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From Anarchy to Totalitarianism?

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Democratic leaders, the liberal press, intellectuals, and the majority of the public in Russia have voiced their despair with the dimensions of the political crisis in the country during the last few months, and have expressed fears of a possible military coup. There are new voices in Russia, saying that a government led by military officers seems to be the only logical solution to pull the state out of the abyss of crime, corruption and anarchy.

Critics say that Boris Yel'tsin has never been more impotent in performing his presidential duties. It is no secret that the Chechnya war was the harshest blow to his already shattered political image. However, what appears to be more serious is that Yel'tsin himself implied that he had lost control of the situation. In his Federal Assembly speech on February 16, he said that there are other people who are using "the president's hands."⁽¹⁾ Grigori Yavlinsky, the leader of Yabloko faction in the Russian parliament, raised the same concern in his recent presentation at Harvard University, saying that power was shifting from the hands of the president to unknown persons and that this was becoming dangerous.⁽²⁾ In front of the Ostankino television building after the murder of Russia's most popular television journalist, Vladislav Listyev, Yel'tsin once again shrugged his shoulders, saying that he had failed to combat organized crime because of "his government's inability to adopt radical measures."⁽³⁾

Recent developments in Russia, however, suggest that the president is taking radical measures, not to combat crime, but rather to ensure his leadership despite his widening unpopularity. Russian human rights activists are becoming more and more concerned

with the creation of new enforcement structures in the federal security apparatus, and the broad powers being given to the KGB's successor.

The law signed by Yel'tsin on April 3 allows the Federal Security Service to break into Russian citizens' homes and offices, tap their telephones, open mail, and place spies inside state agencies and in private companies, on mere suspicion of criminal conduct. Moreover, no prior permission from the prosecutor's office or the courts is required for such actions.(4) One can find a plethora of inconsistencies in this legislation, stemming not only from its obscure and ambiguous language but also from obvious contradictions. On the one hand, the measure suggests that "the state guarantees the observance of human rights and civil liberties" by taking such steps and that "counterintelligence activity affecting the secrecy of correspondence, telephone conversations, postal, telegraphic and other messages" depends on a court decision. On the other hand, the text retains a provision which allows a security officer to enter citizens' homes without hindrance if "there is a sufficient reason to suppose that a crime is being or has been perpetrated there...or if pursuing persons suspected of committing a crime..."(5)

Particularly worrisome is the absence of a regulatory agency, since counterintelligence activities are not overseen by parliament. Nor does Russia's constitution mention oversight of the Russian security organs, so that the way is open for Yel'tsin's reliance on these structures for the pursuit of his own political interests.

On the other hand, the proliferation of enforcement structures could actually limit the Russian president's executive power. Last May, the State Duma Committee on Defense discussed the creation of special mobile troops (in addition to the army and MVD forces) as well as the resurrection of military units within the Federal Counterintelligence Service and the Federal Agency for Government Communications and Information.(6) Together with the recently approved creation of an elite Presidential Guard this has resulted in a plethora of paramilitary entities theoretically under the president's command. The inefficiency of such a cumbersome structure could distort the president's

decisions as they filter down to local executive levels. From the same complicated system the head of state may have difficulty obtaining objective feedback.(7)

It is possible that the present government may be forced to leave power not as a result of a massive social explosion but rather by intervention of the same military and security apparatus that is supposedly serving the president. Such fears are expressed more and more frequently in the Russian press together with the hypothesis that the same enforcement structures could try to assume power under the slogans of "Reinstating Law and Order and Liquidation of Corruption." Voices about Russia's reaching a dead-end street under Boris Yel'tsin's leadership are increasingly intertwined with claims that a successful military coup is the panacea for all troubles.(8)

Even a military leader like Lieutenant General Alexander Lebed', who stood by the president's side during the aborted coup of 1991, is now openly expressing his contempt of Yel'tsin. Becoming a favorite among nationalists and sections of the military, Lebed' is viewed as a strong candidate in the presidential elections, scheduled for June 1996. However, there is a chance that the elections might not take place and that a state of emergency might be imposed. In a recent interview with *Time* magazine, Lebed' said that only the armed forces could prevent the country from falling apart, and that the politicians themselves have pushed the army in this direction. In Russia, he said, military issues cannot be separated from political questions.(9)

Dashed expectations concerning economic reforms and the creation of democratic institutions have resulted in Western models of democracy appearing less and less attractive to Russian citizens. At the same time, strong nationalistic tendencies are becoming more popular. Many Russians perceive that some of Yel'tsin's inane political judgments receive silent approval from the United States and Western Europe, raising concerns that the countries of the industrial world do not understand or do not care about what is happening in Russia.(10)

Zhirinovsky's slogans about the country being sold out to the West were reflected in a document, published by Russia's Federal Counterintelligence Service in January 1995, warning of a real threat from the West. The material, printed in *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, accuses several hundred Western universities, research centers and non-governmental foundations of conducting "subversive activities in Russia."⁽¹¹⁾ The document claims that although the purported aim of these institutions is to help Russia move toward democracy and a market economy, and to train professionals, the real purpose of their activities is to prevent Russia from becoming once again a superpower and a potential rival of the United States.

