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Civic Culture: Public Opinion and the Resurgence of Civic Culture

Yuri Levada

There has hardly been a stretch in Russian history more saturated with sweeping changes than the period between 1988-1993. Packed into this exceedingly brief historical era are the rise of "perestroika" and the fall of its illustrious leader, Mikhail Gorbachev; the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence in its place of 15 independent states; the August '91 communist putsch and the democrats' triumphant ascension to power; the proliferation of virulent ethnic conflicts and the recognition of the abiding need for cooperation; the bloody October '93 confrontation between the executive and legislative powers and the surprising strength that the nationalist and communist forces showed in the first multi-party Parliamentary elections in post-communist Russia . As people watched their political elites reshuffled and familiar institutions crumble, they could not help feeling alternatively elated, confused, and disillusioned. No sooner hopes for a democratic renewal were raised than they were dashed by the unexpected hardships which made some feel nostalgic for the lost security of the communist system.

As we try to take stock of these changes and assess their impact on Russian political culture, we should realize that the institutional transformations tell us only half the story. Hidden behind the visible structural dislocations are less apparent and often confusing trends in public consciousness. To appraise the state of public mind in today's Russia , we need to draw on public opinion surveys. In particular, we shall draw on the data collected by the National Center for Public Opinion Research that has been tracking political developments in the former Soviet Union since the early years of perestroika. [1]

Among the changes that have shaken Soviet society in the last few years, none is more important than the breakdown of the communist party's monopoly on power. The one-party state might be history now, but the political tradition in which it was rooted is not. This tradition predates the Soviet Union and extends much further into Russian history. Thus, today's reformers have to grapple not only with the totalitarian institutions built in the communist era, but also with the authoritarian practices that have existed in Russia for centuries. Far from being destroyed, the old totalitarian structures and authoritarian mentalities have demonstrated a remarkable capacity for social mimicry and adaptability. Undemocratic political sensibilities are manifest in the institutions of mass

communications, while old stereotypes continue to dominate public opinion. Reasons for the persistence of the old attitudes should be sought in the Russian political tradition, in the nation's civic culture that was retained and amplified by the Soviet regime. Authoritarianism sustained by both violence and pervasive paternalism, nearly universal disregard for legal norms and procedures, intolerance toward dissent -- these are among the most salient features of Russian civic culture. On the one hand, this culture breeds widespread fear, obedience, and sycophancy, but on the other, it encourages rebellion and contempt for any authorities and law among the Russians. We must bear in mind this political heritage when we contemplate the most recent upheavals in Russian history. At the same time, we should not gloss over real, if contradictory and painful, changes that Russian civic culture has undergone in recent years.

"Political participation," "political support," "public trust" -- these worn-out clichés have acquired a decidedly new meaning since democratic reforms began to transform Russia. Just a few years ago, "participation" and "support" were arbitrarily invoked by the Communist party whenever it wished to turn on the mechanisms of "double-think" and "unanimity." Now people in Russia have an opportunity to stake out their own political position and develop a conscious attitude toward politicians, parties, and social events, including the option of withdrawing their trust altogether. The traditional preference for unanimity remains strong and the choices practically available to the individual are quite limited, but the very fact that there is a choice in political matters is undeniable.

We can isolate three stages in the nation's political development since 1985. The first stage coincides with Gorbachev's perestroika and is distinguished by the half-hearted efforts to reform the Soviet system from above and from within by using the leverages provided by the system itself. Systematic opinion surveys that began in earnest at this period point to the growing prestige of Gorbachev and his politics, the expansion of glasnost in the public domain, and the rising hopes (especially among the intelligentsia) for liberal reform. The key question that roused the public at this point was: "Who is to blame?" That is the question familiar to several generations of Russian reformist intellectuals who have searched for ways to apportion blame for the nation's sorry state. The list of suspects submitted in the late 80s included communist political leaders charged with distorting the "true" socialist model. All critics -- from the top party brass to extreme Russian nationalists to liberal dissidents -- singled out Stalin as the major culprit. This was a neat way to exonerate oneself from responsibility and to spare the system's fundamental political

institutions from serious criticism.

