

RUSSIA'S ROAD TO MINSK: DEVELOPMENTS FROM THE AUGUST COUP TO THE FORMATION OF THE COMMONWEALTH OF INDEPENDENT STATES*

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This article analyses the political change mainly within the former Russian Soviet Federation of Socialist Republics (RSFSR), from the coup attempt in August to the end of the year 1991. This period witnessed the end of the Soviet Union by increasing shift of power to Russian Federation and other republics and its eventual replacement by Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Since there was a lack of institutional framework to be analysed, where necessary, the article will focus upon dominant political characters, most importantly Yeltsin and Gorbachev. It shows how the new vision for Russia took shape as Yeltsin appointed the 'Young Turks' to key positions and how in his strategy gaining control of the Russian economic might constituted the most important component. It shows how both historical trends and individuals played a role in the collapse of the Soviet Union and civic approach, which claimed that the loss of Russia's imperial role was compensated by the establishment of a new national identity based on the civic institutions of revived statehood, became the dominant nationalist ideology in Russia. This analysis also provides a background for a comparison with today's Russia, a brief information about which is provided at the end.

KEYWORDS

Yeltsin, Gorbachev, Russian Federation, August Coup, Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).

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RUSYA'NIN MINSK'E UZANAN YOLU: AĞUSTOS DARBESİNDEN BAĞIMSIZ DEVLETLER TOPLULUĞUNUN KURULUŞUNA KADAR YAŞANAN GELİŞMELER

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Bu makale temel olarak Ağustos ayındaki darbe girişiminden 1991 yılı sonuna kadar Rusya Sovyet Sosyalist Cumhuriyetler Federasyonu (RSFSR) içerisindeki politik değişimi analiz etmektedir. Bu dönem giderek artan biçimde gücün Rusya Federasyonu ve diğer cumhuriyetlere kayması sonucu Sovyetler Birliği'nin sonuna ve Bağımsız Devletler Topluluğu'nun (BDT) onun yerine almasına şahitlik etmiştir. Analiz edilebilecek kurumsal çerçeve eksikliği dolayısıyla, makale, gerektiğinde, baskın politik karakterlere, en önemli olarak, Yeltsin ve Gorbaçev'a odaklanmaktadır. Yeltsin'in önemli pozisyonlara reformcuları atamasıyla, nasıl yeni bir Rusya vizyonunun şekillendiği, Rusya'nın ekonomik gücünü ele geçirmenin onun stratejisinde nasıl en önemli parçayı oluşturduğu gösterilmektedir. Makale, hem tarihi eğilimlerin hem de bireylerin Sovyetler Birliği'nin çöküşünde oynadıkları rolü ve sivil yaklaşımın, ki Rusya'nın emperyal rol kaybının tekrar canlanan devletin yönetsel kurumlarına dayalı yeni bir millî kimlikle telafi edildiğini ileri sürmüştür, Rusya'da baskın milliyetçi ideoloji oluşunu göstermektedir. Bu analiz, makale sonunda hakkında kısa bir bilgi verilen günümüz Rusya'sıyla da bir karşılaştırma için arka plan oluşturmaktadır.

ANAHTAR KELİMELER

Yeltsin, Gorbaçev, Rusya Federasyonu, Ağustos Darbesi, Bağımsız Devletler Topluluğu (BDT).

1. INTRODUCTION

The failure of the August 1991 coup in Moscow was a key political event of the 20th century. President Yeltsin was not alone in believing that the events on August 19, 20 and 21 caused (or at least hastened) the collapse of the last empire (Yeltsin 1994: 41). The coup was a result of the right wing opposition to the proposed Union Treaty which was to be signed on 20 August. The treaty would provide a diluted form of central control and its most important characteristic was the preservation of a union which would continue to be a state on its own right.

The Union Treaty for Gorbachev meant continuation of the Union, even if a badly wounded one, and preservation of his seniority among the leaders of the republics; for the republics it meant the centre's recognition of their sovereignty. However, the coup attempt prevented its signing and later the republics were reluctant to sign the same treaty which would mean preservation of a centre capable of another, this time successful, coup d'etat.

This article is an analysis of the political change mainly within the former RSFSR (Russian Soviet Federation of Socialist Republics), from the coup attempt to the end of the year 1991. The period under scrutiny witnessed the end of the Soviet Union by increasing shift of the power to Russian Federation and other republics and its eventual replacement by Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Since the old centre was dying and the new order was asserting itself slowly, there was a lack of institutional framework to be analysed; hence, where necessary, the article will focus upon dominant political characters, most importantly Yeltsin and Gorbachev.

Yeltsin, due to his decisive stand against the plotters, emerged from the coup as the most popular and important political figure in the Union; his international prestige was also enhanced. He gained the control over the armed forces within the Russian Federation. The collapse of the coup presented an invaluable opportunity for Yeltsin by creating a political vacuum in Moscow. He did not miss the chance to realise his vision of a new state of affairs where the Russian, not the Soviet, President would play the leading role (Rahr 1992: 10). He used extra-constitutional means in his demarche against the 'old' institutions that favoured the preservation of the Russian dominated communist system: The Communist Party, KGB, military-industrial complex and partially the Army. The first two were perceived as the most dangerous by Yeltsin and the 'Democrats' (a loose term meaning largely anti-Communists and in favour of some democratisation).

