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Perestroika, Social Chaos and Executive Power

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THE CREATION OF THE SOVIET PRESIDENCY:

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Either we create presidential power or chaos triumphs. This is our choice.

__unnamed “government source” in Pravda, April 1990

Abstract

This Report links the creation of the Soviet presidency to the social conditions created by perestroika after 1986, arguing that the purpose of creating a strong executive power was to fill the vacuum of power left not only by the fall of the Party, but by the failure of Russian society to coalesce into groups capable of sustaining parliamentary institutions or fundamental parliamentary behavior. This contradicts depictions of the Soviet presidency either as part of a natural evolution toward a Soviet theory of separated powers, a power grab by Gorbachev’s inner circle, or a more generalized cultural predisposition to strong personal leadership. Reconsidering the roots of the Soviet presidency sheds light not only on the forerunner of the various CIS presidencies, but also calls into question assumptions about the supposedly dangerous nature of presidentialism itself.

Introduction

In March 1991, the Soviet Congress of People’s deputies elected Mikhail Gorbachev “President of the USSR,” the first independent executive post in Soviet history. Although it may have seemed another step on the road to a changed Soviet Union—a directly-elected legislature had chosen the nation’s first independent president—it was in fact an act of desperation. Until 1990 the theory and practice of governing the Soviet Union had been predicated on the explicit rejection of the very idea of separated powers, or even of classical models of unified parliamentarism. But that was before perestroika had gone awry, and Soviet society had descended into chaos and violence. Gorbachev’s post was created as a reaction to this turmoil and growing fear, conditions that would be bequeathed to the Russian presidency (and its counterparts elsewhere in the Commonwealth of Independent States) when the Soviet government finally expired.

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2This Report was extracted from a book manuscript entitled “The Russian Presidency: Society and Politics in the Second Russian Republic,” a project conducted under a grant from the National Council for Soviet and East European Research, whose support the author wishes to acknowledge with gratitude. A precis of the book structure is appended to this Report; a 14,000-word monograph titled “The Logic of Russian Presidentialism,” drawn from the book manuscript is in press for publication this year in the Carl Beck Papers of the University of Pittsburgh; and the book is expected to be published in 1999.

3 See, for example, I.M. Stepanov, “Parlamentskaia demokratia i vybor formy pravleniia” in Konstitutsionnyi stroi rossii, 2nd. ed. (Moscow: Institute of State and Law, 1995); and V.N. Suvorov, “Institut prezidentsva: rossiiskaia konstitutsionnaia model’ i zarubezhnyi opyt” in Ispolnitel’naia vlast’: sramitel’nno-pravovoe issledovanie (Moscow: Institute of Scientific Information on the Social Sciences of the RAN, 1995).
Although much has been written about the end of the Soviet Union and Gorbachev's last days in office, this paper seeks more specifically to highlight the relationship between social disorder and the emergence of a rough system of separated powers in the final years of the Soviet period. Stephen Holmes has written that "strong presidencies, we might predict, will emerge where society is not well-organized enough to produce through elections a parliament that, in turn, is coherent enough to support a single-minded government capable of taking tough economic and other decisions." But while Holmes intended that this hypothesis be applied to postcommunist presidential regimes, it is in fact a succinct description of the Soviet presidency itself. The creation of the post of President of the USSR was not the result of a new Soviet theory of separated powers, but rather an attempt to administer a society so atomized and mistrustful that it was incapable of forming a stable legislative branch or even of reaching agreement on basic principles of self-government.

The Soviet presidency is a case worthy of study not only because of what it tells us about the Soviet transition (for it is clear that many of the Soviet successor states have emulated the Gorbachevian arrangement) but also for what it reveals about the relationship between institutions and social conditions. First, it suggests that the foundations of the presidency were shallow; rather than a new conceptualization of Soviet political institutions, it was instead an ad hoc arrangement. Second, it lends credence to the arguments of Valerie Bunce and others that presidentialism in Eastern Europe might be the result, rather than the cause, of social and political conditions, a finding that calls into question much of the literature critical of the adoption of presidential institutions in the former Soviet region.  

The Failure of Perestroika

Perestroika was a paradoxical approach to reforming the USSR in that it relied heavily for its success on the very thing it was supposed to create. Gorbachev's plans to restore order in the workplace and morale in the streets required precisely the kind of civic, disciplined, lawful, and cooperative society (a society, to use another term, rich in accumulated "social capital") that the Soviet Union lacked in the first place. The atomization of Soviet society in the previous six decades meant that once repression was mitigated, there was no recoalescing of a nascent civil society, but rather only the emergence from the shadows of a loose hodgepodge of groups reflecting conflicting...
and often extreme views and interests. Far from uniting society or creating a new basis of legitimacy for the regime, the openness associated with perestroika and glasnost actually allowed for the vocal expression of complaints, and for the settling of scores old and new. Little wonder that the period between 1986 and 1990 is characterized by Russian researchers V.N. Grigor’iev and Iu.D. Rogov as one of “mass disorder in the USSR.”

Perhaps most maddening to the regime in this period is that there was clear agreement among the Soviet public in principle that change was needed and that the Union was worth saving, but no one was quite willing actually to do anything about it. Soviet polls showed broad support among ordinary workers for “perestroika” throughout the late 1980s, but on closer inspection Soviet sociologists also found a disturbing undercurrent of a “secret prejudice against change,” which reflected many citizens’ belief that their own lives would not change for the better no matter what policies were enacted, and that therefore equilibrium was better than uncertainty. One Soviet report, as Stephen White recounts, noted that “while there might be overwhelming support [for the concept of perestroika], it was ‘quite another thing to take an actual part in changes and to strive for results’,” and that in an atmosphere of “considerable apathy and indifference...people expected perestroika to be introduced by decree, without their active participation.” Much of the blame for this has to rest with the leadership: Gorbachev and his team, according to the late Dmitrii Volkogonov, failed to realize that perestroika could not simply reverse seven decades of learned passivity, and that people “didn’t know how to conduct themselves” outside of established routine, despite exhortations to do exactly that.

