Russia: Portents?

Ra'anan, Uri

Boston University Center for the Study of Conflict, Ideology, and Policy

http://hdl.handle.net/2144/3492

Boston University
Russia: Portents?

BY URI RA'ANAN
Director, Institute for the Study of Conflict, Ideology & Policy

Elements in Moscow opposed to the Russian democratic movement and to economic stabilization policies are attempting to discredit both—in part by attributing views to the new US administration that would serve to further these ends. Antidemocratic forces are interested in pinning responsibility for the population's economic hardships on the supposed failure of the free market policies advocated by Russia's democrats. Undermining the latter, now represented by the Democratic Choice bloc, would translate into enhanced power for the opposition—including both the conservative Civic Union and the extremist "Red-Brown" bloc. As the opposition forces succeed in braking reforms, President Yel'tsin's ability and willingness to stay his course may falter. The Russian government's recent changes in personnel and policy—which culminated in the dismissal of Prime Minister Yegor Gaidar, but had wider implications—must be viewed anew in the light of significant information that sheds light on the opposition's tactics.

In Pravda on November 12 and in Nezavisimaya gazeta on November 19, 1992, respectively, major articles appeared that presented separate but compatible and converging interpretations of the meaning of the US presidential election results for Russian economic reform and political democratization.

In both cases, extrapolations were made—conveniently applied to the current Russian arena—from views expressed by (then) President-elect Clinton and his entourage that were intended actually to address American problems or to be of general relevance. Indeed, no specific source or quotation could be cited since, as far as can be gathered, the Clinton team had not meant these concepts to address Russian problems.
Nevertheless, both articles drew far-reaching conclusions for Russia from the opinions attributed to Clinton.

In *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, the surprisingly durable Georgii Arbatov, together with a team of analysts from his Institute of the US and Canada, argued that since the Clinton platform and victory had stemmed largely from opposition to Reaganomics, it followed that the Clinton presidency would oppose the program of the radical reformers in Moscow. As Arbatov put it, Clinton's views rest on "the rejection of precisely those aspects of 'Reaganomics' that the Russian authors of 'shock therapy' greeted with such enthusiasm."

He drew the conclusion that the "ideological closeness [of these Russian reformers] to people from the past [US] administration will no longer automatically ensure US support for this policy." He commented that, whereas the Republicans "have given preference to the market as a return to capitalism, the new administration will most likely pay attention to democracy," adding that, under Clinton, one can anticipate "a reconsideration of the US position regarding the IMF's tough demands on Russia." In other words, as it were, "Gaidarism amounts to Reaganomics" and "IMF financial requirements are typical capitalistic devices;" thus, the new US administration could be expected to oppose both. Consequently, if President Yel'tsin wished for good relations with the new administration, he should begin by ousting the reformers!

It should be recalled that Arbatov was one of the principal contributors to the Brezhnevite old guard's policy of antagonism to the US, and he remains one of the skeptics concerning effective liberalization of the economy.

The *Pravda* article, by Yuri Glukhov, utilized the same tactic to reach another--but related--conclusion. "It will be much harder for Russia's democrats to find a common language with Clinton's Democratic party ... than it was with Bush's losing Republicans ... Clinton will not stand on ceremony or go easy on foreign leaders who violate the 'democratic convention' ... 'democratic wavelengths' in the US and Russia do
not now coincide ... [Russia's democrats propose] that one-man presidential rule be introduced in Russia until the end of Yeltsin's term of office as president. Threats to dissolve the parliament and the Congress of People's Deputies are in the air. [Such threats] make collisions with Washington inevitable."

In other words, the obstacle to democracy consists not of the anti-reform lobby in the Russian Congress, but rather of the reformers' efforts to constrain that lobby. The Congress, of course, was elected at the time when the communist party still enjoyed substantial power at the local level and was able to ensure the election of a large number of apparatchiki. If Yeltsin uses somewhat autocratic means to obtain basically democratic goals, he will have to reckon with the new administration in Washington!

It seems evident, therefore, that personalities linked to the (anti-Gaidar reform) Civic Union and organizations more radically opposed both to reform and to democratization were using the US presidential elections to pressure Yeltsin into abandoning his policies and his supporters alike. In this context, it must be remembered that it was precisely the core of Democratic Choice--his staunchest base of support--that urged Yeltsin to adopt emergency measures so as to sidestep the Congress of People's Deputies, which is packed by members of Civic Union, as well as by extremist reactionaries.

With this fact in mind, it becomes all the more ominous that, in the period when the two articles appeared, Yeltsin proceeded to: a) oust Yegor Yakovlev who, as head of Russian radio and television, had become identified with the new democratic spirit; b) demote Mikhail Poltoranin and Gennadi Burbulis, two of the more consistent supporters of democratization in his entourage--and it remains to be seen how much influence they can exercise in their new posts; and c) deliver an address to the Russian Foreign Ministry elite, in which he denounced much of Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev's pro-Western policy and the minister himself.