Yeltsin forced Gorbachev to appoint resolved reformists to various key posts (e.g. heads of internal ministry and KGB). He relentlessly pursued

to destroy the Communist Party, which was the most effective institutions in favour of the old system and still had a self-reproducing capacity. This was also required for a rapid economic reform to keep Yeltsin's political base satisfied. The real importance of the KGB, which had been trying to undermine him since 1989, as a political rival for Yeltsin was in its organisational capacity; it could not be outside of his political control.

As far as the ministries and bureaucratic apparatus of the centre were concerned, the primary tool for Yeltsin was money. The control over Russian Federation's budget was Yeltsin's most powerful weapon even before the coup attempt; after it, withholding RSFSR's tax contribution to central budget had a qualitatively different aim. This time, it was not just for increasing the bargaining power, but to strip the centre of the all vital sources to be an alternative to Yeltsin's agenda which was making the Russian Republic the 'core', not the centre of the former Soviet Union. Money was the key in securing the support of the Army, only Yeltsin could pay them.

Yeltsin acted independently of Gorbachev and initiated the creation of CIS on 8 December. Gorbachev, in a sense, was the victim of the very reform process he initiated; his introduction of Perestroika and Glasnost had released the pent up centrifugal forces. The political developments marginalised his political importance, for example as a political arbiter between the republics.

Yeltsin, having no clear tools for his political objectives, believed that everything depended on his taking a position of "brutal consistency" (Yeltsin 1994: 106). After the coup, he stopped working with 'ex-communist' professionals and adopted a radical reform program designed by so-called Young Turks, led by G. Burbulis and Y. Gaidar. Their vision of a progressive Russian nationalism influenced Yeltsin in seeking even a very loose union with other Slavic republics rather than a strong one with Muslim republics. Yeltsin's primary concern was to promote his power and he had to prevent an uncontrolled disintegration of the Union.

2. THE REACTION OF THE REPUBLICS TO THE DISINTEGRATION

Among the many factors contributing to disintegration, the main one was the concentration of some power in the republics due to the reform process launched by Gorbachev. The reform attempts of the rapidly declining economy by economic decentralisation also brought devolution of political control from the centre. The situation was apt for resurfacing of so far suppressed nationalism. The result was greater Republicanism. The Soviet propaganda that Moscow had "solved" the nationality problem proved to

be wrong. As far as the political elites were concerned, in many republics, the *nomenklatura* interests were not actually stronger than ethnic solidarity. As the Party weakened, its national *nomenklaturas* jettisoned their Kremlin connections (Rywkin 1994: 9) and preferred to present themselves as nationalists.

Gorbachev's agenda was only marginally concerned with nationality matters (Szporluk 1992: 92) but for the nationalists, nationalism and consequent independence was a solution to the problems of the Soviet Union. However, this did not mean that all of the republics had a certain type of militant nationalism. The Baltic republics had always been characterised by a strong sense of national identity, they had a historic experience of independence. Having a distinct culture from Russia, they considered themselves more European than Russians did. Their geopolitical unimportance in terms of population and natural resources made their political independence relatively easy. Georgia, which also had a strong sense of identity, remained largely aloof to Gorbachev's attempt to save the union. Azerbaijan also developed a strong nationalist mood and resisted a dominant centre. Armenia and Moldova generally objected to preservation of the Union but their size and lack of natural resources made their role secondary.

Among the Central Asian republics Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan, by virtue of its large territory and demographic structure, Kazakhstan occupied a distinct place; both Gorbachev and Yeltsin sought the support of Nazarbayev. Although, these republics with the exception of Kazakhstan declared their independence, they remained supporters of an economic union because of their dependence to the central budget. Nazarbayev was afraid of a clash with the Russian Federation over the very large ethnic Russians, living mainly in the north of Kazakhstan, in case of an uncontrolled disintegration.

The history of Russia's "younger brothers" Ukraine and Belorus (later Belorussia) has been closely connected with that of Russia. Ukrainians and Belorussians were called by the dominant "Great Russians" as "Little Russians" with a hint of not recognising their separate national identity fully. As fellow Slavs, they enjoyed Moscow's favour and could be entrusted with important positions in the state offices, the party and the military. In the non-Slavic republics of the Central Asia, they were regarded as interchangeable with Russians (Rywkin 1994: 21-22). Therefore, it was difficult for many Russians to understand their desire for independence. Gorbachev could not get the consent of Ukraine for the 'Union' but Yeltsin showed political realism and initiated for establishment of the CIS.

The coup brought the idea that the Union was dangerous and hence must cease to be (Carrere d'Encausse 1993: 17); before it, the Novo-Ogarevo Accord of 23 April somewhat united nine republics (Armenia, Moldova, Georgia and Baltic republics did not participate). The coup was launched

on the 19th of August to prevent signing of the Union Treaty on the 20th. The failure of this last desperate attempt by conservatives caused the demise of the very institutions that they tried to save. Those republics who already abandoned the USSR consolidated their independence. For others, a strong centre meant no guarantee for a subsequent coup and loss of what they had gained politically. The republics began to drop out of the Nova-Ogarevo process (Yeltsin 1994: 109-110).