This is not to say that perestroika did not energize public life. Indeed, in the short term, it succeeded all too well at encouraging public expression of previously private sentiments. Small centers of autonomous social association had begun to coalesce during the Brezhnev era, and while these groups proliferated rapidly under Gorbachev, years of persecution had left them hesitant to play a public role other than as occasional (and vocal) critics. These informal groups were the last great hope of perestroika, the raw material from which Gorbachev’s team hoped to build a civil society that was somehow to be both independent from, and yet supportive of, the regime. The problem, as Volkogonov points out, is that once these groups formed, it was unclear just what they were supposed to do next. “To the very end,” Volkogonov wrote in 1995, “the phenomenon of

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8 See Stephen White, Gorbachev and After (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1992), pp. 241-244.
9 White, p. 242.
11 Vera Tolz has written that despite the growth of autonomous social “circles” and hidden discussion clubs in the 1970s, “the creation of unsanctioned groups with specific sociopolitical goals...almost inevitably continued to provoke persecution” until well into 1987. See Vera Tolz, The USSR’s Emerging Multiparty System (Munich: Radio Liberty, 1990), p. 5.
perestroika was not fully understood by its creators (or its executors),” because Gorbachev was never able to “answer, either in a philosophical or a practical sense, the question: what was the goal of perestroika?”

Gorbachev’s belief that perestroika and its attendant liberalization would strengthen society, and then in turn the regime, was nothing less than a profound misjudging of the Soviet sociopolitical situation, and his reaction to the results of perestroika actually deepened the social crisis. While Gorbachev has made reference to himself as Hamlet, his press secretary Andrei Grachev perhaps more tellingly captured the sense of bewilderment Gorbachev felt when he described his boss as “President Lear.” Valerii Boldin, a Gorbachev aide later implicated in the 1991 coup, charges (rather self-servingly) in his memoirs that by 1989 Gorbachev was simply in denial about the chaos unleashed by his own policies, a charge also leveled by former Central Committee staffer Leon Onikov. Both claim that Gorbachev’s subsequent political paralysis crippled the ability of lower-level party organs to respond to the bewildering tempest of demands and charges engulfing them. This is more than disgruntled apparatchiks settling scores; even loyal Gorbachev advisors Aleksandr Yakovlev and Georgii Arbatov have since acknowledged that Gorbachev was so taken aback—and worse, so taken by surprise—by the chaotic and vicious nature of public debate that he soon turned away from his own policies. (Unfortunately, Gorbachev’s own memoirs regarding this period are no less self-serving, and distinctly less candid.

In any case, the convulsions tormenting Soviet society soon made Gorbachev’s commitment to perestroika, in whatever form he had envisioned it in 1986, a moot point. In due time, the phrases associated with perestroika (“acceleration” and the like) quickly became little more than slogans to be lampooned by a populace more concerned with the day to day survival of the nuclear family than with Gorbachev’s annoying efforts to get them to drink less, to work more, and, in essence, to cheer

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12 Volkogonov, pp. 317-318.
16 Gorbachev glosses over the decision to establish the presidency in only six out of nearly 700 pages (despite the lavish detail given elsewhere to the arcana of various Central Committee meetings) and the emphasis on foreign policy in the bulk of the book lends credence to Boldin’s charge that Gorbachev turned his attention outward as the domestic situation spiraled out of control. Several reviewers have noted the disappointingly evasive nature of the Gorbachev memoirs; See Jack Matlock, “Gorbachev: Lingering Mysteries,” The New York Review of Books, December 19, 1996, esp. pp 38-39, for a pointed dissection that includes Matlock’s charge that an incident involving Matlock himself is “breathtakingly inaccurate, and Gorbachev certainly knows that it is.”
up. When asked in 1990 what perestroika represented, 29 percent of Soviet citizens had no answer at all; the next largest groups were the 18 percent who believed that it was “an attempt by the ruling group to hold on to their power by a certain degree of democratization,” and another 14 percent who thought it simply an “out of date and exhausted slogan.”

**The Implosion of Soviet Society**

By late 1989, the question for Soviet leaders was not whether the Soviet Union was falling apart, but rather whether it was too late to stop it. Predictions of ethnic and social turmoil once dismissed as impossible by both Westerners and the Soviet elite were now coming to pass with alarming speed. Instead of the orderly creation of parties, movements, clubs and organizations that were supposed to be the result of the post-1986 liberalization, Soviet citizens regrouped into thousands of small clusters, many of them quite bizarre and openly hostile to the others. A Russian Academy of Sciences group later detailed the “political disintegration” of the USSR by noting that as of November 1, 1990, there were roughly 60,000 groups averaging between 500-600 members, whose “influence” extended over no less than twenty million adults. These included movements dedicated to:

national rebirth, national movements in support of perestroika, regional national fronts, democratic movements of antisocialist type, antisocialist groupings, organizations of antidemocratic character, workers’ movement clubs, the movement to create independent professional trade unions, movements for cooperative owners and other entrepreneurs, small landowners, a movement to create a green party, a movement to create a social-democratic party, an anarcho-syndicalist movement, groups and organizations of a christian-democratic character, constitutional-democratic groups and organizations, historical-enlightenment (istoriko-prosvetitel'skie) movements, intellectuals in support of perestroika, and voters’ clubs and associations.

Volkogonov recalls that “the very atmosphere, the climate, of perestroika was extraordinarily conflictual,” and he captures the fearful scale of public disorder by 1990 when he describes the USSR as “ablaze with thousands upon thousands of mass rallies.”

Most of the groups involved in these activities were antagonistic to each other, narrowly constituted, and bound only by a kind of generalized oppositionism. Some were motivated by intimate family concerns (such as the group representing mothers of boys slain in Afghanistan), others by naked self-interest (such as those organized around entrepreneurship), while yet more were bound by hatred and revenge (such as the right-wing “Memorial” group, the skinheads-for-hire of the Moscow suburbs, or the ad hoc groups of Afghan veterans who terrorized teens, gays, and others.

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17 White, p. 249.
19 Volkogonov, p. 318.
deemed weak or disrespectful.) Finally, of course, were groups that engaged either in crime or politics—or, in the best Soviet tradition, both—based on ethnic and clan ties. By 1990, the economy was infested by a constellation of ethnic gangs and local mafias, leaving most major cities ripe for the shootouts that would thin criminal ranks over the next five years in a process that bore a striking resemblance to similar bloodlettings among the ethnic gangs of New York and Boston in America a generation earlier.

