast media, the armed forces and police, the judiciary enjoy only qualified independence from the political arena and tend to have close links with the president of the day and his staff. Consequently, a

²⁸ *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts*, SU/2607 B/6. On the previous day President Yeltsin had publicly reprimanded the head of his personal security service, Gen Korzhakov, for suggesting that the election campaign was dividing Russia too deeply and should be postponed. A commentator of the *Moskovskie novosti* newspaper has suggested that Kuznetsov's statement was deliberately designed to indicate to the communists that the Moscow garrison would support President Yeltsin "if the political situation in Moscow deteriorates" - *ibid*, SU/2611 A/10.

²⁹ The need for such a mechanism may have been in Gennadi Zyuganov's mind when, on 7 May, he hinted at his readiness to meet Yeltsin to discuss "the situation in the country" and "the basic interests of Russian voters" - *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts*, SU/2607 B/4. No such meeting has yet occurred.

Zyuganov victory could lead to a wholesale change of leading personnel in public organisations and it is not surprising that the prospect is causing a degree of panic.

However, anyone planning to interrupt the electoral process would have to contend with an unpredictable public response. Levels of public support for the central government and willingness to comply with its demands are already very low. An administration which declined even to seek legitimisation through an election could have great difficulty in imposing its will.

V Prospects for the Russian presidency

There are three dominant themes currently competing at the centre of Russian politics. One is the continuing need to reform the social and economic structure of Russia. There are some who believe in specifically Russian reforms, but for most this is a question of "modernisation" and of bringing Russia more closely into line with international practice in the hope that this will bring prosperity. For some, China is a model, for others the Far Eastern capitalist economies, but for the majority of reformers North America and Western Europe provide the inspiration.

The second theme is that of "protection". Russian society has suffered severe dislocation in the past decade and there are millions of people who regard themselves as victims of the economic and political transformations which have taken place. Some of the victims are homeless, impoverished and unemployed; others have lost status and security or fear that they will lose it in the future. There are demands for the weak, ill and poor to be protected financially and in terms of their basic needs; there are also demands for whole industries and institutions (such as scientific research establishments and museums) to be protected from the rigours of the new market economy and free trade.

Finally, there is the theme of Russian nationhood. The collapse of the Soviet Union has left 25 million ethnic Russians and some areas of long-standing Russian settlement outside the Russian Federation. Many Russians feel that their national identity and culture are under attack from foreign interests and influences ranging from Coca Cola Americanization to Islamic fundamentalism. For example, there is anxiety about evangelical protestantism undermining the Orthodox faith, about Far Eastern imports destroying the Russian computer industry and about Chinese immigrant workers settling in Siberia. The Russian birth rate is declining and life expectancy falling; alcoholism is rampant. In the minds of many the Russian nation is facing a moral crisis of dramatic proportions.

To some extent the three themes identified above are embodied by rival presidential candidates: Yeltsin and Yavlinsky offer variations on the theme of reform; Zyuganov plays chiefly on the protection of key interest groups; Zhirinovskiy and Lebed highlight the national issues. However, this is too simple an analysis: any plausible presidential candidate has to construct an image and a policy platform which addresses all three themes simultaneously. Boris Yeltsin has himself sought to embody all three concerns and the other candidates are struggling to do likewise. If elected, a communist president might try to turn the clock back in various ways, but all the leading candidates would face similar economic constraints in office and would be under pressure to seek similar compromises.

The presidential election is still of great significance for many reasons, not least that, if all runs smoothly, it will increase confidence in Russia and abroad that Russians are capable of operating democratic politics and, if necessary, of engineering a peaceful transfer of power after elections.

Lidiya Shevtsova commented in *Izvestiya* on the aftermath of the December 1995 elections:

When analysing the recent electoral upheavals the most important thing is not the superficial manifestations - neither the personalities elected, nor the new correlation of forces in parliament - but the fact that the elections took place and on time. This fact reflects the process by which the Russian ruling class is formed, its anxiety to establish clear rules of the game and to secure for itself a new legitimacy, because the legitimacy it acquired after the events of 1993 was insufficient... In this sense the Duma elections became an important step forward in completing the construction of the Russian system of power. For the process to be brought to a conclusion presidential elections also have to be held on schedule.³⁰

Graeme Herd has pointed out a significant milestone already passed: "the elections on 17 December 1995 represent the first time in Russian history that a Parliament has been elected according to rules set by its predecessor".³¹

These judgements reflect a cautious optimism in Russia and abroad about the entrenchment of the democratic process in Russia, but all are agreed that it is the presidential election which will be the real test of Russia's political development. Russians are deeply divided over their future and it is not at all clear how the majority will respond to the political choices which face them when these are reduced to the simplicity of the presidential second round ballot; and it cannot yet be taken for granted that the presidential election and its aftermath will be allowed to proceed calmly and without manipulation of the ballot papers.

³⁰ Lidiya Shevtsova, "Kogo vyberet Rossiya letom 1996 goda: politika ili politicheskuyu sistemu?" [What will Russia choose in the summer of 1996: a politician or a political system?], *Izvestiya*, 22 December 1995

³¹ Graeme Herd, "A first for democracy, but where next?", *The World Today*, February 1996, 40

The outcome will also have implications for other states, including the UK. It will, for example, affect the ability of the Russian government to comply with IMF conditions for assistance. It will also affect Russia's ability to comply with the conditions on which it was admitted to membership of the Council of Europe in January 1996. The conflict in Chechnya, the shadowy resurgence of the KGB in the form of the new Security Ministry and the concentration of power in the hands of non-accountable presidential aides and advisors have all cast doubt on the extent of the transition to democracy and constitutional order. The outcome will also influence the chances of Russia and NATO of finding an accommodation over the enlargement of the latter to the east and the chances of all the former republics of the USSR being able to consolidate and develop their new independence.

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