After the coup attempt, the leaders of key republics of Ukraine and Kazakhstan pressed on Yeltsin the model of a confederation of fully independent republics (Dunlop 1993: 61). Local communist elites who supported the coup in Belorussia, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan and Tajikistan declared the independence to protect themselves from a central government under the control of anti-communists, particularly Yeltsin (Beissinger 1991: 30).

3. RUSSIAN FEDERATION BEFORE AND AFTER THE COUP ATTEMPT

The Russian Federation, which started to define itself distinct from and in opposition to Gorbachev's 'centre', was the central actor in destruction of the USSR (Szporluk 1992: 94-95). For several decades, Russian nationhood was subsumed to the USSR and even for Russians there was no separate nationhood in the Soviet Union. In the disintegration process, Russian Federation struggled to gain firstly its nationhood and later its statehood. The new Russia did not define itself identical with the USSR but found it difficult to create a new basis. The August coup attempt provided a special impetus to the rise of Russian self-identification. During the coup, Yeltsin appealed to ethnic feelings of Russians. Russians considered themselves as saviour of democracy.

Yeltsin proclaimed, "Russia has returned" (Carrere d'Encausse 1993: 256), a return that was not welcomed by every republic. Especially Ukraine and Kazakhstan were uncomfortable with rising Russian nationalism and since they have large number of ethnic Russians, their declarations of independence further increased ethnocentric feelings in Russian Federation. The increasing Russification of Union institutions and replacement of the old Union centre by Russian Federation further alienated other republics and Russia found itself isolated.

After the coup, Yeltsin's vision was a docile and toothless Union dominated by Russian Federation, he explained it as "a co-ordinating centre" and "strong republics" (Dunlop 1993: 269). The republics were to remain in the Union as fully independent in their internal affairs but politically and economically dependent upon Russia. This strategy required preservation

of a single economic space in the Union, creation of a commonwealth of sovereign states, preservation of the Union's Army and strict guarantees on human rights on the whole territory of the Union (Dunlop 1993: 266). The last point aimed at defending the interests of ethnic Russians beyond the borders of the RSFSR. This vision was too rigid for other republics. Yeltsin, therefore, had to modify his thoughts.

The coup discredited Gorbachev; he could not prevent it and he himself did not defeat it (Breslauer 1991: 3). It showed that he was a poor team worker and judge of his aides' characters (Mann 1991: 3). Yeltsin and other leaders used these facts in attacking Gorbachev and deciding new appointments. Since the radical reformers destroyed the political power of the Party, KGB and other central organisations, Gorbachev's main conservative constituencies were liquidated and hence his position of a political arbiter between conservatives and radical had no longer value. However, Yeltsin needed Gorbachev as a face national leader until he consolidated his power to contain dangerous centrifugal tendencies and an uncontrolled rapid disintegration (Khasbulatov 1993: 203).

3.1. Yeltsin the Beneficiary of the Coup

With the collapse of the coup, Yeltsin's power was greatly enhanced by his ability to determine most important changes in central institutions (White et al 1993: 91). In fact, he was not working against the preservation of the Union as long as he had been obtaining the powers he wanted from the centre (Sheey 1991: 4). Yeltsin imposed his choices on Gorbachev in key personnel, for example, Y. Shaposhnikov as defence minister and V. Bakatin as head of the KGB (see, Sixsmith 1991). It appeared that Yeltsin had gained enormous authority against Gorbachev and he did not hesitate to bully. The power vacuum in the centre after the coup was filled by Yeltsin and later by Gorbachev in a coalition with ten republican leaders. The RSFSR was able to force the centre into a full-scale retreat. Yeltsin issued edicts beyond his jurisdiction, appointed himself commander of the armed forces on Russian territory and putting all important central institutions under his control (Khasbulatov 1993: 170-184; Thorson 1991a: 16). He pursued a policy of amassing as much power as possible and was in no hurry for institutionalisation of the already shifted power to the Russian republic. His authoritarian style caused fear in other republics. The Uzbek President for example stated that his republic was seeking independence because the central government had fallen too heavily under Yeltsin's control (Beissinger 1991: 30).

3.2. The Communist Party, KGB and Military After the Coup

Some observers, including Moscow's mayor G. Popov, interpreted that

the coup was an attempt to return the power to the Party. He called for its property to be nationalised and publications to be closed (Pravda, 23 August 1991 in Current Digest of Soviet Press (CDSP) 43/34/9). Miller (1993: 182) argues that after the coup the people simply wanted to get rid off the Party, the KGB, socialism and Communism. The party was believed to have either masterminded the coup or at least had provided ideological backbone (Thorson 1991b: 5). Its central committee remained silent against the coup and did not defend Gorbachev. Yeltsin taking advantage of the extraordinary circumstances issued a series of edicts against the Party. Gorbachev initially tried to defend the Party by arguing against a total ban but he quitted it under popular pressure on 24 August and ratified Yeltsin's earlier ban on organised party activity in the Army, the KGB and the MVD (Ministry of Internal Affairs).

