TITLE: THE PRESIDENTIAL APPARATUS IN RUSSIAN POLITICS

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THE PRESIDENTIAL APPARATUS IN RUSSIAN POLITICS:

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This paper briefly describes an institutional imperialism around the Yeltsin presidency in some ways reminiscent of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, which refused to respect essential values of the Western state, such as the legitimacy of opposition and the fixed jurisdiction of office. Yet the contemporary Russian presidency lacks the party’s ability to rule. Unlike the Communist Party, the Russian presidency must contend with extreme factiousness in its own ranks, the absence of a guiding ideology or program, the growth of independent fiefdoms in many regions, ministries, and economic sectors, and Yeltsin’s own lack of political energy and focus. Yeltsin is no Fujimori. He is not even a Gorbachev. Institutional resources and constitutional powers are not wanting in the Russian presidency. Leadership is.

The Paradox of the Expanding State in the Transition from Communism

According to Marx and Lenin, the transition from capitalism to communism brings a withering of the state. Modern observers may be forgiven for assuming the opposite: that the transition from communism to capitalism produces a shrinking of the state apparatus. A shift of property ownership from public to private hands and a scaling back of the ideological and repressive machinery—all on a smaller territory—should in theory reduce considerably the costs of government. Not so in Russia. Indeed, the only growth sector in the economy has been the state apparatus. Spending on the state bureaucracy increased from .23% of GDP in 1992 to .58% in 1994, a more than twofold rise. There is now in Russia the alarming paradox of a weakening yet expanding state.

Approximately two-thirds of the expansion in the state bureaucracy has come in regional and local government. But the uncontrolled growth of the state is most visible, and troubling, in the Russian presidency. Yeltsin has created a presidential bureaucracy of some 4000 officials that operates parallel to the 1000-person executive management team under the Prime Minister. Duplication of executive leadership institutions on this scale appears to have no historical precedent. In semi-presidential France, perhaps the closest fit to the Russian institutional model, President Chirac governs the country with only a few dozen presidential staffers.
Why did Yeltsin permit the development of a presidential leviathan in Russia? At the collapse of the old regime, the Government and its ministries were politically unreliable, easily corrupted, and deeply entrenched. Rather than launch a destabilizing assault on this redoubt of the old order, Yeltsin chose instead to develop a presidential bureaucracy that could serve as the engine of reform in Russian society and the core of the new Russian state. Like the Communist Party before it, the presidency sought to rule but not govern. Where presidential structures would chart the strategic course and check on its implementation, the Government and its ministries would perform the essential services of state.

Such at least was the plan. But the reluctance of many ministries to submit themselves to presidential authority led to what one observer has called "self-destructive competition" between the president's men and traditional bureaucrats. The number and size of presidential structures expanded to meet the resistance of the ministries and also to absorb refugee bureaucrats from the sinking Soviet ship of state. As the presidency took on board ever larger numbers of old regime officials, it became harder to distinguish the opinions of Government personnel from those in Yeltsin's apparatus. The President's growing preference for managers over thinkers in his own entourage further diluted the reform orientation of the presidency. Although the presidency remains the central force for change in the Russian state, it now speaks with numerous, and often conflicting, voices.

The Staff of the Russian Presidency

As a large, complex, and fluid organization, the Russian presidential apparatus resists simple description. The survey below divides the presidency into its six essential modules.

1. THE EXECUTIVE OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT (Administratsiia Prezidenta). In its organization and functions, the 2000-person Executive Office is remarkably similar to the Central Committee of the Communist Party. A self-contained bureaucracy within the presidency, it has several technical support units, an Analytical Center, and approximately 10 sectoral departments (upravleniia) that develop and oversee the implementation of policy in their respective spheres. The Department for Work with Territories, for example, is responsible for Moscow's relations with the provinces. This Department, in turn, is divided into specialized sections, with one handling ethnic Russian regions and another the non-Russian republics, such as Chechnia and Tatarstan.
One of the largest and most controversial divisions of the Executive Office is the State-Legal Department. Recently reduced in size from 225 to 160 persons, the State-Legal Department is involved in the drafting and vetting of presidential decrees and in the introduction of judicial reform. The head of a section in this Department initiated, and now supervises, the much-publicized experiment with the jury trial in Russia.