But even before the criminal gangs went to war with each other, social conflict among ordinary citizens broke into the open at all levels. Sacred cows were ripe for slaughter: the privileged position of the Soviet military was under assault, quite literally, as servicemen in uniform were attacked in the streets, even in the Russian republic itself. Old wounds between the city and the countryside were reopened as the economic crisis worsened, and rumors of price liberalization produced occasional bread panics. And in a throwback to the days of Lenin's New Economic Policy, conflicts appeared between blue-collar workers and the nouveau riche entrepreneurs and "cooperative" owners, some of whom were legitimate businessmen, others of whom operated with silent partners in the local political apparatus. Speculators, who bought items at foolishly depressed state prices and resold them at huge profits, were objects of special hatred.

The picture of Soviet society that emerges at the end of perestroika is an unattractive one, characterized by alienation, anger, and envy. Every portrait of the Soviet electorate from this period finds a combination of self-pity and harsh judgementalism. By 1990 only 26% of Soviet respondents agreed that "other people should be trusted," with 36% adding that caution was warranted, and 38% remaining uncommitted, well below the 85% to 95% positive responses to similar questions in Western Europe, and below even levels found in southeastern Europe or more recently in the United States. Writing in mid-1990, Soviet historian Aleksei Kiva laid blame for these attitudes directly to the "lumpenizing" of Soviet society under Stalin and Brezhnev:

We have been fooling ourselves for too long...we have to overcome in ourselves many of the things we used to see as socialist values but which were in fact the values of a poor, backward society. To take pride today in our poverty, disorganization, dullness, homogeneity, and squalid uniformity is a kind of atavism, a sign of our moral and spiritual degradation.

Without a change in these beliefs, Kiva warned, "we will end up ruining and bankrupting ourselves, starving and strangling one another while continuing to be proud of our specialness and uniqueness."

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20 See Andrei Melville, "An Emerging Civic Culture? Ideology, Public Attitudes and Political Culture in the Early 1990s," in A. Miller et al (eds.) Public Opinion and Regime Change. Although a 1995 Kaiser-Harvard-Washington Post study in the United States found only 35% agreeing that most people can be trusted, the only other option on the Kaiser study was a tepid "you can't be too careful", and at least half of those surveyed also believed that most people try to be "fair" and "helpful." See "Americans Losing Trust in Each Other and Institutions," The Washington Post, January 28, 1996, p. A1.

Kiva was not being alarmist; a 1990 poll found that more than a quarter of Soviets believed "that what their fellow citizens lack most is diligence and thrift," even as two-thirds of the same respondents openly admitted that they were unwilling to work harder for more money, and more than half would have traded away higher salaries in exchange for easier work.\textsuperscript{22} More telling was that loneliness was a dominant theme among respondents, with a plurality blaming their loneliness on "the very organization of our society and the lack of consideration people have for one another." However, this cry for consideration did not extend to the less fortunate, those on the margins of society, or the simply unconventional: nearly a third of the respondents favored the death penalty for prostitutes, homosexuals, and drug addicts, and slightly less than a fifth favored it for "rockers" (a catch-all phrase that included bikers and heavy-metal music fans), AIDS victims and even the mentally ill. Startlingly, in a country beset by poverty and alcohol abuse, between 3 to 9 percent of the respondents nonetheless supported executing street beggars and alcoholics. When asked about the source of their own sense of self-respect, 43\% of this group (the most common response) listed "being a parent," an unsurprising finding in a society centered on the nuclear family. More depressing was the least reported response: only 9\% chose the answer "being a human being."

This alienation was compounded by a sense among ordinary Soviet citizens that there was no remedy for their troubles even in the public institutions that were supposed to guard and protect them. Corruption, only thinly veiled under Brezhnev, brazenly came into the open as the coerciveness of the state declined. Local officials routinely joined hands with criminal elements; police officers, then as now, were understood to be bribable on all but the most severe matters—this, as rates of violent crime skyrocketed. Judicial remedies were suspect, since the courts had long ago come to be seen as dilatory and partial arms of the Soviet bureaucracy, rather than functioning arenas of conflict resolution. Commenting on the flood of letters to newspapers from ordinary citizens seeking action about relatively mundane issues, one Soviet jurist remarked flatly in 1990: "Let us be frank: Our courts have lost their prestige. This is why the people appeal to the newspapers for any reason at all."\textsuperscript{23} (Similar findings were reflected empirically in Richard Rose's 1994 study, in which the courts and the police ranked well behind the only public institution that continuously gets high marks for fairness from the average Russian citizen: the postal service.)\textsuperscript{24}

In short, by 1990, the worst of all worlds had arrived. Soviet society, given a modicum of freedom, had not responded with a collectivist effort to rebuild the state and its shattered economy. Instead, it had gone to war against itself.

\textsuperscript{22} These and following data from "Opinion Poll Reveals Soviet Attitudes," FBIS-SOV-90-065, April 4, 1990, pp. 41-42.


The issue of nationalism and its relationship to the collapse of the Soviet Union is a topic too immense to tackle here, but from the perspective of institutions and social capital it is important at least to mention the character of national and ethnic movements that arose under perestroika. At the level of national elites, it is difficult to disagree with Aleksandr Yakovlev’s angry assertion: “I am convinced: nationalist movements did not crowd out communism in the union republics; rather, it was intra-elite rivalry, which dictated the use of nationalism as a means of the struggle for power....I call it parasitical separatism.”25 Perestroika provided both an opening and a certain amount of camouflage, and later Russian researchers were quite right that by 1989 “national fronts supporting perestroika in some republics had fallen into the hands of extremist-nationalist elements who essentially subordinated the struggle for perestroika to the struggle to exit the USSR.”26

The Soviet elite, which now had broadened to include prominent legislators of the newly-formed Congress of People’s Deputies, knew a civil war in the offing when they saw one, and sought to head it off with a figure of national authority, trust, and conciliation: a national president. To some Soviets at the time, this seemed like limiting democracy in order to save it, and even Gorbachev himself had earlier ruled out the notion of a separate state presidency. (Yakovlev, ever the more far-seeing of Gorbachev’s advisors, had already proposed that Gorbachev create an independent Union presidency as early as December 1985).27 When he changed his mind, he found he had unexpected allies supporting the creation of this kind of super-presidency. One was the legislature itself. The other was the Soviet populace.