The reformers were arguing that the democracy in the Soviet Union could not be achieved as long as the Party remained the dominant political organisation. With the suspension of its activity and freezing of its assets two weeks after the coup, the Party came to its end. Its inactivity against the coup caused loss of much of its remaining support among the ordinary people and party members (Gill 1992: 175). On 23 August, Yeltsin, "with a stroke of the pen," suspended the Communist Party of Russia (Sakwa 1993: xiv). On 29 August, the USSR Supreme Soviet suspended the activity of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) all over the country. Yeltsin described the CPSU as not a party but a "special mechanism for shaping and exercising political power" (Rosiiskaya Gazeta, 9 November in CDSP, 43/45/4) capable of carrying out another coup (Izvestia, 27 August, in CDSP, 43/35/9). By destroying the CPSU, Yeltsin not only got rid off his perhaps the most important political rival but also gave a death stroke to its local structures that could be formidable obstacles to necessary economic and political reforms that would have to take place in near future to keep Yeltsin's power base satisfied.

The involvement of the KGB into the coup was obvious. This fact left the KGB helpless before Yeltsin and the 'Democrats'. Bakatin's mission was to derange and dismantle this powerful organisation (see, Dunlop 1993). Bakatin in an article in Izvestia on 25 October explained the reasons why the KGB had to be reorganised: "The functions of the KGB... were so extensive that the Committee itself represented a threat to the Country's security, something that was demonstrated during the putsch". As of 1 September 1991, the KGB's total staff size was 448,000 with an annual budget of 6.4 billion rubbles. Bakatin, although accepting that any state need the all types of activities that the KGB was engaged in, the monopolisation of these in a single agency, he argued, led to a "state within a state" which was "incompatible" with a democratic system. In accordance with Yeltsin's desires, he was suggesting, "the future conception of security for the new Union of Sovereign State should be based on the idea of complete independence for the republic security agencies with mainly co-ordinating

work for interrepublic structures”. A new strong Russian security agency under his total control would certainly serve much in enhancing Yeltsin’s authority.

The military was not discredited by the coup in the same degree as the CPSU and KGB. Securing the support of the Soviet Army was vital for both Gorbachev and Yeltsin. Although the coup also had roots in the military and security apparatus (Galeotti 1991: 5), overall, it did not actively support it and Yeltsin praised the Army for defending the democracy during the coup and said he would defend it against unjustified criticism (Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty; The Report on the USSR (hereafter ROTU), 6 Sep. 1991: 101). Gorbachev’s attempt to restore status quo ante in the Defence Ministry was halted by Yeltsin (Rahr 1992: 9) and he backed Shaposhnikov who became the new minister. Shaposhnikov immediately started a reform in the Army and moved decisively to eliminate Communist Party activity in it. He seemed determined to bring the armed forces firmly under control of the elected state bodies and free from political parties or organisations (Foye 1991: 8-11). His new Chief of the General Staff Vladimir Lobov was stressing on the need for professionalism, better equipment and departyisation in the Army (Izvestia 31.08. 1991, in CDSP 43/35/30).

3.3. Political Clashes Among the New Elite

In the wake of the coup, Boris Yeltsin seemed disoriented by the vastness of the new political realities and challenges confronting the Russian Republic. It took Yeltsin and his team to comprehend the immensity of what had occurred and to work out the appropriate strategy to deal with the emerging order. After a seventeen-day rest at Sochi, apparently on the orders of the doctors, Yeltsin returned to Moscow with a will to form a new team of advisers and attack the republic’s daunting economic problems. It soon became obvious that neither Yeltsin nor his advisers nor the Russian Parliament understood how a western democracy works. This resulted in some painful political clashes between the legislative and executive authorities and even within the presidential apparatus. *Moskovskie novosti*, a pro-democracy weekly complained that serious feuding broken out at the top level of the Russian political structure along with institutional lines, “between the council of ministers and the Parliament... between the council of ministers and the President”. Yeltsin was criticised for “hanging back” from the fierce fighting among his advisers and for masking his own policy preferences (Dunlop 1993: 262).

Analysts were agreed upon that Yeltsin was a brilliant instinctive politician but they were wondering how far he can concentrate on the complicated aspects of the Russian economic problems and political struggle. He gave impression of a “hands off” president. Newly emerging political leaders were often riven by genuine policy differences but there was also clash of

egos. Those who were in the close circle jockeyed for influence on Yeltsin. There emerged a so-called “Sverdlosk Mafia”, named after Yeltsin’s home region, in the Russian White House, home of Presidency and the parliament. Yuri Petrov became Yeltsin’s administrative director; Victor Ilyushin, Yeltsin’s chief of staff, was another Sverdlosk party functionary (Solovyov and Klepikova 1992: 27). However, the close circle also contained many out-of-towners. Fears that people from his region would wield excessive influence over Yeltsin turned out to be unfounded. Sverdlovskites too, could not form a united front among themselves. Yeltsin had a huge staff. He took pride in his close circle and liked showing them off. He did not replace people; he collected them, invented new sections and duties and created many advisory groups. This bloated staff inevitably led to frictions. His staff’s inability to share him peacefully was Yeltsin’s own fault (Solovyov and Klepikova 1992: 279).