Research findings from this period support this view. In 1988, 13% percent of Soviet citizens named Stalin and his legacy as the main cause of the country's problems. This figure grew to 35% in 1989. Similarly, Gorbachev's popularity among his countrymen peaked in 1988 at 51%, and the interest and trust in the mass media crested in 1989. After that, perestroika ran out of steam, the Soviet leader's popularity plummeted, and radical reform ideas gained in prominence.

The second stage in Russia 's political transformation raised another question: "Who is to be trusted?" Since 1990, Boris Yeltsin took the center stage as the new man of the year -- first, as the proponent of a more radical approach to perestroika and later, as a radical democratic reformer. The political forces shaping public opinion underwent significant transformation in this period. The reform alliance that gave perestroika its initial thrust and helped to legitimize it faded from the public scene. The public lost interest in the critical press and its endless exposes of past abuses. Faced with rising tide of militant nationalism, the looming prospects of authoritarianism, and the imminent breakdown of the Soviet Union , reform intellectuals retreated in disarray. The high point of this second stage was the August '91 putsch, when communist party apparatchiks made a desperate attempt to reclaim power, followed by a radical counter-putsch engineered by Yeltsin and his democratic supporters. The Soviet period in the Russian history officially ended here, but some of its key institutions and mentalities have persisted. Our polls show that Yeltsin's popularity peaked in July 1990, when he was elected to chair the Russian Parliament. This finding suggests that Yeltsin appealed to the people first and foremost as a radical opposition leader.

As the public began to lose its interest in political debunking and in stories about the Stalinist excesses, the new stage of Russia 's political transformation commenced. This third stage, which dated back to the early 1992, placed on the agenda another question well known to the Russian reform-minded intellectuals: "What is to be done?" The answer was sought not so much in digging out new enemies and plotting new revolutions as in freeing prices from state control, encouraging private enterprise, and granting more autonomy to regional authorities. The liberal policies pursued at this stage tended to be idealistic, impractical, and sometimes downright irrational. Liberalism and state reforms clearly parted company. Meanwhile, the populace shunned ideology and gave the sacramental formula "What is to be done" a pragmatic reading, doing

what it could do to muddle through everyday life.

Such a turn of events was particularly painful for an authoritarian society. Ever since Russia embarked on the course of modernization some 150 years ago, it relied exclusively on authoritarian means to move the country forward. Perestroika and post-perestroika reformers acted in the same tradition, seeking to impose reforms from above. By the end of 1992, support for political institutions and leaders hit a new low. Spurred by the ex-liberal scandal-mongering oppositional press, public consciousness turned against all politicians and reforms. Perestroika intellectuals grew increasingly angry, aggressive, and divisive. No national leader or political group seemed capable of commanding authority and providing moral guidance. But then again, the state resources for ramming social reforms down society's throat were exhausted -- the fact that political leaders had a hard time to digest.

This is not to say that the people deserted their reform leaders altogether. They still could lend their support to Yeltsin at a critical juncture, as they did during the April '93 national referendum and once again -- for a short period only -- during the October 93 showdown between the President and the Parliament. But their skepticism about Yeltsin's program remained palpable, as they resented the high inflation and unemployment fostered by reform policies. Public consciousness became thoroughly deideologized, and the absence of credible political programs or leaders did not seem to alarm Russian citizens.

As most societies trying to shake their totalitarian legacy, today's Russia is propelled forward not by a coherent reform program but by the confluence of events, circumstances, and unexpected crises necessitating ad hoc solutions and improvisations. Throughout this seemingly haphazard development, however, one can detect a trend toward the structuralization of society -- a trend especially important in a country that suppressed independent interest groups in the past. In the political sphere, new parties began to emerge, which formed the nucleus of the future pluralistic politics. Economic interest groups grew conscious of their particular agenda and sought to consolidate their influence through various organizational outlets. In the area of norms and values, society emancipated itself from the patronage of the state which used to mandate values for its citizens. [2] Universal human values and negotiated norms of everyday life emerged as alternative sources of legitimation in society. Opinion surveys from this period give further substance to this generalization. Let us take a closer look at the process of political

differentiation as captured in our findings.

The National Center for Public Opinion Research has tracked public attitudes toward political life in Russia for several years, and as Table 1 shows (see appendix), the participatory spirit essential to democracy has been slow to emerge.

