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After Yeltsin Comes... Yeltsin

Author(s): Daniel Treisman

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# After Yeltsin Comes . . . Yeltsin

by Daniel Treisman

Russia today stands on the brink of major change. Barring some sort of constitutional coup, eight months from now a new president will be rearranging the furniture in the Kremlin's official chambers. The current occupant will have retired, taking with him the entourage of opportunistic courtiers and high-profile millionaires that Russians have come to loathe. Whoever his successor turns out to be—Moscow's mayor Yuri Luzhkov, former Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov, Krasnoyarsk governor Alexander Lebed, Communist Party chief Gennady Zyuganov, or some wild-card candidate—he is likely to lead the country in a radically new direction, away from the lurching improvisations, regional crises, and politics of corruption and deadlock that characterized the late Yeltsin era. For better or worse, Russia is headed somewhere new.

At least, so one might like to think. And many observers do. As a November 1998 editorial in the *Washington Post* put it, Russia's failures in the late 1990s result from both the current president's "mistakes" and his "inconstancy and absence during recent years of illness." In the words of its editorialists: "Mr Yeltsin today cannot govern; and as long as he remains president, neither can anyone else." Although skeptical

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DANIEL TREISMAN is an assistant professor of political science at the University of California at Los Angeles and author of *After the Deluge: Regional Crises and Political Consolidation in Russia* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999).

about those who might replace Boris Yeltsin, George W. Bush's foreign affairs adviser, Condoleezza Rice, clearly believes him personally responsible for many of Russia's current problems. "More than anything, [the Russians] need somebody who's not corrupt, somebody who's not trying to do this for personal gain." Within Russia, opposition candidates actively cultivate the impression that Yeltsin's departure will, by itself, put an end to Russia's woes.

Despite its widespread acceptance, this image is almost completely wrong. Those who attribute Russia's disappointing economic and political condition to Yeltsin's personal weaknesses and who expect major change to follow his departure are, unfortunately, in for a surprise. Recognizing this reality should be the starting point from which Western countries begin to construct a rational policy to manage the transition.

Yeltsin's defects are not in question. In recent years, he has been sickly, detached, erratic, and overly beholden to certain aides and acquaintances of dubious ethics and judgment. And it is wrong to say that it does not matter who is in charge. A leader other than Yeltsin might not have stumbled into the first Chechnya war or now be trying—incomprehensibly—to wage a second. (Then again, a Slobodan Milosevic in Yeltsin's shoes might have made such wars the rule not the exception.)

However, the particular character flaws, intellectual lapses, and health problems of Yeltsin do not convincingly explain why successive Russian governments have become mired in corruption, why the economy remains stagnant, and why the country's territorial integrity seems so often an open question. The undesirable aspects of Russian politics and policies in the 1990s have resulted less from the bad decisions made by powerful central leaders (or even from their distraction as the president's health has worsened) than from these leaders' extreme impotence. A saint or clairvoyant in the Kremlin would also have been hedged in by a variety of constraints—some political, some economic, and others even geographical—that would shrink any president's room for maneuver.

These constraints remain. Yeltsin's possible successors are starting out their campaigns with a variety of plans and programs, ranging from the communist *revanche* of Zyuganov to the law-and-order primitivism of Lebed. Yet any one of the candidates, as he tries to implement campaign promises or even stray from them, will find himself blocked in by the realities of Russia's political game, pushed back toward a set of policies and a style of governing that closely resemble

Yeltsin's. Like his predecessor, the next Russian president will alternately bargain with and fight challenges from the country's regional governors, threaten to prosecute the big business "oligarchs," while striking secret deals with some of them; promise social welfare benefits that never materialize; and scold the West rhetorically, while simultaneously negotiating for International Monetary Fund (IMF) aid. Within six months to a year after taking office, the next president will find himself—against his will, to the horror of his supporters, and probably against all observers' expectations—"becoming Yeltsin."