3.4 Economic Reform

Professor Aslund, two months after the coup, observed that the extraordinary opportunity, that victory against hard-liners offered, for solving intractable political and economic problems was being wasted (1991: 44). The agenda for economic change was obvious since victorious ‘democrats’ including Yeltsin declared that the democracy in the Western sense was the aim. There was a broad consensus among Western and Eastern experts on what a transition from a command economy to a market economy should look like. There must be a comprehensive economic change involving economic stabilisation, domestic liberalisation, especially price liberalisation, freedom of enterprise and integration into the world economy. Liberalisation of prices would hurt the population and hence required substantial governmental legitimacy. They had to be executed at the republic level as the centre was too discredited.

The efforts in the search of a single economic space at the Union level resulted in a “Treaty on an Economic Community” signed by eight republics (Russia, Belorussia, Armenia and the five Central Asian Republics). It became clear that an economic union could not really function among the Soviet Republics as no republic accepted a political Union whereas basic economic decisions were deeply political. The desire of the republics for economic separation was politically motivated; perhaps they believed that in the long run they could manage their own resources better than a distant Moscow.

During September and October, the Russian government structures had been in shambles with parallel operating bodies; but on October 28, Yeltsin, in his first major policy speech outlined his revolutionary economic steps to the RSFSR Congress of People’s Deputies and embraced the Y. Gaidar’s program of radical economic reform (Bush 1991: 3). It envisioned a

combined economic and liberalisation at the republic level. Gorbachev tried to reform the old system but economic reform had to give way to transformation of the entire system towards the market economy. Market economy, albeit in a Russian way, was a demand of the anti-Communist movement. In electing Yeltsin, Russians voted for some economic rationality as the economic basis of political freedom (Sakwa 1993: 210). Centralised economy was suffering from catastrophic breakdown and the repeated failure of economic reforms persuaded Soviet economists that there was no third way of “market socialism”. Democratic movement was unequivocal in its desire to restore private ownership. Under Yeltsin, the Russian approach to economic reform drew much from the experience of the Polish economic reforms; if they were ‘shock therapy’ then the Russian reforms were ‘double shock therapy’ (Sakwa 1993: 210).

3.5. The Young Turks in Charge

At the end of the October, Yeltsin placed his country’s fate in the hands of a group of young politicians known as the “Young Turks” (*Mladiturki*). G. Burbulis was the leader of the group which included minister of foreign affairs A. Kozyrev and minister of economy A. Shokhin (Rahr 1991: 20). They were the principal architects of the new radical economic program. They called for a separate Russian path and break with the Union. They urged Yeltsin to ban the Communist Party and argued that Russia should inherit the superpower status of the Soviet Union. Burbulis as the first Deputy Chairman of the RSFSR Government became the second most important politician in Russia. Yeltsin explained later, “I had an urgent need to share the total responsibility of running the country with someone, to assign someone else the long term planning...leaving me free to conceive all the tactics and strategy of the immediate political struggle” (1994: 151). He appointed Gaidar who was favoured by Burbulis as chief economist with a role of revitalising Russian economy, compelling it to stand on its feet by forcing its vital centres, resources and organisms to work. The goal Yeltsin set before the new government was to make the reform irreversible (Yeltsin 1994: 146). Burbulis and Gaidar were in favour of an independent Russian economy.

Gaidar’s economic reform aimed at destroying the old system to create a fully-functioning market economy on its ruins. The strategy of ‘shock therapy’ “with a high risk of killing the patient” was deliberately chosen, so that if the reforms failed there would be no chance for the old centralised state-owned economy to resurrect (Steele 1995: 295). Rustkoi labelled Gaidar’s team as a “wrecking team”. Gaidar admitted that he was forming a kamikaze government with a suicide mission that would sink its target beyond any possible salvage operation (Steele 1995: 292).

One important factor in introduction of the shock therapy which was hoped

to lead to the market economy was the intense political and intellectual pressure from western governments and media who wanted to see the communist system destroyed once and for all. Yeltsin and the “Young Turks” as self-styled ‘democrats’ enjoyed the full control over the Russian political and economic life. They insisted that the goal was democracy but democratisation was only one element in the new politics. After the coup, the term democrat lost much of its meaning except being anti-Communist. There were mainly two camps in the ‘democratic’ movement. The first one was concerned with the functioning of democratic process and changes in the elite structure to dispossess the old nomenklatura. The other group, the ‘liberals’ was concerned with establishment of economic basis of civil society. With the rise of the Young Turks, the latter gained power within the executive.

Yeltsin said that basis of statehood had to be sought through land reform, privatisation and the market: “We have defended political freedom; now we have to give economic freedom” (Sakwa 1993: 27). Radical reform aimed economic stabilisation based on tight monetary and credit policy, strengthening of the rouble, privatisation, land reform, reorganisation of the financial system by tight control of budget expenditure, reform of the tax and banking systems. Yeltsin wanted to revive Russian economic might as quickly as possible.