As you can see, there is a marked drop in the number of "veterans" as well as "newcomers" to politics. The percentage of those who is disappointed with or lost interest in politics is increasing. At the same time, there are fewer individuals who find the political process closed to them. It is not so much the inaccessibility of politics that presents a challenge to Russian democracy as the lack of sustained interest in political matters. Further details could be gleaned from the age distribution of the respondents. At the early stages of political reforms in Russia, those reporting a high level of political participation were primarily individuals aged 40-50. Toward the end of the period in question, politically active individuals were primarily those 55 years and older. That is to say, respondents reporting high political participation tended to be older. By contrast, individuals who lost their interest in or were disappointed with politics were often young, followed by the middle-aged group. Those who felt that they exerted no influence on politics were also likely to be young and, toward the end of the period, middle-aged.

A few words on such terms as "politics," "public life," "political participation," as well as "the fate of your nation" are in order here. The meaning of these terms underwent considerable changes between 1988 and 1992. During the Soviet era, "politics" meant something official and imposed from above on a common citizen. It included obligatory meetings and officially sanctioned demonstrations declaring unanimous support for the government, plus the Young Communist League's pseudo-popular initiatives. In the early glasnost era that fell between 1987 and 1988, public consciousness was agitated and politicized. This was especially apparent among the young people and the so-called "60's generation" -- dissident intellectuals whose formative years coincided with the Khrushchev thaw. Political clubs and seminars sprang up throughout the country, with the participants making daring (by the standards of the time) speeches and proposing novel political schemes. The circle of people united into these groups was fairly narrow, but their influence was growing rapidly, spurred in part by the liberal press. This liberal "club culture" operated with the approval of Communist party reformers, who tried to stir the debates towards "constructive channels" and keep reforms within the basic framework of the Soviet system of government. Later on,

mass political movements would begin to gather force, bringing in their wake semi-open elections and ethnic conflicts. The political process could no longer be controlled from one center, yet it did not acquire stable features of a multi-party system. With the Communist party exiting center stage after August '91, the political vacuum ensued, and it has not been filled since. After all, the CPSU was not a political but a state monopoly structure; the absence of viable political institutions and organizations simply became more apparent since the Communist party's sudden collapse.

Totalitarian societies tend to confer the "political" status on each and every problem facing the nation, yet they remain profoundly apolitical -- not just because the masses of people are politically disenfranchised, but because no real political interests are allowed to crystallize and acquire a stable organizational form. Where everything is declared to be political, especially every initiative undertaken by the extant powers, nothing qualifies as a genuinely political event. Politics, state, constitution, election -- all these phenomena are robbed of their political content, while public and private life, as well as ideology and economics, are radically conflated.

To be sure, a purely totalitarian society has hardly ever existed. Any concrete historical polity has to compromise its principles for the sake of efficiency, and Soviet society was no exception to this rule. The so called "stagnation period" in Soviet history was filled with such compromises and inconsistencies. It can be seen as the practical limit of adaptability that a totalitarian society could reach in its efforts to appear normal and civilized (hence the ironic label: "Stalinism with the human face"). The dissolution of totalitarian structures spurs the differentiation of public and private spheres, of political, economic, social, cultural and other institutions which hitherto merged into each other. Judge from the available data, this process of differentiation is now under way, albeit it moves sluggishly, and it is marred with many contradictions.

Perestroika stimulated the politization of Russian society but it failed to create a viable political structure. We can see this era as the period of primary politization or political agitation. (I deliberately avoid talking about "awakening" or "renaissance," because these terms imply that some dormant political structures were waiting to be reignited -- a wrong assumption in the case of post-Soviet society). During this stage, the party-state apparatus continued to hold the monopoly on power and to impede the formation of independent political parties and groups. The pyramid of power had the Communist party at the top and no free

elections were possible.