Although some Department heads may communicate directly with Yeltsin on occasion, the normal chain of command is through the central staff of the Executive Office, which is led by Sergei Filatov and his deputies. Among reformist officials in the presidency, none is as astute or influential as Filatov. With the authority to select his Department heads and to confirm their assistants, Filatov has been able to maintain a generally democrat orientation in the Executive Office of the President.

2. PRESIDENTIAL ASSISTANTS (Sluzhba pomoshchnikov). Where the vast Executive Office is housed primarily in the former Central Committee buildings on Old Square, the presidential assistants work in close proximity to Yeltsin in the Kremlin, each with small personal staffs. The assistants are policy advisors who have direct access to the President. Here again, each of the major sectors of policy is represented: Alexander Livshits advises Yeltsin on the economy, Georgii Satarov on parliament and society, Yuri Baturin on national security issues, Dmitrii Riurikov on foreign affairs, Mikhail Krasnov on law, and so forth. The senior assistant to the President, and perhaps the closest thing in Russia to a chief of staff, is Victor Iliushin, who followed Yeltsin to Moscow from Sverdlovsk in the 1980s. Befitting a permanent secretary in the British tradition, Iliushin has kept a low public profile and avoids association with any political faction.

Just as the Executive Office shadows the Government and its ministries, so the presidential assistants often duplicate the functions performed in the Executive Office of the President. Competition between these presidential structures is at times fierce, as each seeks to expand its jurisdiction and its access to Yeltsin. During the past two years, Iliushin and Filatov have launched separate attempts to subdue each other by restructuring the presidency into an organizational pyramid. Yeltsin has insisted, however, on retaining a hub-and-spoke system, apparently as a means of balancing personal and policy interests in the presidency.

3. THE SECURITY COUNCIL (Sovet besopasnosti). Following the French model, ministers with portfolios in foreign and security affairs report directly to the President rather than through the Prime Minister. The Security Council includes these "presidential ministers"
along with the presidency’s own national security advisors and the speakers of the two chambers of parliament. A longtime Yeltsin loyalist, Oleg Lobov, directs the Council’s permanent staff, whose functions are as yet ill-defined. The occasional attempts of Lobov—and his more ambitious predecessor, Yuri Skokov—to expand the staff’s jurisdiction into matters of economic security or oversight of presidential ministries have thus far been unsuccessful.

The war in Chechnia has placed a considerable strain on the Security Council as a forum for debate and decisionmaking on issues of national security. Prior to the Security Council’s decision to launch military action in Chechnia, Yeltsin’s National Security Advisor, Yuri Baturin, submitted a memorandum that warned of the dire consequences of such an approach. After the war began, Baturin reportedly found himself excluded from several Security Council meetings, apparently at the instigation of Lobov. The Security Council’s—and Lobov’s—future in the presidency may depend heavily on the outcome of the Chechen war.

4. PRESIDENTIAL SUPPORT SERVICES. The operation of the Russian presidency also depends on offices that handle administrative services. These include the chancellery, the protocol service, the business office (Upravlenie delami), and the security services. It would be a grave mistake to underestimate the political significance of these offices, whose functions are highly routinized in Western bureaucracies. For example, the head of the President’s personal security service (Sluzhba bezopasnosti), General Alexander Korzhakov, is one of Yeltsin’s closest advisors and confidants. His influence with the President is reputed to be equal to that of Iliushin or Filatov. As indicated recently by the formation of a policy think-tank in his agency, the interests of Korzhakov extend well beyond security. He reviews personnel appointments and has interfered directly in matters of economic policy and in the central government’s relations with the Moscow city government.

For its part, the business office controls roughly half of the presidency’s five trillion ruble budget. The head of this office, Pavel Borodin, uses these funds not just to support the apparatus but to distribute in-kind privileges and favors to officials in all branches of government. In an astute political move, Yeltsin centralized in the presidency the distribution of scarce housing, country cottages (dachas), cars, and telephones. Unable to afford a comfortable life on their salaries alone, members of parliament, Government and the courts depend on the presidency’s business office to supply the accoutrements of modern life. Whether an official gets one of the 20 dachas with a chef and security, one of the 150 year-
round dachas without these amenities, or one of the 200 summer season dachas, may depend more on his or her standing with the President than rank in office.