3.6. The Vision of Great Russia

By appointing the Young Turks to key positions, Yeltsin showed that he decided in favour of an independent strong Russia through seizing the full control over the Russian economy. This meant *going it alone* in economic realm and was an important part of growing Russian nationalism. Nationalist revival in the most developed parts of the former Soviet Union such as the Baltic and Slavic republics was no surprise (Zaslavsky 1992: 110). In these areas, new elites saw that independence would also mean a better off economy. The Young Turks, too, rejected an economic union on the grounds that it would serve only to interests of other republics. They understood that after the coup, other republics united against Russia. They thought that Russia could play the leading role in the formation of an economic policy without an official centre. Trade agreements with other republics should be in world market prices. There was no need to alter existing borders. The Russian population in Ukraine and Kazakhstan were large enough to stand up for their own interests. Young Turks also argued that the sooner Russia recognises the other republican borders the sooner it could legitimise its own borders and therefore stop the process of disintegration that Russia was experiencing at least with the unrest in Checheno-Ingushetia.

The Young Turks argued that Russia must become legal successor to the Soviet Union and inherit the permanent seat in the UN Security Council.

They suggested that Russia should initiate for the elimination of nuclear weapons on the territories of Ukraine, Kazakhstan and Belorussia. Their vision of a strong independent Russian Republic had great impact on Yeltsin who tried to materialise it.

3.7. Russian Nation Building

Nationalism provides both an immediate cause and a long-term explanation for the collapse of the USSR as pointed out by various experts. Throughout the Soviet history, nationality policy depended upon the state's ability to suppress various nationalist and especially separatist movements. However, as Brzezinski notes, Gorbachev's reforms "created an opportunity for long-suppressed national grievances to surface (1989: 2). The emerging nationalism in most of the former Soviet republics aimed at local control over the economy, public administration and culture, in short, all aspects of life hitherto controlled by the party-state (Malia 1992: 67). Under the Communist system, the only all-embracing loyalty was to be to the Soviet state and the party, and the very reality of nation as a focus of people's separate loyalty was to be eradicated (Kolakowski 1992: 52). Perestroika enabled non-communist political leaders to harness nationalistic sentiment and turned it to a political power-base.

In Russian Federation, the old notion of "much suffering (*mnogostradal'naya*)" Russia re-emerged. People started to voice complaints; Russian culture had been suppressed under the name of creating a new Soviet state. Fortunately neither the communist conservatives nor the pro-Yeltsin 'radical democrats' turned this nationalist spirit against other ethnic groups. Radical's "instrumental nationalism" was directed against the whole communist system. They saw other nationalists in other republics not as enemies but as political allies in the struggle against the 'centre'. They argued that Russia, too, had been colonised by the 'centre'. The whole country had been exploited by a group of party functionaries (Steele 1995: 243). The struggle against the communist regime took the form of a struggle for the restoration of Russian statehood. Statehood returned to Russia in two senses, as a political state freed itself from the tutelage of the Communist Party and as a republic separate from the USSR (Sakwa 1993: 43). Russia declared state sovereignty on 12 June 1990 and election of Yeltsin established a really leading executive (Horrigan and Karasik 1992: 116).

The new Russian identity could choose between four distinct approaches which were not exclusive. The first was the restoration of an imperial role. The second approach focused on ethnicity, loyalty to ties of blood and kinship. The third approach stressed the development of cultural community with a view that the core of Russian national identity lay in religio-cultural feature. The fourth approach, which can be labelled as civic

approach, claimed that the loss of Russia's imperial role was compensated by the establishment of a new national identity which was based on the civic institutions of revived statehood. The civic approach, which received the support of Yeltsin and the Young Turks, became the dominant ideology after the coup (Sakwa 1993: 108-9).

4. CREATION OF THE COMMONWEALTH OF INDEPENDENT STATES

In the wake of the coup, power was essentially transferred to the republics and by the end of October 1991 all the republics except the RSFSR and Kazakhstan declared their independence. The discredited centre lost much of its power and the Supreme Soviet became ineffectual as only seven of the twelve remaining republics bothered to send deputies. Following Yeltsin's decision that the RSFSR would no longer continue funding them, some eighty Union ministries and departments were closed. The republics controlled the purse. At the end of November the centre run out of funds.

Ukraine's refusal to sign Gorbachev's union treaty accelerated the death of the USSR and the creation of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) on 8 December 1992 (Karatnycky 1992: 90). On 1 December 90.3% of Ukrainians expressed support for independence that was declared immediately after the coup on 24 August. They also voted for the president and 61.5% supported Leonid Kravchuk who was formerly a Ukrainian Communist Party ideologist. He gradually transformed himself into a champion of Ukraine's sovereignty (Nahoylo 1991: 1).

Kravchuk explained, "the desire for independence was not people's blind faith in a miracle, but the hope that a state of their own will be closer to them, will protect their interests" (Izvestia 26 Nov. in CDSP 43/47/8). He was explicit in his intention: "I would like history to record one day that Kravchuk was one of those that did much to break up the empire, that Ukraine played an enormous role in that" (Karatnycky 1992: 91). Ukraine was Russia's own blood sister and a union without it was unimaginable for Yeltsin (Rosiiskaya gazeta 28 Nov. in CDSP 43/47/8). It was time to drop Gorbachev and some new arrangements acceptable to the Ukrainians had to be sought (Morrison 1991: 310-11).

According to Kravchuk Ukraine was not prepared to be part of a Union, which would be a state on its own right. Some kind of commonwealth modelled after European Community was his goal. Yeltsin, Kravchuk and Belorussian Parliament's President Stanislav Shushkevich agreed to meet on 7 December. Before the meeting, Yeltsin signalled that the common interests of the former republics were sufficient to form a "commonwealth".