The first sign of change was the shift in public attitudes toward the traditional power structures, which was accompanied by the weakening of the totalitarian monolith. Soviet citizens might have laughed at their leaders in the privacy of their homes but they obeyed the authorities in public. In the post-Soviet era, the powers no longer had to be taken seriously, and as more and more people effectively ignored the government orders, the power had lost its effectiveness. The attitude toward politics was now comprised of two elements: passive identification with certain leaders (which did not differ much from the old Soviet attitude) and political agitation (or mobilization) whipped up by perestroika reforms. Both elements were doomed to disappear once real political structures began to take shape. The mass politization inevitably led to the disappointment in the quasi-politics that marked the transitional period between totalitarianism and democracy. All changes that perestroika brought about in the political domain -- elections, parties, demonstrations -- bore the mark of their origins and remained essentially quasi-political and unstable. Sooner or later, the primary politization of society would have to give way to the formation of a civic culture and genuine political structures that reflect diverse political interests and make multi-party, pluralistic polity possible. There were signs that such structures began to form after 1989, but these were very early and distressingly weak portends.

If stable and working political structures are so hard to come by in today's Russian politics, it is because the political interests that these structures are supposed to represent are still largely nascent and inchoate. Nor is there a viable political milieu -- the middle class -- where such interests would have a chance to crystalize. Not only coherent political platforms are missing from the Russia 's political scene; political slogans, concepts, ideas around which stable political groupings could form remain barely audible. There is no dearth of new political headings and noisy statements but what exactly they stand for in terms of specific policies is very hard to fathom. When a political party or group declared itself in the old Parliament, it was usually a byproduct of the latest schism in the parliamentary politics and not an indication that the party expressed the interests of a certain constituency and intended to press for an electoral victory.

Current public opinion surveys show that the political divisions do not so much reflect the political differentiation in the country as they reveal the latest swing in the popularity of a particular leader or group. As long as

society remains organized around the structures of power -- popular or not -- it will not know genuine pluralism and political consolidation.

The current difficulties with building a viable political culture in Russia have one unsettling consequence: the disenchantment with democracy and the paucity of legitimate political structures. The bridge that was supposed to link the old and the new Russia has gone only half way, never reaching the other side. The politics in the transitional period breeds discontent, provokes frequent crises, and obscures the criteria by which one could judge the progress toward democracy. Especially distraught and disappointed are those circles which succumbed to initial euphoria and developed unrealistic hopes for the imminent reforms. I am talking about the country's reform-minded political elites and liberal post-dissident intellectuals, including the emigre circles, which exerted a certain influence on the politics in the transitional period. If you look at rank and file individuals, those normally reached by pollsters, you find a far greater stability in mood over the period under study. One could even speak about certain socio-psychological types of responses to political turmoil, which seem quite independent from the nature of events. Instructive in this respect are the answers to the following survey question: "Which mood has been most common last year among the people you know?" (see table 2 in appendix).

Why did the leaders who came into prominence on the wave of perestroika fail to hold on to power? Quite apart from their personal dispositions, they were selected for the deconstructive role. They helped tear down the old political institutions, but they proved inept when it came to the constructive task of building up new political structures. This deconstructive thrust of the early perestroika reformers reflected the gap between the "can-do" self-image they communicated to their followers and their far more limited practical skills and personal abilities. These leaders were sold on the idea that Soviet socialism could be rejuvenated, that they were the movers and shakers behind the reforms, that they could cleanse the "true Leninism" from the Stalinist distortions and return the country to the pristine sources of communist ideology. All innovations that sprang to life during the Gorbachev era -- the opening up of the mass media, elections featuring alternative candidates, campaigns against corruption and bureaucratic excesses -- were animated by the idea of reclaiming the revolutionary past, with the party apparatus posing as the prime engine for this renewal. The 1989-90 national election campaign was dominated by the leaders who were brought to power with the Communist party's tacit or open approval and who were looking to the past rather than to the future for their programmatic statements. When

the totalitarian structures crumbled, however, they were entirely unprepared to offer constructive policies and assume the mantle of leadership. Not even dissident intellectuals, with a few notable exceptions, were free from the liberal Soviet mentality of renewal and restoration. All reforms were to be imposed from above by the wise leaders drawn from the educated strata of intellectuals.