Consider Luzhkov, the pugnacious mayor of Moscow. He was re-elected in 1996 with 90 percent of the vote in recognition of the economic renaissance the city has experienced under his rule. Since Luzhkov took office in 1992, the city has become a massive construction site. Moscow is the only one of Russia's 89 regions where more apartments were built in 1997 than in 1990. The secret, in the mayor's words, has been a pattern of partnership between the government and the city's big businesses, which have been persuaded to contribute everything from cash to gold plating for the basilica of the grandiose new Cathedral of Christ the Savior.

In his campaign for president, Luzhkov offers to extend the Moscow model to the country as a whole. The problem is that Moscow's recent wealth has come in large part at the expense of other regions. The major oil and gas companies established their headquarters in the capital and, as a result, pay regional taxes on corporate profits there. The natural gas monopoly Gazprom alone, for instance, accounted for some 7 percent of the city's tax revenues in 1996. Meanwhile, the regional subdivisions of these companies, which actually extract or process the oil and gas, often report losses—and so pay no profit taxes into the budgets of their home regions. Luzhkov has also been able to tap the "rents" that come from the city's status as the country's political and business center. Fifty percent of all foreign direct investment has gone into the city of Moscow. As if that were not enough, the federal budget usually pays Moscow a large subsidy—more than \$400 million in 1997—to compensate it for the expense of hosting the country's capital (no pun intended). Luzhkov obviously recognizes his city's privileged position. "When people say to me that they, those villains, have concentrated 80 percent of the banking capital in Moscow, I always give the same answer," he said in a recent interview. "So what?!"

Partnership with big business to extract resources from other parts of the country is an effective development strategy for Moscow, but not a way to enrich the country as a whole. President Luzhkov would face two options. He could leave things as they are—a rich Moscow and poor regions—and enjoy the personal perks of power, while his popularity gradually faded. Or he could attempt to turn the tables on his erstwhile allies—the major oil, gas, and banking barons who control the country's few concentrations of wealth—and force them to pay higher taxes and thus share the benefits more broadly. Most likely, he would try to do something in between: squeeze the raw materials giants wherever possible without alienating them completely, curry favor with regional governors while providing them with the minimum of actual cash. But that has been the exact strategy of Yeltsin's successive governments since 1997. Luzhkov would, in fact ... become Yeltsin.

Primakov, the avuncular former spymaster and current ally of Luzhkov, has already had some experience in becoming Yeltsin. He gained it during the eight months he spent in 1998-99 as Russia's prime minister. In the economic sphere, Primakov and Yuri Maslyukov, his Communist first deputy, did not print money with abandon as many had feared. Their pledges of support to collapsing industries remained, for the most part, just words. By March 1999, this critic of previous Western-oriented governments of economic reformers was pleading with a recalcitrant parliament not to lower tax rates or to vitiate the promise of fiscal responsibility that he had just made to the IMF. Nor did Primakov radically reorient Russian foreign policy, as Western observers had feared, though he stepped up the marginal trouble making, mostly with Yeltsin's support.

In his relations with the regions, Primakov was sometimes viewed as taking a hard line. In fact, his behavior was quite Yeltsinian in its modulations. He intermittently called for a recreation of vertical authority between center and regions—the federal nomination rather than local election of regional governors—and for a consolidation of Russia's 89 regions into a smaller number. Yet he did nothing to place these issues on any practical agenda. And in personal meetings with regional governors, he was the embodiment of charm, listening attentively, sharing their concerns, and promising financial assistance.

To his supporters, Primakov also appeared to be taking a tougher line against the oligarchs who dominated Russian business. In fact, his approach was at least as selective as those of previous governments. He

## The Powers That Be

Some of the most important rival power centers that any incoming Russian president must face include:

**The Regional Governors.** Since 1997, almost all the chief executives of Russia's 89 regions have been popularly elected, making it extremely hard for the president to dismiss them. Governors also serve in the national upper house of parliament, the Council of Federation, which can hold up or block most legislation. Since the early 1990s, governors have been co-opting the local directors of federal bureaucracies—tax collectors, police chiefs, even army commanders—by offering them wage bonuses, housing, and other perks. As a result, most governors can impede implementation of central decrees or laws that they dislike. Some of the most powerful include Mintimer Shaimiev of Tatarstan and Eduard Rossel of Sverdlovsk.