It was claimed that Yeltsin had been influenced by Alexander Solzhenitsyn,

whose long essay “How Do We Rebuild Russia” had been published in 1990. Solzhenitsyn was seeking to redefine ‘Russianness’. He wrote that the USSR would break up anyway, only it should be done without needless human suffering. For him, Moldova could go to Romania, three Baltic States, three republics in Caucasus and four in Central Asia could follow their own way. However, the White Russia (Belorussia), Little Russia (Ukraine) and Great Russia should merge into an entity that might be called ‘Rus’. Kazakhstan should be partitioned, the Kazakhs would take some of the country and Russia should subsume the rest (Kampfner 1994: 61-2). Yeltsin, Kravchuk and Shushkevich, the President of the Belorussian Parliament had agreed that it was the end of the USSR and the CIS was created.

One of the crucial issues was to secure the support of the Soviet Army for the CIS agreement. Yeltsin met with the senior army officers and won their support. According to Radio Moscow, since most of the officers were Slavs they favoured a Slavic Commonwealth. However, the main reason as Izvestia put it was financial. Having assumed the control over the central financial sources it was Yeltsin who was paying the officers’ salaries. Already before the Minsk Agreement Yeltsin raised military salaries by 90% and spoken about the need to improve their living standards; he, not Gorbachev, was in a position to do so.

On 8 December at Alma Ata, eleven of fifteen republics (except Georgia and three Baltic republics) joined into CIS as founding members. The CIS had the headquarters in Minsk but it was not a capital since the CIS was not a state, “no flag, no emblem, no anthem” (Kampfner 1994: 63). Other republics supported Russia as successor to the USSR’s UN Security Council seat and Ukraine, Belarus and Kazakhstan agreed to give up their nuclear weapons to Russian Federation.

5. RUSSIA TODAY

Although it is beyond the scope of this paper, it might be useful to touch briefly upon to recent political and economic situation in Russia to provide a comparison with 15 years ago. On 31 December 1999, Yeltsin resigned and appointed Putin as the second President of the Russian Federation. Putin won the presidential elections on 26 March 2000. Since coming to power Putin’s strategy is often summarised as strengthening the Russian state, both within the country and in the world. Thus, since democracy has not had a top place in this agenda, Putin’s priority has not been to foster a good atmosphere for all parties but to strengthen those parties and coalitions that support the Kremlin (Knox et al. 2006: 9).

Initially, Yeltsin’s inner circle selected and supported Putin with the aim

to maintain their own power and privilege. Putin was also backed by a team of economic reformers from his native St Petersburg. He could also rely on support from the *siloviki* (who are defined as members of Russia's powerful security services, or those who regard themselves as the defenders of Russia's national interests in the face of 'corruptible' politicians and officials). The tensions and cooperation between these groups was a central theme in his first term. Under Putin, Russia has gone from bankruptcy to a foreign reserves position of \$170 bn. For example, the rising oil prices in the world, largely due the tensions, and war in the Middle East have helped increase Russia's revenue from oil and gas production and export. Using the incidents like the Beslan attack by Chechens in which more than 330 people died (Aron 2005), Putin took measures to restore the primacy of the Kremlin in Russian politics. Yeltsin had granted Russia's 89 federal territories unprecedented autonomy in order to help his political manoeuvres in the early 1990s. This also led to irregular federalism and the growth of separatist movements (e.g. in Chechnya). Putin moved to correct this and restore the traditional top-down federal system.

The pro-Putin, United Russia Party won the victory in the 2003 elections. In today's Russia, parties of power (i.e. those "represent vested bureaucratic or other institutional interests, not the interests of the wider citizenry") are able to dominate Russian politics because "grass-roots parties are weak and personality oriented" (Knox et al 2006). On 14 March 2004, Putin won the election to the presidency for a second term, gaining 71 percent of the vote thanks to one-sided campaigning for him by state owned and controlled Russian television channels (see, for example, Goldgeier and McFaul 2005). On 25 April 2005, Putin stated that the collapse of the Soviet Union was "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century". For this remark he has been harshly criticised by Western observers. Later, he clarified that he was not praising the former Soviet Union but highlighting the dramatic impact of the collapse the economic and social well-being of the people living in the former USSR. It can be said that Putin has tried to strengthen the ties with other members of the CIS. The "near abroad" zone of traditional Russian influence once again become a foreign policy priority. As the EU and NATO have grown to encompass Central Europe and the Baltic States. Russia reluctantly accepted the NATO enlargement into the Baltic states, but Putin wants to increase Russia's influence over Belarus and Ukraine (Wikipedia Contributors, 2006). It seems, at the end of the March 2006 that the battle between pro-Western and Pro-Russian political groups in Ukraine is to continue for a foreseeable future.