Meanwhile, the foundations of Soviet socialism and the international empire it fostered collapsed much faster than anybody thought possible. And as soon as it became clear that the hopes for a smooth transition to freedom and prosperity were widely exaggerated, the old style leaders and their institutions came under attack. Very quickly, they turned from facilitators into a stumbling block impeding reforms. The reformist alliance, which included party reformers, liberal democratic intelligentsia, and nationalistic forces, came apart. Each group formed its own power centers, however poorly organized, and each was distinguished by vociferous attacks on the state and the executive power. The key divide between the political forces at the time was the line between the radical pragmatic reformers who gathered around the executive power and various oppositional currents. Among the most salient manifestations of this division was the confrontation between the presidential and parliamentary branches of power that came to a head in 1993.

Those leaders who failed to transcend their perestroika-from-above illusions disappeared from the political scene. Such was the fate of party reformers and intellectuals gathered around Gorbachev. Others joined newly founded factions and groups. Gorbachev's demise could be attributed to the rise of Yeltsin who presented himself to the nation as a more radical reformer. But the drop in popularity that Yeltsin's government suffered in 1993 suggested that the country was ready for a new form of leadership and political organization.

The Soviet Union has always been a "mobilized society," i.e., society based on political activism organized from above and controlled by the hierarchy of state power. The political regimes that governed Russia throughout much of its history relied on force, propaganda, and centralized control to keep the country moving. Unorganized and undifferentiated masses of people were to be brought into action and compelled toward the goal set forth by the higher authorities. Intellectual and moral resources were mobilized in the same way as any other, with the intelligentsia enlisted to do the powers' bidding. Mobilization is the only form in which a totalitarian society could exist. By contrast, civil society is possible only where interest groups and autonomous civic

structures are allowed to flourish, where individual interests have a chance to be articulated and communicated to others. To be sure, mobilized and civil societies are but ideal types that approximate reality in all its richness and possibilities. Yet, these are useful models that help us understand the nature of political processes in the transitional period.

Both the theory and practice of mobilized society implied that the political masses are passive and pliable, that the power mechanisms must be turned on to push them in the right direction. Characteristically, Bolsheviks favored such terms as "levers," "transmitting belts," "cogs," etc., which underscored their philosophical commitment to the mobilizational ethics of government. Despotism and coercion endemic to the Russian political tradition might account for the ruthlessness with which the Bolsheviks set out to realize their mechanical model of mobilizational politics. This model had three principal components: omnipotent power, subservient people, and since the middle of the 19th century, intelligentsia. In recent years, the role of direct coercion and fear-fostering propaganda has diminished. The "transmitting belts," to use Lenin's favorite expression, have been loosened up. But the Russian polity has not shaken fully the mobilizational structures and certainly not the old mobilizational mentality. This is evident in the fact that agitation and apathy -- the two states most common in a mobilizational society -- are characteristic of post-Soviet society, where emotional excitement and moral tension are typically followed by periods of depression and asthenic apathy.

The mobilizational thrust of recent Russian reforms was apparent in the Gorbachev era, and it was especially evident in the propaganda technology used by the elites. The mobilizational mechanisms weakened afterwards, but they were still working during the August '91 putsch and the April 1993 national referendum. In both cases society was mobilized in the face of attempts to restore the old regime, even though most people lost their early enthusiasm about reforms. Still, this was mobilizational activism and not the kind of steady participatory practice that undergirds democratic politics. Except for the nationalistic and ethnic movements that unite the constituency around the idea of the opposition to the center and local sovereignty, alternative forms of political participation remain in the rudimentary stage. The path from a mobilizational political culture to a participatory civil society is yet to be charted in the post-Soviet era.

Now, if we take a closer look at the Russian political elites, we can see that their evolution mirrors the problems facing the society that seeks to shed the old and build a new civic culture. Soviet society had two kinds of

elites: power elite and cultural elite (the intelligentsia). Both suffered a serious setback in the current political crisis. Following the tradition of Russian intelligentsia, Soviet intellectuals sought to modernize the state and its citizens. They provided intellectual and moral legitimation to the powers and at the same time served, though to a lesser degree, as the critics of the system. The Soviet intelligentsia owed to the state its ideological, political, and economic autonomy, which is why it aimed primarily at the liberal rationalization of the regime. Perestroika spurred the intelligentsia's illusions that a wise reformer, drawing expert advice, could revamp Russian society. Glasnost encouraged intellectuals to believe that they would be the experts called upon to provide the high-brow theoretical rationale for the reforms. Yet, intellectuals hardly qualified for this role, since few of them possessed expert knowledge adequate to the task at hand. That is not to gainsay the key, indeed crucial, role that the intelligentsia played in stirring public opinion and mobilizing society in the early perestroika years. But this was the intelligentsia's swan song. The crisis of perestroika in 1990-91 led to the disillusionment among intellectuals who, along with other national elites, were given to profound pessimism about the country's future. The very triangular structure of power that carried the Russian polity through more than a century -- power-people-intelligentsia -- has collapsed.