**Big Business.** Russian tycoons such as the controversial media magnate Boris Berezovsky are rarely out of the headlines, but their power pales beside that of Rem Vyakhirev, the head of the country's natural gas monopoly, Gazprom, or even Vagit Alekperov, the director of the largest oil company, Lukoil. The latter do not just influence the state, in one sense they are the state—providing subsidies to decrepit parts of the economy in the form of free or cheap oil and gas, in return for tax breaks.

In the summer of 1998, the Kiriyenko government tried to seize Gazprom's assets to force it to pay overdue taxes. Within hours, a call to the Duma had prompted a mutiny. The deputies voted 307 to 0 to demand that the government drop its attack. Even Gennady Zyuganov, the Communist leader and an advocate of renationalizing much of the energy sector, came out in the company's defense, declaring that "splitting up Gazprom is tantamount to splitting up Russia." The fuel barons also can affect presidential election campaigns with sudden cutoffs of energy, not to mention their large foreign currency export earnings.

**The Duma.** The 1993 Constitution reduced the Soviet-era powers of Russia's lower house of parliament, but Yeltsin has generally bargained with parliamentary factions more often than seeking a test of wills. The annual budget law must get through the Duma, as must other legislation. Although the president can rule by decree on some matters, the Duma can overrule such decrees by passing laws that supersede them. Since 1996, Zyuganov's Communists have been the largest faction in the Duma; its speaker has been an ambitious moderate Communist, Gennady Seleznev.

—D.T.

encouraged the legal investigation of Boris Berezovsky, an oligarch with close ties to Yeltsin whose constant meddling had irritated even the president at times. Under Primakov, a warrant for Berezovsky's arrest was issued. But even Primakov, taking a leaf from the president's book, soon relented and called Berezovsky in to tell him that the investigation was a matter of business rather than anything personal. While supporting the pressures on one oligarch, Primakov nevertheless remained on excellent terms with several others. The campaign to force Gazprom to pay taxes in cash was quickly softened after Primakov's arrival in the White House. His relations were also friendly toward Lukoil, Russia's largest oil company, which has major business interests in Iraq, a country with which Primakov has had some experience.

In the end, what damaged Primakov in Yeltsin's eyes and caused his summary dismissal in May was that he was becoming Yeltsin too well. Through flexible bargaining, he had started to line up a coalition of support with a broadness that scared the major political actors. He was on cordial terms with Gazprom and Lukoil, had begun to reassure and strike deals with regional governors, had found common language with the Communists in the Duma, and continued to enjoy high public approval. Like any broad coalition, his was based on promising contradictory things to different people while at the same time promising stability to all. The skill with which Primakov was piecing it together alarmed those left out and even some coalition members, who eventually helped engineer his downfall.

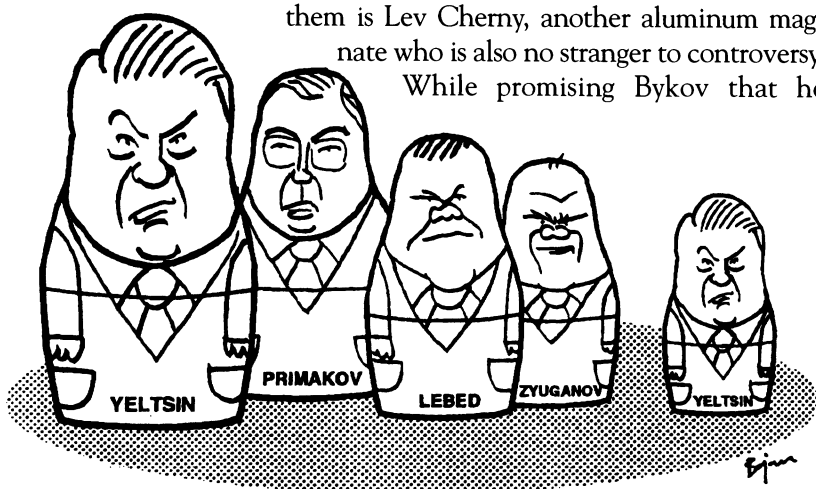
As for General Lebed, if any issue catapults him from his Siberian retreat back into the thick of Moscow politics, it will be the public's desire for law and order. The promise to root out corruption is already the centerpiece of his nascent campaign. Lebed brings to this task a gritty determination, a gravelly voice, a wealth of military anecdotes, and a year and a half of practical experience trying to introduce order to the economy of Krasnoyarsk, where he was elected governor in May 1998. This experience—inconclusive, though not entirely without success—is notable for the parallel it evokes. The Lebed it shows could be described as “Yeltsin in microcosm.”

