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Yel'tsin's Chechnya

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The invasion of Chechnya, now in its second month, has prompted a great deal of questioning in the West about Russian President Boris Yeltsin's suitability as his country's steward into what US President Bill Clinton has called "market-democracy." Clinton and leaders in Europe have invested political and real capital into Russian reform and have chosen to embody their idea of Russian reform in the person of Boris Yeltsin. Now, after seeing nightly pictures of the bombing of Chechnya in full swing with indiscriminate damage, Western leaders find themselves in the awkward position of supporting a leader who appears belligerent, irrational, incompetent, and perhaps dangerous. The only alternative, according to this logic, would be the unpleasant one of retracting support for Yeltsin, whom they continue to equate with reform.

In fact, though, it is time to face the possibility that Boris Yeltsin is not the best man for Russia. Attempts to ignore his most recent transgression and to consider it an internal matter will only add Chechnya to the growing list of Western failures to respond to bloodshed in the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. It would make the continuation of Western aid to Russia in the near term look foolish. And, most threateningly, it would send another signal to Russia and elsewhere that Western leaders are willing to tolerate virtually anything to avoid taking difficult decisions in this challenging post-Cold War period. As is shown by Chechnya--the stepchild of Western mishandling of Russia -- such craven behavior promises only similar challenges in the future.
Yel'tsin's Record

If anyone had any lingering doubts about the shortsightedness of putting all bets on Yel'tsin, Chechnya should finally sweep them away. Supporting individuals rather than paths of reform is risky business. In the case of Boris Yel'tsin, the policy was also ill-informed: Sufficient evidence was available before Chechnya that Yel'tsin was prone to skirting the law in domestic politics and in foreign policy.

In many ways--outlined below--the Chechnya operation reflects behavioral patterns clearly displayed by Yel'tsin in the past. The Russian president is acting impulsively, relying on a small circle of advisers, and resorting quickly to the use of military force to obtain political ends.

Impulsive rule. Perhaps Boris Yel'tsin's most distinctive characteristic as a leader is his proclivity to be guided by impulse and improvisation. He has developed a reputation for taking decisions quickly and without contemplation, sometimes even surprising his advisers.(1)

The decision to invade Chechnya seems to have been impulsive, taken on short notice. Commanders and troops were not equipped with maps of Grozny--neither ordinary ones nor electronic ones--for use in targetting bombs.(2) Ill-prepared, they were in some cases unwilling to fight. No time was taken for putting together a reliable force or for convincing soldiers of the purpose of their mission. The necessity for this should have been obvious given the tumult in the Russian armed forces, the upheavals in their country, and the fact that the war which they were expected to prosecute was against both civilians and fellow-countrymen, against both Chechens and ethnic Russians.

Observers are still speculating about why Yel'tsin chose this course of action. Searches for a pressing reason come up empty-handed: Chechnya's declaration of independence, the breakdown of law and order, and the defiance toward Moscow were old news, dating back to 1991. Explanations that the war was necessary to hold the Russian Federation together cannot be reconciled with the fact that Chechnya's pre-
invasion intransigence posed no real threat of breaking Russia apart. An alternative theory holds that the passage of an oil pipeline through Chechnya necessitated a conclusive crackdown on the republic's independence drive. This also does not explain the failure to plan and prepare the operation properly.

A somewhat more convincing explanation holds that the proximate cause was a dispute between the Ministry of Defense (MOD) and segments of the security apparatus, possibly the Ministry of Interior (MVD), over the use of assets in the most recent failed undercover operation to bring down Chechen President Dzhokar Dudayev. According to this thinking, the invasion would provide a decisive conclusion to the entire Chechnya affair, enveloping and smothering the MOD-MVD dispute. However, this theory leaves one wondering why an MOD-MVD dispute, which would have constituted a small wrinkle in Russia's already rocky political landscape, called for a large-scale invasion, even if that invasion had been swift and victorious.

More persuasive are reports coming in from Kremlin watchers that Yel'tsin, for various reasons, had come to desire a robust show of force and a quick victory in something and that Chechnya, whose declaration of independence had long been a pebble in the Russian president's shoe, presented itself as the convenient victim.

This theory seems to work best because it takes into account the Russian president's growing frustration with the political and economic situation in Russia, his persistently declining popularity just over one year before the June 1996 presidential elections, and the failure of Russia's international relations to develop the way he would like. Yel'tsin had become overheated on a number of domestic and international issues in the weeks before the invasion. His sharp warning about the emergence of a "Cold Peace" at the summit meeting of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe during the first week in December betrayed a high level of frustration. Yel'tsin had also run into obstacles with the Duma over the state budget. Considering the fact that no real progress had emerged in Russia's affairs after so many difficulties, Yel'tsin was showing
signs that he desperately wanted to demonstrate that he was in control and that at least one of Russia's many problems could be vanquished.

A Small Circle of Advisers. The next piece in the Chechnya puzzle concerns Yeltsin's habit of giving responsibility to those who are loyal to him but who do not necessarily possess other recognizable qualifications. This tendency, which can be found in virtually any government around the world, was particularly pronounced in the Soviet system -- the system in which Boris Yeltsin received his political education.