The Fall of the Party and the Call for Soviet Presidentialism

If the idea of a “Union of Soviet Socialist Republics” was losing meaning in 1989 and 1990, it was in no measure due to actions Gorbachev had taken against the Communist Party in the name of reforming it, and in the end Gorbachev’s decision to allow the creation of an all-Union presidency had as much to do with his own political security as with any larger issue of social trust. Until 1990, the impregnable fortress from which every Soviet leader had ruled was the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, and the only means by which leadership changed was through a revolt within that fortress, or by a decision from the ultimate arbiter of the length of a dictator’s rule, death. In 1989, Gorbachev was in fine health; it was now the Party that was clearly doddering and sclerotic. If Gorbachev were to continue to rule the Soviet Union, it would have to be from a perch more secure than the General Secretary’s seat in the Politburo. Although public support for this decision reflected broader social conditions, it is nonetheless important to note that the origins of the Soviet office itself were directly tied to the political fortunes of Gorbachev and his inner circle.

25 Yakovlev, p. 346.
26 Reformirovanie Rossii, p. 29.
27 Yakovlev, pp. 211-212.
The creation of the presidency owed much to the fact that perestroika, again, had produced the opposite effect that Gorbachev had intended. Opening the political process to younger reformers was supposed to galvanize the Party faithful, who in response would duly turn and vote the last of the Brezhnevite dinosaurs off to the tar pits. But democratizing the political process undermined the entire rationale beneath a single-party state. Gorbachev himself recognized this potential land mine and tried to defuse it in his 1987 opus on perestroika:

The question is put forward — by some with the secret hope, by others with apprehension — whether perestroika perhaps represents a move away from socialism, or for the most part an utter dilution of its basis? Certain people in the West would have us accept this version: socialism, they say, is undergoing a deep crisis, and is leading society into a dead end. But our entire program, as a whole and in its specific parts, is based on the principle: more socialism, more democracy.\(^2^8\)

A clever defense, but in the end unconvincing: either the Party ruled as a vanguard organization whose elite represented the moral compass of socialism, or it would submit itself to the judgement of the masses as a parliamentary party in the effort to create “more democracy.” Gorbachev chose the latter hoping the people would confirm the former, and in doing so unintentionally set in motion events that would end the Party’s political monopoly.

But even if Gorbachev had been able to explain away these ideological contradictions, he still had to contend with the entrenched Party conservatives who opposed the whole scheme. “More democracy” requires “more democrats,” and to this end Gorbachev set about purging the aging ranks of the Party. This shake-out—representing the most severe turnover in Soviet political and administrative elites in over 50 years—was intended to invigorate a moribund Party while at the same time flushing out the enemies of reform.\(^2^9\) Instead, Gorbachev’s admirable, if doomed, frontal assault divided and weakened the Party: while the upper echelons fell into bitter struggle, the rank and file opted out for the informal organizations, or even for an apolitical life, in droves. Growth in Party membership, already slowing in the 1980s, declined for the first time in 1989, when some 800,000 members quit—to be followed by over three million more in the next two years.\(^3^0\) Recruiting the young was even harder: the Komsomol, already in trouble, lost fully 25% of its membership in 1990 alone. Perhaps worse was that one-third of Komsomol members surveyed in 1989 said they would leave the country if they could, a slightly higher level of response than found

\(^{2^8}\) Mikhail Gorbachev, Perestroika i novoe myshlenie dlja nashego strana i dlja vsego mira (Moscow: Politizdat, 1987), pp. 31-32.


overall among those aged 18-30. The younger men and women who were supposed to be the future of the Party, in other words, would be the first in line to leave if they could.

Despite the decline in membership, the Party still declared itself the sole source of authority in the Soviet Union, and the steady dissipation of that authority was even more disturbing than what could have been viewed at the time as merely transitional problems of recruitment. The erosion of Party authority was part of the overall decentralization (both physical and organizational) of the powers of the central Union government, another Gorbachev policy that, while intended to strengthen the regional reformers at the expense of the Moscow apparat, had instead spun out of control. It was bad enough that more and more decisions were being made outside Moscow, but worse yet was that they were often made by people outside the Party. In describing the *neformatly* in 1990, Nicolai Petro found that they represented the “localization of politics,” as they began “to pay more attention to local concerns and thus shift the balance of political activism from the national to the local level.” This set the stage for what later was called the “war of laws,” in which legislation or decrees issued from the Kremlin were then promptly ignored, superceded, or publicly rejected at the republic level—with the Russian republican government right down the street one of the most visible such offenders. Increasingly incoherent Party policies were stymied first by the indecision of the apparatchiks, later by the conflicting directives of the Congress of People’s Deputies, and finally by the growing power of local and regional elites.

Centrifugal forces were tearing the Union apart, and the Party, in the name of reform and “more democracy,” had not stepped in to halt them. For the first time since the chaotic days of the Revolution, the question arose of whether the Party could still control large sectors of daily political and economic activity within Soviet borders, which in turn represented a concrete problem of spreading social disorder. In early 1990, a sociologist at the Central Committee Social Science Academy warned:

> For the first time during the years of perestroika the proportion of those who have lost faith in the party’s progressive role has exceeded the proportion of those believing in it...Replying to the question as to who today can defend the interests of the ordinary man, only 12 percent of working people mentioned party bodies. Preference was given to the mass media...Even Communists—some 40 percent—advocate a multiparty political system...”

This collapse of support for the Party accelerated throughout 1989 and 1990, and Gorbachev’s eventual turn back to the conservatives would only exacerbate the sense that the entire country was frozen in irretrievable confrontation. Indeed, when Gorbachev would reject the so-called “500 Days”

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31 White, p. 253; *Refomirovanie Rossii*, p. 27.
economic liberalization package in late 1990, Aleksandr Yakovlev would describe it to journalist David Remnick as turning away from "the last chance for a civilized transition." and that "what followed was nothing less than a war."\(^{14}\)

The Party was thus caught in a bind of Gorbachev's making: either reclaim, by force if necessary, its monopoly over power and political speech, or enter into direct competition with groups that were in essence acting like opposition parties. In early 1990, the Party made a choice that, depending on one's point of view, represented either a courageous acceptance of an inevitable challenge, or a craven inability to find the backbone to use the measures that would save itself and the Union. In February 1990, the Central Committee voted to repeal Article Six of the Soviet Constitution, thereby ending the constitutional status of the Communist Party as the "leading force" and "nucleus" of Soviet society. Multipartism, of a sort, had arrived in the Soviet Union.