5. PRESIDENTIAL REPRESENTATIVES (Predstaviteli Prezidenta). One of the peculiar features of the Russian presidency is the institution of the personal representative of the President. These representatives operate in the country’s regions—as the eyes of the President in local government—and in the parliament (A.M. Yakovlev), the Constitutional Court (V.M. Savitskii), and in Russia’s main arms supply company, "Rosvooruzhenie" (General E.I. Shaposhnikov). The representative in the Constitutional Court, for example, defends the President’s interests during oral arguments before the Court, advises the President on the constitutionality of the drafts of presidential decrees, and formulates requests for review (zaprosy) for the Constitutional Court.

Along with the wording of the 1993 Constitution, the existence of such representatives "in" (v) non-presidential structures illustrates that the Russian presidency refuses to respect the idea of a separation of powers. Much like the tsar or a traditional monarch, the President stands above—but at the same time in—the Government, parliament and courts. To identify the presidency as a "branch" of government, or to conflate the Government (pravitel’stvo) and presidency into a single executive branch, is to misunderstand the conceptual underpinnings of the Russian state in the post-communist era.

6. PRESIDENTIAL COMMISSIONS AND FUNDS. At the fringe of the presidential bureaucracy are a number of presidential commissions that operate with boards of unpaid luminaries supported by small permanent staffs. One such organization is the Commission for Physical Culture and Sport, chaired by Yeltsin’s tennis coach, Shamil Tarpishchev. In some cases these advisory bodies assume important administrative functions. The Commission on Pardons, for example, serves as the nation’s single parole board. In keeping with Russia’s traditional belief in the incorruptibility of the intelligentsia, Yeltsin has appointed major cultural figures to the Commission on Pardons.

The Fund for Presidential Programs, headed by Nikolai Malyshev, is the best funded and most inscrutable component of the presidential bureaucracy. Of the five trillion rubles allocated to the presidency in the 1994 budget, 2.8 trillion flowed into this Fund. According to sources in Moscow, the Fund spends its money on items as varied as holiday celebrations and book prizes. It apparently serves in part as a presidential discretionary fund, though the
budget also makes provision for a separate reserve fund for the President (some 500 billion rubles in 1994).

The Presidency in Russian Politics

Unfortunately for the forces of reform in Russian society, the presidency has assumed many of the characteristics of the entrenched bureaucracy that it was designed to supersede. Now a vast army of officials divided by offices, outlook, and ambition, the presidency has failed to devise a coherent strategy for change. It has even failed to insure the implementation of the President's own decrees. Russia is drifting toward inefficient—not soft-authoritarianism.

As the presidency has embraced more buildings and more personnel, it has also assumed more functions. This predatory behavior is evident across the political landscape, whether in the use of presidential decrees as substitutes for parliamentary laws or in the formation of a special media court in the presidency. When the presidency is not encroaching on the jurisdiction of other institutions, it is seeking to reduce or eliminate political opposition by coopting potential adversaries into a grand ruling coalition. This logic inspired the signing of the Civic Accord and the formation of the Conciliatory Commission to implement it; it lay behind the creation of two "parties of power" under Victor Chernomyrdin and Ivan Rybkin; and it has led Yeltsin to reduce further the independence of the press, most recently by appointing the head of the leading news agency, ITAR-TASS, to a key post in the Government.

The institutional imperialism described here is in some ways reminiscent of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, which refused to respect essential values of the Western state, such as the legitimacy of opposition and the fixed jurisdiction of office. Yet the contemporary Russian presidency lacks the party's ability to rule. Unlike the Communist Party, the Russian presidency must contend with extreme factiousness in its own ranks, the absence of a guiding ideology or program, the growth of independent fiefdoms in many regions, ministries, and economic sectors, and Yeltsin's own lack of political energy and focus. Yeltsin is no Fujimori. He is not even a Gorbachev. Institutional resources and constitutional powers are not wanting in the Russian presidency. Leadership is.