Reports from Russians and Western observers alike agree that Yeltsin relied on too limited council over Chechnya. According to former Acting Prime Minister Yegor Gaidar, there were but three key advisers: Security Council Secretary Oleg Lobov, Deputy Prime Minister Nikolai Yegorov, and Defense Minister Pavel Grachev.(3) Yeltsin's advisers, reading his mood, told him what they thought he wanted to hear: Invading Chechnya would solve a number of problems. One can only hypothesize that they portrayed the plan as nothing but achievable, probably at little material or human cost on the Russian side, and possibly in a short span of time.

The Use of Force. Yeltsin's use of force to achieve political ends is nothing new and should surprise no one. The use of military power to settle the score with his political foes in the city of Moscow is a well-known example. Russia's military operations in Georgia, Moldova, and Tajikistan were scarcely concealed and have also been well-documented.(4)

The way in which military operations were undertaken and then denied is also similar. In Georgia, Russian officials attempted to blame participation by Russian armed forces personnel in insurrections on unauthorized freelancing and mercenary activity. Similarly, Yeltsin placed the blame for continued bombing of Chechen civilian targets, following his orders for it to stop, on military officers who were reportedly out of control. However, in the case of both Georgia and Chechnya, these explanations don't withstand scrutiny. The clear pattern of military involvement in Georgia required clearcut coordination with
the Russian leadership at the highest levels. Similarly, Yeltsin's orders for a halt to bombing of civilians in Chechnya were disingenuous from the start: Unable to pinpoint targets accurately, the military operation could not have discriminated between civilian and military facilities. (5) Soldiers, already bitter about being placed in this tricky military situation unprepared, seemed to view Yeltsin's order as laughable.

**Yeltsin in Perspective**
Russia's first post-communist president, Yeltsin was also the last leader of the Russian Socialist Federated Soviet Republic. As such, he shouldn't be expected to serve as anything more than a transitional leader, with one foot in the past and one foot in the present. This may seem an overly charitable analysis of the Russian president's leadership in the wake of the unwarranted bloodshed in Chechnya, but it is valid nonetheless. One really can expect only the minimum from a man who learned politics in the old school and who succeeded in the brutal communist system. That Yeltsin rebelled against that system is his single best qualification for staying on after its demise; little more recommends him as the steward of Russian reforms.

To be sure, Yeltsin looks like democracy's "best bet" when considered with such personalities as Liberal Democratic Party Leader Vladimir Zhirinovsky, the outspoken General Aleksandr Lebed', the commander of the 14th Army in Moldova, or even Afghan war hero and former vice president Aleksandr Rutskoi. Yet as more liberal and reform-minded presidential hopefuls--such as Yegor Gaidar or Grigori Yavlinsky--begin showing the initiative to oppose the Chechnya invasion, Yeltsin no longer resembles a reformer, much less a uniquely qualified one.

Cast in this light, Yeltsin emerges as a transitional leader whose mistakes, in hindsight, look unsurprising. This perspective is not meant to excuse the Russian leader of his transgressions or to say they should be treated lightly. Rather, it is intended to encourage a bit more skepticism in Western expectations of Yeltsin, of his ability to bring reform forward, and most importantly, of his readiness to act as a good partner in the Western club.
Postscript

It is, in a way, disappointing to many who have followed Russian interventions in the affairs of its neighbors for the past few years, and who have tried to convince policy makers of the need to react and impose a clear cost, to see the rapid and plentiful attention given to the Chechnya invasion in the West. When Russia initiated or exacerbated conflicts in non-Russian territories--Georgia, Moldova, Tajikistan, and Nagorno-Karabakh--its interventions did not attract much notice in Western capitals, much less in the Western media. Now, in a situation in which Russia can claim a ready excuse (ostensibly keeping internal order and maintaining the country's territorial integrity), challenges from Europe and gradually from the United States for a halt to the violence are made on somewhat weaker ground.

The West's preference to condone Russian misbehavior early in the "Near Abroad" produced an incentive for additional misconduct of the type evident in Moscow in October 1993 and in Chechnya today. Advisers close to Yel'tsin openly admit that the West's silence undermined the positions of liberals and eliminated their braking influence on such types of behavior. (The best example is the reincarnation of Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev as a traditionalist and now, unsurprisingly, an ardent defender of the Chechnya invasion.) Sources close to Yel'tsin and Kozyrev say that both are stunned by the Western reaction to the invasion. They had been taught to expect silence, if not support.

Notes:
1 Examples include his sudden decision to enter into a new arms control agreement with the United States in early 1993 and his decision to recognize Macedonia during a state visit to Bulgaria in mid-1993.
2 Interview with Alexei Pushkov, Deputy Editor-In-Chief of Moscow News, on 11 January 1995, in Brussels.
4 Fiona Hill and Pamela Jewett, Back in the USSR: Russia's Intervention in the Internal Affairs of the Former Soviet Republics and the Implications for US Policy toward