Yeltsin ran for election in 1996 with the help of certain business oligarchs. In return, these magnates got positions in his new government and the chance to buy large state companies cheaply. In mid-1997, however, Yeltsin authorized a change in the rules. The oligarchs were pushed out of government, the rigged privatization

auctions ended with the sale of shares in telecommunications giant Svyazinvest for what market observers said was a fair price, and the tax service and tax police were ordered to squeeze more out of the oligarchs' companies. The result was a dirty and inconclusive guerilla war between big business and the government, fought by means of intimidation, publication of embarrassing materials, and, on occasion, federal security service troops. Observable results—higher tax collections, lower corruption—were meager.

Lebed also ran for office—in this case the governorship of Krasnoyarsk—with help from certain major oligarchs. Notable among them was the region's "Aluminum King," the chairman of the Krasnoyarsk Aluminum Plant, Anatoly Bykov. Like Yeltsin, Lebed also decided to turn the tables on his erstwhile ally after the election and began investigating Bykov's business dealings. When local law enforcement proved inadequate, he persuaded the federal government to send a massive task force of armed security police, who stormed Bykov's offices, made some arrests, and ended up staying in the region for more than six months. A warrant for Bykov himself was issued, but only after he had left the country.

Arrests of managers, a company director turned into a fugitive—these results might seem like a victory for the fight against business corruption, and in a sense they may have been just that. But look a little closer at the context. Nothing has fundamentally changed in the way the Krasnoyarsk Aluminum Plant is run. The absence of Bykov forces Lebed to deal directly with the plant's other major shareholders. Among them is Lev Cherny, another aluminum magnate who is also no stranger to controversy. While promising Bykov that he



would “break [his] back,” Lebed remained on good terms with his other major supporter in the gubernatorial race—none other than Russia’s oligarch-in-chief, Berezovsky. In fact, Lebed’s jubilation last April on hearing that an arrest warrant had been issued for Bykov was tempered by the simultaneous announcement that a warrant had also been issued for his patron Berezovsky. “This is bankruptcy of the regime,” Lebed told local television reporters. “I am embarrassed for the country.”

Lebed’s fight against big business corruption in his region offers hints about the likely style and techniques he would employ as president. These seem open to every criticism that has been made of the Yeltsin administration’s efforts. Leave aside the fact that massive federal task forces like the one sent into Krasnoyarsk could not be assigned to more than a few regions at a time. Even with these resources, Lebed’s campaign changed little under the surface. And it looked less like a fight against oligarchs *per se* than a campaign against particular oligarchs. There may be wisdom in this approach, as a fight against all simultaneously could not be won. But it does suggest that the battle against corruption under a President Lebed would have a distinctly Yeltsinian flavor.

What about Zyuganov, the dour standard-bearer for Russia’s unreformed Communists? He would seem the most likely to strike out on a new, thoroughly un-Yeltsin-like path. His scorn for the current head of state is clearer than anyone’s. Yeltsin, in Zyuganov’s words, is a “helpless, weak-willed drunkard sitting in the Kremlin. Or rather, either lying in a hospital bed or confined to a sanatorium ... a man who is incapable of self-control, incapable of doing his job properly, and incapable of answering for his words and his personal behavior.” The Communists’ likely program would also involve the most radical departures—a renationalization of the major energy firms, reimposition of control over the media, and increased pensions and public sector wages financed by inflation.