Highly instructive in this respect is the fate of glasnost. Perestroika's major and most enduring accomplishment, glasnost lost its luster in the post-perestroika period. The freedom of speech, publications, and gathering is still in place, but its role as a central factor in public life is diminishing. The uncensored word lost its capacity to rouse imagination, spur the public into action. The public takes glasnost for granted, if not views it with suspicion. This is probably how it should be in a normal democratic society, where glasnost serves its informational, aesthetic, and other functions. But Russian society today is hardly a functional democracy, and the indifference to free speech is a symptom of the underlying crisis.

As the democratic process continues, the Russian intelligentsia is likely to lose its traditional mobilizing role and turn into an educated cultural and technical elite. Intellectuals are bound to become specialists, that is, if Russian society evolves into a participatory democracy. If it follows a different type of development, the intelligentsia will continue to vacillate between despair and patriotic messianism. In any event, there is no return to the traditional triangular power structure.

For the first time in Soviet history, perestroika transformed Russian

politicians from larger than life figures exemplifying a particular cause into a flesh and blood individuals with some clearly visible strengths and all too apparent weaknesses. Gorbachev, Ligachev, Sakharov, Yeltsin (and I should add, Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher and some other western politicians) -- these were concrete individuals who could not hide themselves behind the carefully polished images, who thrust themselves into the public eye by virtue of their willingness to take a stance, to venture a personal and sometimes unpopular opinion. The negative side of this development was the personalization of politics. The political divisions were defined as personal confrontations between Gorbachev and Ligachev, Sakharov and Gorbachev, Gorbachev and Yeltsin, and so forth. However, in the post-perestroika years, all politicians suffered in public opinion, their popularity taking a dramatic plunge. Here are the ratings that the two most prominent Russian politicians were given in a series of polls identifying man of the year (see table 3 in the appendix).

The 1992 figures show that barely one sixth of all those polled gave their vote to the man of the year. Three times as many votes went to Yeltsin during the April 1993 referendum, but this figure reflected the mobilizational agitation that preceded this referendum. Once the political strain subsided, the leaders lost their appeal in the public eye. Now we have clear signs that the politics is getting more and more depersonalized, that leadership structure and legitimation patterns are undergoing systemic change.

Soviet society produced not so much political leaders as party bosses whose legitimacy derived from their allegiance to the party cause and personal connections to the higher layers of power. The popular image was important to the party bosses, who cultivated it assiduously through propaganda and mass media (Stalin's cult of personality is most revealing in this respect). But their "personal charisma" did not precede their ascent to power; rather, it devolved on them after they entrenched themselves in the power structure.

Gorbachev and Yeltsin are the last two Soviet-style leaders in contemporary Russian politics, though their ascent to power followed different paths. Gorbachev received his leadership mantle from the Communist party. He tried to legitimize his power as the president elected by the Parliament, but his efforts proved a failure. Yeltsin came to national prominence as a party maverick and an opposition leader. Later on, he was chosen by popular vote as the president of the Russian Federation . He assumed real power after the August '91 putsch and the dissolution of the Soviet Union . Along with the mantle of leadership, he inherited the

"secondary charisma" that belonged to and protected anyone who controlled the state machinery. In 1993, with the state machinery sputtering, Yeltsin's popularity ratings began to slide.