The authors of the document suggest that these institutions gather information for the US intelligence service through analysis of the Russian media; through the use of Russian library materials; and through unrestricted travel in Russia, etc. The most alarming fact is that the document proposes to impose restrictions on travel abroad for persons with "knowledge of secret information in the area of national security, defense or science." However, even wider restrictions seem to be implied, covering a broader range of contacts between the Russian intellectual elite and Western institutions, including universities. It states boldly that "an efficient system should be created to prevent gathering of information by foreign intelligence services."

The document goes so far as to allege that the United States is trying to recruit potential presidential candidates and other political leaders for education in America. Particularly disturbing is the implication that the media in Russia constitute a primary information source for foreign "subversive activities" since what the media print or broadcast is "analyzed" in the West.

Recently, the mutual distrust in the government-media relationship has deepened, taking a new turn. For the first time in many decades, organs of power and the media are standing on diametrically opposite platforms in their statements concerning Russian reality. This is apparent not only in the striking discrepancies between Moscow's official press releases on the situation in Chechnya and journalists' reports from Grozny, but

also in the authorities' open harassment of investigative reporters who write about corruption and crime in Russia.

The government has reasons to worry: A recent poll conducted by the Public Opinion foundation has shown that only 14 percent of Russians trust reports from government sources, while 46 percent give preference to information coming from non-governmental institutions.(12) The Moscow Charter of Journalists has stated that the political crisis which turned into a war in Chechnya had been an excuse for large-scale violations of journalists' rights. Yel'tsin himself accused the Russian media of being bought by Dudayev to criticize Russian government policy in Chechnya.(13) Moreover, the Russian Duma has vilified the press for its destructive role in society. In January, there was parliamentary discussion of a document which condemned the media as the new enemy of Russia. Leonid Shershnev, the head of the National and International Security Fund, said at the Duma meeting that the media are a threat to national security and are engaged in a war against the Russian people.(14)

A significant proportion of journalists and political analysts in Russia have no illusions about the president's new political face. In his recent article in *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, Aleksandr Konovalov, the head of the Center for Military Policy and System Analysis at the Institute for the Study of the US and Canada, wrote that Yel'tsin "had become bored with playing the game of democracy," and had entirely changed his political identification. Konovalov added, "[Yel'tsin] will never win again in any democratic elections. But maybe it is already decided that no elections will take place?"(15)

Notes:

1 *Yel'tsin's Federal Assembly Speech*, Russian Television Network, 16 February 1995, trans. in FBIS-SOV-95-032, 16 February 1995, p. 12.

2 Grigori Yavlinsky, "The Failure of Reform in Russia," lecture at Harvard University, Russian Research Center, 2 March 1995.

3 Antonina Yur'eva, "President," *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 3 March 1995, p. 2.

- 4 Petr Zhuravlev, "New Law Enshrines Security Service's Broad Powers," *Segodnya*, trans. in FBIS-SOV-95-033, 17 February 1995, p. 19.
- 5 *Ibid.*
- 6 "Elite Presidential Guard Proposed," *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 15 December 1995, pp. 1-2, trans. in FBIS-SOV-004-S, 6 January 1995, p. 35.
- 7 *Ibid.* p. 36.
- 8 Dmitri Furman, "Nas Zhdet Voennyi Perevorot, Polagayut Rossiyskiye Democracy," *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 12 January 1995, p. 2.
- 9 "Awaiting His Nation's Call," interview with General Lebed', *Time*, 27 February 1995, pp. 26-27.
- 10 Alexander Liubimov, "Political Management of Television," presented at a conference on "The Struggle for a Free Press in Russia" at Northeastern University, Boston, 21 March 1994.
- 11 "The Federal Counterintelligence Service is Disturbed by the Activities of American Researchers in Russia," *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 10 January 1995, p. 3.
- 12 "Little Confidence in Government's Words," *Izvestiya*, 17 January 1995, p. 1, trans. in FBIS-SOV-95-011, 18 January 1995, p. 21.
- 13 Igor Korolkov, "Thinking Differently of the Authorities Does Not Mean Being Corrupt," *Izvestiya*, 30 December 1994, p. 2, trans. in FBIS-SOV-001, 3 January 1995, p. 14.
- 14 Nikita Vainonen, "Pressa i Vlast': Kto Dlya Kogo?" *Rossiyskiye vesti*, 7 February 1995, p. 1.
- 15 Aleksandr Konovalov, "Posledstviya Chechenskoy Campanii," *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 14 January 1995, p. 1.

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