Now, Russia gives the impression of an authoritarian state (Zurekerman (2006). According to studies of democratization in the former communist bloc, Russia is at the less advanced end of the spectrum. Only the Central Asian states are doing worse. Freedom House placed Russia lowest in the category of "transitional governments or hybrid regimes" along with Bosnia, Moldova, Ukraine, Armenia, and Georgia. These states are above

“autocracies”, Azerbaijan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan, but below those designated as “democracies (some consolidation)”, Bulgaria, Romania, Croatia, Yugoslavia, Albania, and Macedonia. It is clear that Russia had regressed in terms of relative freedom since mid-1990s. “The power of the presidency, dominance of the oligarchs, erosion of media freedom, and unfair elections are some of the factors identified as corroding freedom” (Knox et al 2006: 11). This information should be evaluated against the background that in a recent survey 43% of Russians stated that “Russia has never had democracy and does not have it now” (Gorshkov 2006: 50). Nevertheless, it is clear that the “space” for civil society has been shrinking in Russia since Vladimir Putin has become president. For example, though the Russian media have never been entirely free, their critical space has been reduced. Independent organizations, the components of civil society, such as churches and political parties have increasingly become controlled by the state (Knox et al. 2006: 5; see also, Goldgeier and McFaul 2005). One important strategy of Putin has been selective targeting of the oligarchs. Many domestic and foreign critics accused Putin for the trials of oligarchs such as B. Berezovksy, V. Gusinsky and M. Khodorkovsky in order to place the control over the media and large sectors of the Russian economy at the hands of Kremlin (Zurckerman 2006). Now, people from Putin’s inner circle control companies with huge assets, producing some 40 percent of the country’s GDP.

It can be seen that very similar to Yelstin’s era, the new administration focuses on the economic might of the country. The principal focus now is energy. Russia provides nearly half of Europe’s natural gas and a third of its oil. When the new Gazprom pipeline under the Baltic Sea is ready, Russia will provide up to 80 percent of Europe’s gas. Russia also plans to dominate the gas distribution business in Europe.

Putin has consolidated the state’s grip over national television, turned the upper house of parliament into an appointed body, effectively seized control of the courts, and developed a form of state capitalism in which private companies are tolerated only if they are subservient to the state’s agenda. This slow transformation into a one-party state is seemingly largely supported by people’s support for the Putin, as a strong leader. But Russia lacks some crucial democratic components, for example, an independent court system and free media (see, for example, Goldgeier and McFaul 2005). The Russians welcome Putin’s commitment to order, to enhancement of national pride and to a fairer distribution of income. But, this came with some costs, like lack of democracy and increasing corruption (Goldgeier and Mcfaul 2005).

In world politics, the fact that the U.S. is interested in having Russia as a political partner in maintaining international stability provides Russia broad room for manoeuvre (Primakov 2005: 41), this is not a good news for Russia’s ‘enemies’ (e.g. Chechen separatists) (Goldgeier and Mcfaul

2005). The tactic of using fear as a base of political power as practiced by Bush Administration in recent years has been long practiced by Russians. The social glue of these times is wars, the terror and presently the Chechen issue (Çomak, no date).

Today's Russia suffers from income inequalities. The income of the richest 10 percent of the population is 15 times higher than that of the poorest 10 percent. According to World Bank, the gap is even higher - 20 times. This situation may jeopardize Russia's socio-political stability (Primakov 2005). Nevertheless, Russia's achievements under Putin are real. Private property is now widely accepted. The Communist Party has no chance of returning to power. The bureaucracy has been cut, and military spending is down from about 30 percent of GNP to about 3 percent. Putin may look like a czar incarnate, but he is also a bold market reformer (Zurckerman 2006). Therefore it is not surprising that according to a recent survey, Russians think that "things were good under Gorbachev, but not very good, after which things got very bad under Yeltsin, and, finally, under Putin things became better than under Gorbachev or Yeltsin" (Gorshkov 2006: 50).

6. CONCLUSION

The events from August to December 1991 were truly revolutionary if revolution means a significant shift in power and property relations achieved through extra-constitutional means with participation of elements of masses. The revolution did not start in August nor ended in 1991, but this was the most crucial period in the process that brought the end of the USSR. The greatest achievement of the August-December period was not establishment of democracy which requires many years but the restoration of the autonomy of politics (Sakwa 1993: 409).

Yeltsin's appointment of the Young Turks confirmed that a new type of post-imperial, progressive Russian nationalism become the official ideology of Russian Federation. In Yeltsin's strategy, the most important component was gaining control of the Russian economic might. Yeltsin also sought the solution in a Degaulist way of amassing as much power as possible in his hands (Dunlop 1993).

Both historical trends and individuals played a role in the collapse of the Soviet Union. The Soviet system was not very efficient in keeping its modernisation promises (e.g. abundance of consumer goods) and it seemed that it was doomed in the long run. However, how long was the long run for such a superpower? It could have survived for years or decades.

It was shown that Ukraine's insistence on independence was the key for the Russian Federation too. Unlike Gorbachev Yeltsin showed political realism and initiated for the CIS rather than continuation of a centre in the place

of USSR.

As far as the ministries and bureaucratic apparatus of the centre were concerned, the primary tool for Yeltsin was money. He gained the control over Russian Federation's budget and used it as the most powerful weapon even before the coup attempt. After the coup, withholding RSFSR's tax contribution to central budget had a qualitatively different aim. This time, it was to prevent the centre continuing to be an alternative to Yeltsin's agenda, which was making the Russian Republic the 'core', not the centre of the former USSR. Money proved to be the key in securing the support of the Army as it became clear that only the Russian Federation could pay them.

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