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Yeltsin's moves complicate the struggle for democracy

By Vladimir Orlov

Moscow - It is one of the chief ironies of the Russian drama that Boris Yeltsin - the first Russian leader chosen in a free and direct election, the man regarded as Russia's № 1 democrat - came to ignore the Constitution on which the Russian state is based.

To be sure, the existing Constitution is not the finest flower of modern juridical thought. But neither is it a fossil of Brezhnev era, as some of the West would make it out to be. It includes guarantees of all the fundamental human rights and lays out the division of powers. It was this Constitution that gave the President his role as the head of the country's executive power.

When the Congress of People's Deputies began eating away at Yeltsin's powers, he had two options: either to ignore the Congress and work behind the scenes with his opponents to reconstruct the Russian state, or to play the role of a Pinochet, prohibiting all political parties and movements, employing the army to back up his decrees, closing opposition newspapers and using censorship to control all the news media.

Yeltsin was too weak to employ either of those actions. And the person responsible was not his nemesis in Congress. Russian Khasbulatov, but rather Yeltsin himself. The President sank into frustration in December after losing the two most intelligent members of his team: his chief adviser, Gennady Burbulis and acting Premier Yegor Gaidar. In the following months, Yeltsin made only half-hearted attempts to regain his strength.

Then, a week ago, Yeltsin angrily and carelessly tried to correct his own mistakes by taking unconstitutional steps to work his will. The extremists in the National Salvation Front and the Russian Unity faction were overjoyed that they finally succeeded in provoking the president to act rashly. As an emotional human being, Yeltsin won the game. As a politician, he lost it.

Even Yeltsin eventually realized that he was being too rash: He drew back from the idea of direct presidential rule in the formal text of his decree, issued four days after his speech. Khasbulatov, too, beat a strategic retreat as the week wore on, demonstrating once again that the Congress is an anachronism, a barking dog that does not bite. It did not even take a vote on impeaching Yeltsin, as both the Russian president and his Congressional adversaries backed off from a showdown. Both sides overestimate their popular backing. The majority of Russians are on one thing: They are toward high politics, completely exhausted by all these battles between the branches of power.

In such an atmosphere Yeltsin's call for a showdown vote on April 25 opens the door for danger. The run-up to such a plebiscite could bring the battle out of the halls of the Kremlin and on to the streets. Some of the Russian Federation's ethnic regions might decide to defy Yeltsin and not to conduct the election at all. YELTSIN'S OWN vice president, Alexander Rutskoi, openly refused to support him. Gen. Rutskoi, a hero of the Afghan War, is hoping to replace his boss. Rutskoi has enough popularity to be elected president in his own right this year, but he can't wait for 1995 or 1996, when a new batch of strong leaders will arise, supported by new financial groups. 1994 is the last and best year for Rutskoi and Co to make their move. Rutskoi is a brilliant No. 2 man but he can't work as No. 1, and he knows it. Nevertheless, the right-centrist forces in politics business and the military believe he's their best choice.

Where is this all headed? To get a better understanding of the reality behind the ups and downs in Moscow, you have to look how Russian politics has developed in the past year.

It would be naive to look only at the contradictory motives dividing the political factions. Obviously, there are struggles between the executive and legislative branches, and within them as well.

But there is also movement way out: consolidation of forces that might not satisfy every representative of branches, but serve the interests of their leaders and chief lobbyists. A little more than a year ago, only chaos ruled. The Soviet Union and its bureaucratic foundation, known as the nomenklatura, was going to its death. Russia's political bureaucracy was not yet an independent and powerful force. But it managed to achieve its initial goal: to take power and, while creating the Russian nation-state, keep that power out of the hands of old Soviet central bureaucracy. The next step in the process was for the "new nomenklatura" to strengthen its power. Now the new Russian bureaucracy faces the third step: to find its true allies among the country's other political forces. In this context, the contacts between the country's industrialists, will continue to develop. There will be a consolidation of the ruling elite with at least some of the "new Russians" - the nouveaux-riches who control billions of rubles and millions of dollars, who are not planning to leave Russia for, say, Miami or Switzerland, because their commercial interests are here. Not everyone on this Olympus of Russian politics yet realizes that such a cooperation is the only way to proceed, but the majority is moving toward such an understanding. The next step will be an informal agreement dividing up spheres of influence. All these steps are aimed at filling in "the black hole" at the center of Russian politics: an absence of legitimacy. The new ruling elite will look for self-legitimization in order to begin creating a nation-state. The structure of the state was weakened by the fall of the Communist Party and shaken by the disintegration of the Soviet Union. But state power now seems returning, its tread becoming firmer and heavier. A few examples:

- The Supreme Soviet's efforts to take control the newspaper Izvestia, and to arrest contributors to Moscow News on the grounds that they were revealing state secrets.
- Tougher policies toward the Baltic states, where there are still Russian troops and sizable Russian minorities.
- Yeltsin's efforts to prevent the establishment of the National Salvation Front, the increasing reliance on presidential decrees and finally the turn to direct presidential rule.

The resurgence of the state is normal with deep roots in the traditions of Russia. It is a reaction to the crisis that society has been going through. The only alternative appears to be chaos, anarchy, disintegration and civil war. This move toward a strong state comes as a reaction to the increasing surrounding states, say, Estonia and Ukraine, and the resulting challenges posed to Russian interests. It's also what some see as infringement on Russia's interests in the international arena — and to the growing independence of the regions and republics within Russia itself. The relationship of the center with the provinces is one of the most important issues — and clear solution is yet in sight. Under the Russian Federation's present system of rights and legislative representation, non-Russian territories wield more influence than Russian ones, even though ethnic Russians make up more than three-quarters of the federation's population. How is it possible to build a nation-state in Russia without giving more power to Russian lands? However the problem is resolved on the federal level, the decentralization of political and economic power is likely to continue. The trick is to keep decentralization from turning into disintegration.

There is a clear danger in the resurgence of state power: a revival of the authoritarian and anti-democratic practices that have characterized Moscow's rule for centuries. A strong state can be used to defend political democracy - or to suppress it. It is essential that the victory go to those who see the state as a tool for raising democracy rather than restoring autocracy. FOR MANY YEARS, the economy had supremacy consumed by political questions. Now the

tables are turning: The people are now thoroughly tired of policies and transfixed by economic concerns, but we cannot proceed without establishing the political infrastructure for development. Those who are for state power - Yeltsin, Rutskoi, and others - tend to overlook the main thing: In the end nothing really hinges on who is going to be in our government, or on which economic team has the upper hand in the fray. Although the struggle of personalities will continue, the underlying trends point toward an eventual integration of the leading forces in the country.