None of this was supposed to happen, of course. The year before, a popularly elected legislature, the Congress of People's Deputies, had been created, but as journalist David Satter has pointed out, the whole point was to use the institution "to weaken the party's ability to remove [Gorbachev] and to resist reforms, not to surrender moral authority in the country to the democrats."\(^{15}\) But once again, Gorbachev had set processes in motion that—to his continual surprise—he could not control. Now a multiparty state was in the offing, and it could not logically be governed from the General Secretary's chair, even if the Party had retained any of its former capacity to induce awe or fear or even compliance (which by 1990 it clearly had not). The Party had crumbled, the Congress (or part of it) was trying to act like a real legislature, social tensions and demands were mounting, and the state itself was adrift. As one USSR People's Deputy wondered aloud at the end of 1989, "I keep thinking: have we bypassed the point at which a chaos-free transition to a democratic society was possible?"\(^{36}\)

Here, Gorbachev's personal interest and the growing crisis in society coincided, and in retrospect it is easy to see where creating a post of chief executive would seem to accomplish several things at once. First, it would provide Gorbachev himself with a firmer claim to national leadership, a mandate that could extend beyond the dwindling numbers of the Party faithful. Second, it answered popular demands for a figure of accountability, for an end to the faceless curtain of collective leadership behind which some of the most disastrous political decisions in the USSR had been taken. Finally, it would provide leverage over a legislature that was increasingly taking itself far more seriously than Gorbachev had ever envisioned, including routinely rejecting the government's nominations of senior ministers. The president, as Aleksandr Yakovlev made clear after Gorbachev's...

\(^{14}\) Remnick, p. 371.

\(^{15}\) Satter, p. 72.

accession, would be a figure of national power and unity, against whom opposition would be not only illegal, but in some sense even immoral:

Whereas before a nonparty person, say, or a dissident within the party itself could say: That decision by the raikom or the Politburo is to me illegal and therefore not binding upon me; now the decision of the president, according to the Constitution, is binding upon all....Like it or not, this person, if he does not fulfill the decision of the President, is to a certain extent setting himself against society and against its rights and laws...[emphasis added]37

"I think," Yakovlev added, "we all have to understand this peculiarity and get used to it."

Debating the Union Presidency

During the winter of 1990, debate began in the Soviet legislature over whether to create a Union presidency. In early March, a joint Soviet-British poll found more than 60% of Soviets supporting the establishment of such an office, with over 80% favoring direct elections. When asked who should hold the presidency, 72% chose Gorbachev, with Boris Yeltsin (at this point still only a legislator) a distant second at 11%.38 A poll taken solely within the RSFSR a month later showed exactly the same level of support for creating a Russian presidency as well.39 Perhaps more important was that the Soviet respondents were not simply choosing reflexively to support the most popular or visible leader; a September 1990 poll showed that Yeltsin was a vastly more popular figure union-wide than Gorbachev.40 Soviet citizens "fully approved" of Yeltsin's actions by more than a two to one margin over Gorbachev (61% to 28%), yet supported the creation of Soviet presidency for Gorbachev anyway—indicating that they were capable of making fairly sophisticated judgements about politicians and their offices.

Additional anecdotal evidence suggests that popular support for the creation of a presidency was not merely renewed desire for a benevolent dictator. As one factory worker put it, "We don't need the 'great,' 'most wise,' 'father of the peoples' that we once had, Unfortunately, and from whom our fathers and grandfathers had to endure so much. We need a chief of state elected at our will."41 Iurii Golik, the head of the Supreme Soviet committee on law and order, pointedly mentioned Afghanistan in explaining his support for a more accountable executive: "[Not long ago] the Politburo was the de facto president...To this day, we cannot figure out who, for example, gave the order to introduce troops into Afghanistan."42 As Izvestiia commentator Stanislav Kondrashov put it, a Soviet presidency would not be "a panacea," but rather "an attempt to exit the historical

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40 "Poll Shows Yeltsin Has Highest Approval Rating," FBIS-SOV-90-175, September 10, 1990, p. 84.
dead-end in which the country was left by the dictatorship of party power. The presidency is not an end in itself."

Particularly strong statements came from Party leaders in some of the regions that were sliding into open civil conflict. Armenian Communist Party leader Suren Arutyunyan spoke in favor of the motion by emphasizing that “it is the whole of the country that is in crisis, not just those regions which have recently exploded. In this situation we need a supreme power...it is not the army that has arrived late, it is power. A president could be a social stabilizer.” (Interestingly, Arutyunyan showed a particularly insightful understanding of the capacity of a president when he added that the negative power of the veto, rather than the positive power of decree, might be the most important component of the office.) To this, a Kalmyk deputy added that “it is only the president who can keep peace during moments of conflict,” although exactly how this was to happen was left unspoken.

Some supporters of the motion, including the normally more circumspect Yakovlev, tended to overestimate the level of Gorbachev’s popularity and his capacity to act as a figure of national reconciliation. Yakovlev argued that “a country on the scale of ours...requires a certain unity around some idea, some central symbol which personifies this power, this unity,” although why he thought Gorbachev could do this while yet remaining CPSU General Secretary is unclear.

Soviet Minister of Justice V.F. Yakovlev made even more startling claims for the new office: “In essence, he personifies the unity of the nation and the state, represents society, the people as a whole, guarantees the sovereignty, independence, security and territorial integrity of the given state, and the interaction of these same bodies of legislative authority, executive authority, and even the judicial authority.”

Supreme Soviet leader Anatolii Luk’ianov, who would later betray Gorbachev in the 1991 coup, emphasized that a president must “create conditions for the development of mutual understanding and social dialogue between various social and political movements” and “maintain civil peace and interethnic harmony in the country.” He then promised, with no apparent sense of irony, that the new presidency would be both “consistently democratic” and “Soviet” in nature (whatever that was supposed to mean). Little wonder that Prime Minister Nikolai Ryzhkov was concerned about the claims being made for the office. “An impression is forming,” he said shortly before the vote on the presidential statute, “since things are bad today, give us presidential power. a president will bring

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45 “Deputies Offer Amendments,” FBIS-SOV-90-040, February 28, 1990, p.34
order. One power [the party] has become weaker but another has not yet become stronger. This is the whole point."