On closer examination, though, the Communist Party is internally split. On one side, there are a relatively small number of ideologues and true believers—the “Communists with party cards.” On the other, there are a large number of opportunists, whose main reasons for staying in the party are the possibilities it presents for political advancement, access to potential business contacts in the State Duma, and the perks of office—the “Communists with platinum cards.” Were Zyuganov to win the presidency, a struggle would break

out almost immediately between these two groups. The latter would quickly find common language with the oligarchs. Dividing the spoils between the ideologues and opportunists on the principle of “to each his own”—with the ideologues getting to control the airwaves and the opportunists getting to regulate big business—might hold back the conflict for a few months. But not for long. Television, after all, is big business. And the oligarchs, with their newly co-

opted friends in the party, would not readily give it up.

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President Zyuganov would have to choose. If he sided with the opportunists, the grand Communist program might as well be relegated to the shredder. But if he sided with the ideologues, he would ironically find himself fenced in (like

Yeltsin before him) by a hostile Communist majority in the Duma. At the same time, if he tried to renationalize the oil or gas industries, the energy barons would temporarily halt fuel supplies to the regions (as they did when the Yeltsin administration tried to get tough with Gazprom in the summer of 1998). Regionally elected deputies in both houses of parliament would (as they did then) demand unanimously that the government back down. Zyuganov would find himself blocked by a hostile parliament, at odds with most regional governors, and unable to shift the balance of power with the energy companies; as a result, he would be unable to collect taxes and desperate for fiscal aid. A retreat to compromise with the Communist opportunists would seem likely—and Zyuganov, like the others ... would become Yeltsin.

Russia's next leader—whoever he is and wherever he would like to take the country—will find a script already written for him. In domestic politics, this means the conciliation of regional governors and a political alliance with a subset of the business oligarchs. In economics, it means muddling through with continuing fiscal instability. In foreign policy, it means occasional anti-Western rhetoric, flamboyant gestures, and low-intensity trouble making combined with negotiation for IMF money. To an extent rarely recognized, Russia after Yeltsin will look remarkably similar to Russia under Yeltsin. Ironically, despite the considerable powers granted to Russia's president in the

Constitution and the radically different programs that political parties espouse, the executive in Russia is blocked from making major changes to the political and economic status quo. Four main constraints render such changes unusually difficult:

First, Russia is and will remain a decentralized federation. There is much to be said in favor of decentralization. However, the existing division of Russia into 89 semi-autonomous regions also means that economic criminals or tax evaders have 89 possible hiding places and 89 chances to find a corrupt regional government that will help them. Large companies can play the federal government off the regions and the regions against the federation. At the same time, the center must bargain with regional leaders, who can threaten secession in order to extort aid, pilfer federal taxes, and co-opt federal police and even army units on the territory. Regional governors are all elected, directly or indirectly, and are impossible for the central government to dislodge. At the same time, major legislative changes can often be blocked by the upper house of parliament, which is composed of regional representatives and can veto acts passed by the Duma. The veto can be overturned only by a two-thirds majority in the lower house. Anyone who wonders why it is so hard for the central government to root out corruption in Russia's federal state might consider asking why it was so difficult to abolish slavery—and later segregation—in the federal United States.

Second, although political corruption is sometimes viewed as an unfortunate personal failing of Russia's current leadership, it is a function of the setting in which these leaders—whether naturally honest or avaricious—must operate. Countries that are as poor as Russia, that have a decentralized political structure, and that have had little experience with democracy or openness to trade are always highly corrupt, as a simple glance around the world shows and statistical analysis confirms. Against the force of such conditioning factors, the personal integrity of one leader can help only a little at best. Unless these features change rapidly in Russia, widespread corruption will remain a constraint on the implementation of policies for the next president as well.

Third, in Russia, huge quantities of extremely valuable natural resources are concentrated in a few regions. Between them, the Khanti-Mansiisky and Yamalo-Nenetsky districts in Siberia produce four fifths of Russia's oil and one fifth of the world's supply. The Sakha Republic supplies one quarter of the world's diamonds. The Soviet period also left an industrial structure in the natural resources sector that is highly con-

centrated, with massive conglomerates at the top. Under the Soviets, all gas extraction was organized within the natural gas ministry. Today, it remains under the umbrella of the ministry's partly privatized successor, Gazprom. Such concentration was probably economically rational; the international oil and gas industries that service market economies have not been known for their small start-up firms either.