The crisis of power that unfolded in late 1993 dramatized the crisis of the old political culture and all its peculiar modes of legitimation, support mobilization, and political leadership. To grasp the meaning of the bloody confrontation between the President and the Parliament we need to go back to the earlier socio-political developments, beginning with the collapse of the party-state hegemony. These tragic events are but a stage in the ongoing political and constitutional crisis that will, in all likelihood, continue for months and years. The 1993 summer opinion surveys show the public clamoring for law and order as a counterbalance to the mounting chaos and anarchy. To a society that never lived under a genuine constitution and frequently spurned the rule of law, the dictatorial means seemed a fair price to pay for instituting an order. When confronted with a choice between authoritarian rule by President Yeltsin and a military dictatorship by ex-communists, the first choice -- government by presidential dictate -- was given a clear preference. The populace still saw Yeltsin as the best hope for political and economic reforms. Yeltsin's decision to dissolve and later to storm Parliament should be seen against the backdrop of this popular support for strong actions designed to restore order without turning back the wheel of history. Our data show that in the beginning of October, the majority (52 percent) of the Russian population generally supported Yeltsin's decision to do away with the old Parliament, while 24 percent of the respondents opposed his action. Yeltsin's decision drew a particularly strong approval from college educated people (61 percent supported and 20 percent disapproved the action), whereas less educated respondents, those without a high school diploma, showed the least enthusiasm for the radical course of action (44 percent approved and 28 percent disapproved Yeltsin's decision). Nobody anticipated that the confrontation between the President and the Parliament would take a bloody turn, and most likely nobody wanted the showdown to go that far, but the configuration of political forces and public opinion in the nation compelled the course of events. Public opinion in Russia took the side of the President and generally approved his use of force, in part because it followed the bloodbath provoked by the militant supporters of Parliament. According to the findings gathered in mid-October of '93 by the National Center for Public Opinion Research, 20 percent of the respondents stated that Yeltsin's recourse to force was timely and 35% believed that he waited too long to clamp down on his opponents. The majority of those polled declared that Yeltsin had the right to dissolve the Parliament. This judgment, which was not entirely

consistent with the then current constitution, showed that the population was willing to disregard the legal niceties in the face of a severe political crisis. However, the mood in the country soon changed once again. Yeltsin's ratings slipped in November of 1993, which led to the defeat of his allies during the December 12 Parliamentary election.

But subsequent events showed that Yeltsin might have been too hasty suspending the constitution. I am talking about the December '93 Parliamentary elections. The disillusionment with the democratic process, the pervasive economic hardship, and the failure of reformers to coordinate their efforts translated into a surprising show of strength by the ultra-nationalists led by Vladimir Zhirinovskiy. As our findings show, Zhirinovskiy, the head of the mislabeled Liberal Democratic Party, drew his support chiefly from the lower middle class. Those who voted for him were people with a below-average education, employed in the sectors of the economy vulnerable to unemployment, concerned about the crime situation, and humiliated by Russia's loss of a superpower status. While the traditional Soviet working class voted for radical nationalists, older and retired people were most prominent among the communist party supporters. Nearly a third of those who gave their voice to Zhirinovskiy waited until election day to make up their mind. Few voters knew much about Zhirinovskiy and his party, most chose this venue as a way to dramatize their displeasure with the reforms and the negative impact they had on their standards of living. The vote for Zhirinovskiy was mainly a vote against the establishment. Some of his supporters already indicated that they regretted their vote, so he might be a temporary phenomenon on the Russian political scene. It is certainly too early to tell. What seems perfectly clear now is that dismantling the old Russian and Soviet political tradition and replacing it with a viable democratic civic culture will be a long and arduous process.

References

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1. See Social and Economic Changes: Public Opinion Monitoring (Moscow: VCIOM, 1993, No. 1-8 and 1994, No.1-4).
2. Yuri Levada, ed. *Sovetskii Prostoi Chelovek*, (Moscow, 1993).

Appendix

Table 1

(% to the total answers)

	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992
I have always participated and still participate in public life	10	13	7	4	3
Now I have a real opportunity for participation	11	1	1	1	.5
There is still no real opportunity for participation	33	22	21	17	19
Lately, I have lost interest in public life	-	12	14	16	16
I have no interest in politics	7	12	11	21	26
The most important question today is the fate of our nation	34	32	26	28	26

Table 2

(% to the total answers)

	1990	1991	1992
Hope	13	20	17
Confusion	23	27	24
Dispair	28	27	18
Confidence	6	6	5

Table 3

(% to the total answers)

	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992
Mikhail Gorbachev	51	44	16	14	1
Boris Yeltsin	5	19	44	38	17