Not surprisingly, opponents of the measure seemed less concerned about Gorbachev himself than about the next Soviet president, should there be one. "Who among us," asked one Moldavian delegate, "is confident that after four or nine years, there will not appear someone in the Soviet Union who wants to create socialism of the barracks type?" Moscow mayor Gavriil Popov, along with other liberals, complained—with good reason—that the post was being created specifically for Gorbachev and insisted that there "must be a legal and regulatory framework that will protect us against authoritarian temptations, come what may." But Popov's remedy, a "strong parliament to counterbalance a strong president," seemed unlikely given his own admission that the country couldn't even produce a coherent direct election of the chief executive. As he told a journalist, "it is neither possible nor opportune to call a direct presidential election in the country now. The USSR is torn by too many splits." Academician Dmitrii Likhachev bluntly warned that direct elections of any kind would produce civil war. Even a loyalist like Georgii Arbatov sent Gorbachev a letter "[drawing his] attention to the danger that, at his request, the presidency had been given truly dictatorial powers: 'Many, including myself, consider Gorbachev morally incapable of becoming a despot and a dictator....But what if something happens to him or he is deposed?'"

It was a reasonable question, since the powers of both legislative and executive institutions were potentially immense, a danger made worse by the fact that they were unclear and in places overlapped. The Soviet Union in early 1990 was neither a parliamentary nor a presidential republic, it was a party-state without a party. Sergei Alekseev, chairman of the Supreme Soviet's committee on constitutional compliance, pleaded with the Congress delegates to see clearly what was evident to others abroad:

I have just come back from France and talked to some of [that] country's most important lawyers and they are saying: Where are you going? Can you really not see that your state system has started to collapse? Isn't our experience of 1958 an object lesson for you? As it happens, Soviet constitutional engineers were quite candid in their admission that they had taken foreign practices into account, as well as in their doubts about the ability of a single institution

51 Quoted in Satter, p. 75, and in Gorbachev, p. 321.
53 Likhachev, a survivor of the Gulag, appealed to his fellow deputies in a televised session to "trust him as an old man and one of much experience" that electing the president directly, or "depriving him of party support" would lead to war. "Deputies Debate Presidency," FBIS-SOV-90-051, March 15, 1990, p. 56. See also Satter, p. 76.
54 Arbatov, p. 333.

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to mitigate the growing chaos. But like Alekseev, most were less concerned about the power of the presidency than about the consequences of an uncontrolled parliament. In a telling moment, Alekseev asserted that “experience shows that a purely parliamentary structure...is most of all adapted to dictatorship.” There could be little doubt about which parliament Alekseev had in mind.

The Failure of the Legislature

While no one was certain that the presidency could save the Union, or even stave off civil war, the precarious state of Soviet society foreclosed any other options short of a return to authoritarian one-party rule. Both the Congress of People’s Deputies and the Supreme Soviet had failed miserably, not only as fora for the civil expression of political views, but even in their nominal role as legislative bodies. The intense social conflict that characterized Soviet public life was replicated in legislative chambers, with the added complication of ongoing and personalized political combat among the legislators themselves. As Izvestiia’s Kondrashov put it, the Supreme Soviet quickly devolved to “everyone for himself, everyone only with his own voice...” Deputy Viktor Sheinis said bluntly in 1990 that “just one year of the work [of the Congress and Supreme Soviet] at the all-Union level has been enough to confirm the worst misgivings voiced by critics of the newly invented system.” And Alekseev complained that even the public itself misunderstood what parliamentary committees like his own on Constitutional Compliance was supposed to do:

Unfortunately, this is how many people perceive the committee’s mission, believing that the committee—like the country’s monitoring-supervisory authorities—should be organizing its activity on precisely this...level—“interdicting violations of procedure at the Congress,” “putting Ryzhkov in his place.” “straightening out Popov” and “calling the separatists to order.”

In the meantime, nothing of substance was done. Public reaction was setting in against both the Party and the legislature, and it is instructive to note that the Soviet-British study found “a rare unanimity” among the population on the means of electing the president: over 80% favored direct election, while 8% entrusted election to the Congress. The Supreme Soviet, heavily dominated by Communists, was favored to choose the president by only 3%. The combined result of this legislative flight from responsibility and the public reaction against it was to make the Congress and Supreme Soviet independent and besieged actors in the increasingly

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57 Quoted in Satter, p. 73.
58 Kondrashov, p. 68.
61 “Results of Opinion Poll on Post of President,” p. 76.
confrontational public arena, rather than vehicles for the expression of public opinions or interests. Indeed, Gorbachev advisor Yakovlev played on public fears of the reckless legislature and embraced a popular mandate by promising that “the presidential system could also raise an additional barrier to bids to seize power in an unconstitutional way.” He went further, adding that “society should be reliably protected against lawlessness, against the attempts of irresponsible or corrupt forces, representing no one, to usurp power, and should be cured of legal nihilism.” 62 (Again, how the president was supposed to do all this without resorting to forceful measures was never clear.) The presidential idea gained currency in no small measure due to the belief that these legislative institutions had become so tainted that they were now irretrievable. The Soviet presidency would thus came into existence in the midst of a matrix of confrontation: Soviet society, the Communist Party, and the national legislature were not only were at war with each other, but were riven by internal conflicts as well.

Under these anarchic conditions, Soviet legislators embraced intensified personal and institutional conflict, as their instinct for self-preservation grew in proportion to the severity of the crises they were supposed to help resolve. Shortly before the vote on the presidency itself, Supreme Soviet member E. Mal’kova described the atmosphere in the legislature:

I honestly admit: I am frightened, not just as a deputy, but as a mother as well, by the aggressive spirit pervading the air and the intolerance shown for others’ ways of thinking being displayed by other social groupings....What I have stated here also defines my attitude toward the question of presidential rule. Democracy is not anarchy [bezvlastie]—it is strong authority formed by democratic means....The country needs a chief of state, a president who confidently coordinates the activity of the highest organs of authority and direction, and who bears responsibility for his actions and decisions before the people. 63

Legislators themselves were no longer able to “bear responsibility” before the electorate, since they were too busy trying to protect themselves while seeking to extinguish each other politically. This irresponsible behavior set in motion and sustained a circle of cynicism, with public disgust fueling yet more legislative evasiveness and bickering, which in turn deepened the public conviction that the legislative enterprise was worthless. 64

In fairness to Soviet lawmakers, it is questionable whether any of them could have actually divined the will of their own fragmented and divided electorate by 1990. Except for nebulous and generalized demands to “fix” things—to create a healthy economy, curb crime, and quell the growing chain-reaction of separatist movements—it was unclear what exactly legislators were supposed to do or how they were supposed to do it. Under this kind of pressure, and in such

uncertain conditions, Soviet legislators sought primarily to assign blame and to protect themselves against the day when the now-inevitable reckoning would come. The new Union president, it seemed, would not only have to rescue the country from ruin, but legislators and intolerant "social groupings" from each other as well.