Viewed against this background, Prime Minister Yegor Gaidar's dismissal a few weeks later becomes the climax of a series of moves in the same direction, rather than a
startling departure. Moreover, the same setting sheds light upon Kozyrev's bizarre speech in Stockholm which stunned the other diplomats present. He denounced "persistent attempts by NATO and the Western European Union to develop plans to strengthen their military presence in the Baltics and other areas of the former Soviet Union." He assailed "interference ... in the internal affairs of Yugoslavia," adding "we retain the right to take the necessary unilateral measures to preserve our interests ... Serbia can count on the support of Great Russia in its struggle." Then he stalked out of the room. The Ukrainian Foreign Minister rushed to the phone to ask whether a coup had taken place in Moscow.

Later, apparently after intervention by US Secretary of State Eagleburger, Kozyrev returned and said that the speech had been a ruse to demonstrate what would happen if the anti-reform, anti-democratic forces in the Russian Congress prevailed--the elements which had denounced him as the "leader of the pro-American lobby in Russia."

In this context, one must now view Kozyrev's performance as a warning, simultaneously, to Yel'tsin (i.e., not to betray his supporters in the democratic camp) and to the incoming US administration (i.e., to give Moscow appropriate signals, so as to indicate that abandonment of reform and democratization, far from being compatible with the Clinton team's policies, would constitute a serious obstacle to amicable Russo-American relations).

The question remains why Yel'tsin should have been persuaded--as apparently he was--that deviation from the reformist and democratizing path would be advantageous as far as Russo-American relations were concerned, or at least would not be counterproductive. The timing of the events listed suggests that there was some linkage. Moreover, this chain of events culminated in Russia's demonstrative dissent from the anti-Hussein coalition's air operations in Iraq. Irrespective of this aspect, it does seem that Yel'tsin was not merely succumbing to pressure from the anti-reformist camp, as many commentaries indicated at the time of Gaidar's ouster.
Yeltsin's heroic image, since August of 1991, as a democrat on the barricades, cannot obscure entirely his early years as a typical member of the apparat and some of the associations established then have tended to persist. The fact is that he has promoted the meteoric career of an apparatchik from the military-industrial complex, Yuri Skokov, who has become the central figure in the "new Yeltsin" regime.

As secretary of the Security Council, Skokov deals directly with the military and security services of Russia; under a July 1992 decree, he has vast administrative powers, particularly in the president's absence. As chair of a new commission under the Security Council, Skokov will coordinate all foreign affairs, thus pushing aside Kozyrev, even if the latter were to retain his post as foreign minister. Moreover, in this new post, Skokov will appoint all the other members of the commission and stipulate what precisely its powers will be, subject to President Yeltsin's formal consent. Earlier, he headed a short-lived commission that dealt with the top personnel of the Defense Ministry and the armed forces.

In his post on the Security Council, Skokov constitutes its direct link with the presidents of the various autonomous ethnic regions--and it was complaints from some of these leaders that provided the pretext for Yegor Yakovlev's ouster.

Other key figures on the Security Council (which is believed now to make fundamental policy decisions on domestic issues also) include Security Minister Viktor Barannikov and Minister of Internal Affairs Viktor Yerin. Events of recent months reflect both Yeltsin's increasing dependency on these security agencies and the lack of effective supervision over their operations and personnel. With regard to civilian control (or absence thereof), the following quotation from Lev Ponomarev, leading parliamentarian and representative of the democratic movement, speaks for itself:

Has anything changed as far as control of the security agencies is concerned? One inevitably comes to the conclusion that there has been virtually no improvement. [Ponomarev's commission investigating the aborted
August 1991 coup heard complaints] from parliamentary deputies, journalists, even from a government minister, that their conversations were being bugged. The successor organization to the KGB still is able to undertake technical measures directed against its opponents ... [A] temporary parliamentary commission to monitor the reorganization of the security organs ... appears to be extremely ineffective ... [N]ew staffing rosters for the central Security Ministry as well as for its local administrations ... are being automatically approved ... [T]he ministry is not being afforded the opportunity to transform itself from a 'warlike detachment of the party' into a civilized security service ... [T]his situation gravely compromises the new Russian government and the whole reform process, as well as--most unfortunately--the authority of the president personally.