This created an odd, almost accidental consensus between the public and the legislature on the issue of the presidency. The Soviet citizens wanted a figure who would be accountable; the legislature wanted to find one to give them. The lawmakers sought a presidency that would mediate between increasingly irreconcilable political and social forces, while thus allowing the parliament to pursue its own confrontation agenda and internal intrigues. As one Pravda commentator put it, "both the democrats and the conservatives understand that at some point the promissory notes of trust will have to be paid. Isn't this why they and others have begun to bustle about the search for a culprit and have been readily prepared to heap their own shortcomings and mistakes on the president's shoulders?" In a complaint that would one day be heard again from President Yeltsin's spokesmen, Gorbachev aide Nikolai Petakov rightly castigated legislators who "have shown incompetence here and an unwillingness to assume responsibility," in effect beating their breasts about impending dictatorship while gladly offering to delegate their own powers to the President. Unlike Yeltsin, however (who apparently learned from Gorbachev's sad experiences), the Gorbachev team nonetheless continued to walk blindly into the trap of accountability that had been set.

In the end, despite the public reservations of many legislators, the eventual votes to create the post of President of the USSR and then to fill it were lopsided affairs. On March 14, 1990, the Congress of People's Deputies voted 1817 to 133 (with 61 abstentions) to create a Soviet presidency. The next day, Gorbachev was elected to the post (his name was the only one on the ballot) by a vote of 1329 to 495, which represented only 59% of all deputies, but 71% of those actually voting.

Now all that remained was for Mikhail Gorbachev to fulfill his constitutional duty and save the country from itself. With Gorbachev's election, the Soviet Union for the first time in its history had foresworn the principle of collective leadership. In retrospect, it is curious that even Gorbachev's most faithful followers could have clung to the idea in 1990 that a president, or any individual leader, could reverse the frightful decay of Soviet society. It remains an open question whether even Gorbachev believed it, but the die was now cast. The legislature had slipped the noose, and Gorbachev had willingly stepped up to the gallows.

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The Last Months of Presidential Rule: “Full Social Disintegration”

It was clear from the very beginning of Gorbachev’s 10-month reign as President of the USSR that he had neither the substantive power nor the moral authority to meet the challenge that had been placed before him. There was little he could do in the area of moral authority (and the shameful use of force in Georgia, Lithuania and elsewhere had deprived him of much of the moral high ground earned in the previous five years anyway), but where raw power was concerned, there was the option of asking for more. But before charges of power-seeking or crypto-authoritarianism are laid at Gorbachev’s door, it is crucial to point out that he was attempting only to fill the vacuum left by a magnificently incompetent legislature. The Congress of People’s Deputies, with 2250 members, was at that time the largest elected body in the world and would have been incapable of coherent action due to its sheer size, even if its sessions hadn’t already been characterized by shouting contests, shoving matches, huffy speeches, and ad hominem attacks. The Supreme Soviet, the standing body of 400-plus members elected from the CPD, was less fractious but also less ambitious, and Huskey is quite right to point out that in the end Gorbachev gave up first on the Party as a vehicle of reform, and then on the legislature.68

Although he would eventually seek ever wider powers as the Union collapsed, Gorbachev entered office with what seems to have been a good-faith desire to act as a responsible chief executive. Remarkably, however, Gorbachev began his tenure by accepting his new post with a rambling speech that said much about perestroika—as if that were not, by 1990, a dead letter—but little about the presidency itself. “I consented to stand for president,” he told the Congress, “because I am certain of the future of our fatherland, and also because perestroika has become the meaning of my whole life.”69 He promised that he understood he was “especially accountable” and that he did not “wish to evade carrying out his duty to the people.” These were appropriate words, but ones he would come to regret. Barely eight months later he would return to the same hall and plead:

Listen, we need to act together. The president cannot by himself—just as you cannot solve many questions without his participation and without using his powers. So let us act, come on, let us act. [commotion in hall] Fine, fine, OK. I take it upon myself and am prepared to start acting without waiting for a proposal from the provinces. Is that it? [sounds of approval from hall] Fine!70

Although this was just so much bluster—the central government simply had no ability to stop the fact that many decisions were being made at local and regional levels—it was in its way an admirable attempt by Gorbachev to claim powers that under the law were rightfully his and to shame the parliament into acting on the powers that were rightfully theirs.

68 Huskey in Huskey, ed., p. 98.
69 “Gorbachev Speech Accepting Presidency,” FBIS-SOV-90-051, March 15, 1990, p. 44.
As the legislature descended into incoherence, Gorbachev tried to forestall one disaster after another with decrees that ranged from the grandiose to the ridiculous. In May, he acted against the Baltic declarations of independence, declaring them (as was his duty) unconstitutional. By August, he was issuing decrees on such putatively crucial matters as "the Responsibility of Functionaries for the Unsatisfactory State of Supplying the Population with Tobacco Products."71 Robert Sharlet notes that as 1990 wore on,

Gorbachev’s decrees became increasingly arbitrary and controversial [and ignored], resembling more the proclamations of a monarch than the considered executive decisions of a constitutional leader mindful of the division of power within a constitutional system. By early 1991, the Soviet Union had begun to take on the appearance of a system of unchecked presidential power.72

Sharlet wasn’t quite accurate: this Soviet decretismo was hardly unchecked power, since Gorbachev seemed unable to get anyone to listen to him. At each step, Gorbachev sought more legal power, and at each step—occasional histrionics aside—the lawmakers were more than happy to provide it, because they realized what Gorbachev apparently did not: delegated power now only meant accountability, but not capability.