(Shortly thereafter, in an episode strangely reminiscent of former KGB measures against prominent dissidents, Ponomarev was attacked by mysterious assailants just outside the parliament building.) Developments have underlined that Ponomarev's charge was on target. Faced with an usurpation of power by the chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet, Ruslan Khasbulatov, who commandeered an armed guard numbering several thousand, Yel'tsin was compelled to rely on the aid of the very same (former KGB) Alpha Group which had been ordered to dispose of him during the August 1991 coup. Alpha had been part of the notorious KGB Seventh Directorate (in charge of domestic surveillance, including the continued wiretapping abuses of which Ponomarev complained).

The Seventh Directorate now is included in one of the KGB's successor agencies, Viktor Barannikov's Security Ministry which, after a short interlude, has seized command again over several hundred thousand (former KGB) border troops and over special KGB units assigned to the regular armed forces. While the Ministry of Internal Affairs theoretically is separate from the Ministry of Security, it is headed by Barannikov's former deputy, Viktor Yerin, and controls armed "internal forces" of its own, including the notorious "black beret" OMON detachments, which were responsible for outrages against the civilian population in Lithuania and in Georgia.
It seems most unlikely that Yel'tsin is fully apprised of the security sector's scope of activities: For example, in an effort to achieve reconciliation with South Korea, he was provided with the "black box" of Flight 007 (the Korean airliner that was shot down by Soviet planes) to be handed over to Korea's president. It turned out that one of the tapes inside the box (which had been in the hands of the security services) was missing, with consequent public embarrassment for Yel'tsin. Presumably, therefore, it is not only Ponomarev's commission and other parliamentary organs that lack supervision over the security agencies (which, recently, started again to hamper travel abroad--despite Moscow's international commitment to freedom of movement--causing Russian artists to miss concert engagements).

Nor does the situation appear to be better with regard to the armed forces and their sector of the economy. During the January 7, 1993 Senate confirmation hearings on his appointment as Secretary of Defense, (then) Congressman Les Aspin expressed doubt that President Yel'tsin has "total control over all aspects of what is going on in the [Soviet] defense budget." His comment related to information concerning US "intelligence community estimates that by the end of this decade the Russians will deploy three new strategic systems" (updated versions of the silo-based SS-25, a mobile SS-25, and a new version of the submarine-based SSN-20--constituting major financial burdens on the bankrupt Russian economy). It must be recalled that continued heavy investment in strategic nuclear systems contradicts the usual excuse for failing to accelerate the conversion of the Russian armaments industry, namely that hard currency from the export of military hardware is urgently needed.

Mr. Aspin's surmise concerning Yel'tsin's lack of total control over the defense budget appears to hold true also for the actions of senior military officers. Russian forces stationed along the periphery, especially the 14th army in Moldova and the garrison of the former Baltic military district, are known to have acted on occasion not only without authorization from--or even consultation with--President Yel'tsin, but even without obtaining approval from their own military superiors in Moscow.
Moreover, in addition to the competing military jurisdictions of the republics, especially Russia and Ukraine, there is a great deal of confusion between the bureaucratic delimitations of the CIS and Russian commands, thus freeing local commanders to act as they please.

Lack of supervision may have even graver implications where the activities of the former KGB First Directorate are concerned. That organ now constitutes the Foreign Intelligence Service headed by Yevgeni Primakov (who passed for decades as a journalist and academician, but was revealed recently to be a KGB general)--Saddam Hussein's would-be rescuer on the eve of Desert Storm. (It was Primakov who insisted then that nearly 200 Soviet military advisers stay in Baghdad and, as Russia's recent dissent from the western coalition's Iraqi operations revealed, at least 60 are still there two years later. Moreover, Primakov, despite his record, continues to be sent on presidential missions, such as his trip to Belgrade.) According to FBI reports, Primakov's service, if anything, is even more active than its predecessor and its operations in the US are even bolder.

Altogether, there is some reason for concern that Yel'tsin may have been misled with regard to the new US administration's views on radical reform and democratization in Russia, and that he may have been co-opted, to a degree, by bureaucratic vested interests (including associates from his Sverdlovsk days) and by the security apparatus--while, at the same time, lacking effective oversight and control over the security and military services and over the military sector of the economy. The leaders of Russia's increasingly weak democratic movement, at any rate, are watching developments with growing anxiety. Re-emphasis--at the highest administration level--of US support for Russia's genuinely democratic organizations and for wholehearted economic reform could play a significant role in halting or reversing such accommodations with holdovers from the old regime as Russia's leaders may have been tempted to make.
At the same time, the West ought to rebuff attempts by Civic Union and other questionable elements to persuade the outside world that Yeltsin is doomed and that there are more viable leaders in Moscow. With all of his shortcomings, the Russian president remains the only personality capable of furthering the democratization of his country.

Copyright Boston University Trustees 1993

Unless otherwise indicated, all articles appearing in this journal have been commissioned especially for Perspective. This article was originally published at http://www.bu.edu/iscip/vol3/Ra%27anan2.html.