But no enlargement of presidential prerogatives could stop what Russian sociologists describe in this period as a process representing nothing less than "full social disintegration."73 The Union, as the Soviet citizen knew it, had practically ceased to exist with the declarations of sovereignty of the republics and even the smaller subject territories within the republics. To his credit, Gorbachev seemed to understand even in these desperate circumstances that in the final analysis, chief executives have to execute; that is, they have to ensure that laws passed are laws observed. But by the time he asked for the ability to rule under special powers (under which he would have greatly enhanced authority to override both the legislature and regional governments until 1992), too much political momentum had shifted to local and republican leaders who had little reason to attend to decrees from a president who lacked the instruments (or perhaps the will) to enforce them. And by the time Gorbachev abandoned the Party and sought a democratic renewal of the Union, it was too late. The Soviet era had passed, in the minds of all but its most dogmatic defenders.

Conclusions

True anarchy is rare. When people lose faith in specific political arrangements or particular leaders, they almost immediately turn to others. In creating a national presidency, Gorbachev had unwittingly provided the final nail in his own political coffin, by providing for the creation of the alternative institutions and leaders to whom the Soviet public could turn in the last days of the

72 Sharlet, p. 95.
73 Reformirovanie Rossii, p. 42.
Union. Perhaps nothing could stop growing public attachment to popular or charismatic local leaders, but even Gorbachev (in hindsight) realized that he had helped equip those leaders with the outline of an institution that could both claim popular legitimacy and quell fears of uncontrolled legislative and administrative chaos.

The creation of a Soviet presidency was a last-ditch reaction to the social chaos unleashed by perestroika and not, as many argued at the time, an attempt to recreate a Stalinist center, or even the product of some irrational attachment to a Russian fuhrerprinzip. Rather, it was a perfectly understandable reaction at both the elite and public levels to 1) the realization, brought about by the failure of perestroika, that Soviet society was far too atomized to reaggregate itself into the kinds of parties or movements that could provide the basis of a parliamentary regime, and 2) the immediate and startling incompetence and venality of the Congresses of People's Deputies and the Supreme Soviet.

In a way, Gorbachev's own eloquence and incompetence had been a perfect combination: he had suggested what a president could be, and then shown that even a powerful president could be hamstrung by determined national and local authorities. Even the eventual attempt to depose him redounded to the benefit of arguments in favor of presidentialism. What was the 1991 coup, if not the replacement of the single, legally-elected executive with a committee of charismatically-challenged functionaries that looked nothing so much like a Politburo-in-waiting?

The crowning irony of the whole affair, of course, is that after the putsch had been put down, Gorbachev owed much of his survival to the man he had banished from the Kremlin four years earlier: Boris N. Yeltsin, the first democratically elected president of the Russian Federation. Perhaps the most important legacy of the Soviet presidential experiment is that when Yeltsin and the Russians found themselves in the midst of the same kind of social disorder and public disaffection with politics that Gorbachev faced, they likewise chose to strengthen presidential institutions rather than abandon them. Unlike Gorbachev, however, Yeltsin was determined not to suffer at the hands of an incompetent legislature. Whatever the legal or moral character of Yeltsin's later actions as president, it is clear that he had learned much from the presidency that had preceded his own.
APPENDIX

Structure of the Book

The Book is not meant as a comprehensive history of the Russian presidency, but rather an attempt to explain the emergence and survival of Russian democracy under a presidential system. It is therefore as much a study of the management of mistrust, an attempt to draw the link between social conditions and political developments, as it is an analysis of politics in the post-Soviet period generally. Chapter One begins with the events surrounding the establishment of Soviet presidency, the office created in 1990 specifically for Mikhail Gorbachev, and specifically so that he could manage—or stop—the accelerating disintegration of the Soviet Union. The Soviet presidency was not quite detached from a legislative mandate (confirmation came from the immense Congress of People’s Deputies), but it had wide popular support and represented a step forward toward a system of separated powers in the USSR.

As Gorbachev was maneuvering himself into what would prove to be a short-lived USSR Presidency, Yeltsin was rapidly returning from the political exile into which Gorbachev had forced him. The first Yeltsin “presidency” was actually a premiership, and as the Russian public lost faith in the central government’s ability to forestall outright social warfare, it soon eclipsed the Soviet presidency in terms of popular support and practical strength. Chapter Two discusses the debates that broke into the open about the creation of an independent government for the First Russian Republic. The First Republic, relying as it did on remnants of Soviet institutions, was in essence a parliamentary system, and it is a vivid illustration of the repercussions of social mistrust in a parliamentary arrangement, from the rhetorical parliamentary combat to the very real combat of the October 1993 destruction of the White House.

Chapter Three is an analysis of the reconstruction of Russian politics, both among new party organizations at large and among Moscow’s elites, that led to the Second Republic. Of particular interest are the roads not taken: the failure to establish a “special regime” or to ban elections and political activity. The chapter is centered on the reorganization of society after the trauma of the October attack, and the new legislature and presidency that emerge from the referendum and elections of December 1993. The 1993 elections could be referred to as “founding” elections, and it is a common adage that the most important elections in a post-authoritarian situation are not the first round but the second. Chapter Four discusses the transition from the first to the second modern Duma. The legislative elections of 1995 are especially important in that they produced a result—a Communist plurality—that challenged the ruling presidential administration without bringing down the regime or even forestalling the next round of elections, a result I explain in terms of the dynamics of legislative-executive relations in a low-trust society.

Chapter Four is a brief exploration of the 1996 presidential election, an event that is noteworthy for two reasons: that it took place, and that it took place essentially without incident. It
was, however, something of a test of the hypothesis of trust, and I discuss the changing relationship
between the candidates, their platforms, and the expressed views of the voters. The 1996 election is
also important because it was Yeltsin's last, and his victory opened the campaign to succeed him.
The conduct and outcome of the 1996 election showed that the voters understood the logic of the
presidential system, and acted to keep it intact and in moderate hands. Taken together, the 1995
Duma elections and the two-round presidential elections also showed that the Russian voter was
willing to cast a protest vote in legislative elections and in the first round of a presidential election.
This relatively sophisticated understanding of the role of the presidency represented an equally
sophisticated understanding of the fragility of Russian society, and indicated a growing moderation
on the part of the voters.

The final chapter of this book explores the prospects for the strengthening of Russian
democratic institutions, while revisiting the initial propositions about trust and presidentialism—and,
along the way, about the autonomy of institutions in general. It also considers the possibilities of a
Russian Third Republic, a constitutional reorganization that will almost certainly take place within
the next decade—and perhaps sooner.

In the 1996 presidential elections, Mikhail Gorbachev polled less than 1 point of popular
support, and was physically assaulted at least twice. But in 1990, he was made President of the
USSR practically by acclamation.