This geographical and industrial concentration meant that those who happened to be sitting in the best seats after the Soviet-era music stopped became instant millionaires. (In the late 1980s, the central government essentially lost the power to fire enterprise directors.) Whether these raw materials barons cashed in their chips in the mafia-ridden free-for-all that was the state economy under Mikhail Gorbachev or in the mafia-ridden free-for-all of the market economy under Yeltsin was a secondary question. The rise of economic "oligarchs" was virtually inevitable. That Viktor Chernomyrdin, Gorbachev's natural gas minister, ended up Yeltsin's prime minister by late 1992 was symptomatic of the way control of natural resources paved the way to political influence.

Moreover, the initial concentration of resources meant that a—if not the—major task of Russian politics would be to try to extract value from the raw materials sector and redistribute it to those living in agricultural or industrialized parts of the country, where the capital stock was largely obsolete and investment would trickle in at best. Given the weakness of the central state, this meant bargaining with governors more often than sending in storm troopers. Those surprised by Russia's troubles collecting taxes from its highly profitable oil companies might also take a look at the way a few oil-state senators in the United States have for years blocked federal attempts to revise the formula for calculating oil royalties from public lands.

Fourth, Russia has a presidential system that—like that of the United States—does not guarantee the president a supportive majority in parliament. When, as has happened throughout the 1990s, the president faces a hostile majority in parliament, major policy changes should not be expected. Although the president has the authority to rule by decree in certain areas, he can only do so as long as the law is silent, and decrees can be overruled by parliamentary legislation. These two centers of power in Moscow act as magnets to industrial lobbyists, who can play the Duma off the president just as they pit the central against the regional authorities.

Few of these inherited constraints are likely to disappear in the near future. Conflict between parliament and president may be tem-

porarily alleviated if both are elected with similar mandates. But without powerful parties to discipline political competition, such pauses are likely to be brief. Neither political decentralization nor the regional concentration of resources are easily changeable. The sad but inescapable prognosis is that—without large-scale foreign investment and rapid economic growth—Russia will remain a blocked political system in which big business plays on the conflicts between branches and levels of government, and political leaders have to make deals with the devil in order to get the smallest innovation approved.

The challenge for Western states dealing with Russia in the next couple of years can be summed up in a question: What is the best way to deal with a naked emperor? Within the first year of taking office, the new Russian president, and his supporters, are likely to realize the emptiness of

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their hopes for a breakthrough. An emperor whose nakedness has become apparent will be preoccupied at least initially with finding some clothes, possibly leading to a sharpening of anti-Western rhetoric. Paradoxically, this rhetoric will conceal a greater readiness to return to cordial relations with the West—but only if a face-saving way to do so can be found. Running out of steam, a President Luzhkov or President Zyuganov will be more desperate than ever for Western aid and legitimacy. This need for outside support may create opportunities for Western diplomacy to win genuinely valuable concessions in return for symbolic gestures and small amounts of material assistance.

The danger is that Western politicians will overreact to the hostile rhetoric, stir up public opinion, and shut off contact, thus missing the opportunities that such rhetoric conceals. A better policy would be for Western leaders to keep a clear head, respond calmly to rhetorical attacks, and give up nothing of substance, while remaining alert for the change in the weather that will come as the new president realizes the incoherence of his own plans and is pushed back toward an ambivalent partnership with the West. One day, probably about a year after he moves into the Kremlin, Russia's next

president will look in the mirror and see not himself but Boris Nikolaevich Yeltsin. Let us hope that by that time the West has not taught itself to see Lenin or Stalin.

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## WANT TO KNOW MORE?

For an analysis of the competition between central and regional governments in 1990s Russia—and the central policies that managed to keep the country intact—see Daniel Treisman's *After the Deluge: Regional Crises and Political Consolidation in Russia* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999). Treisman's "Russia's Taxing Problem" (FOREIGN POLICY, Fall 1998) makes the case that the country's difficulties collecting taxes are caused in part by this competition between central and regional governments. A detailed analysis of how the political constraints described above shaped the Yeltsin administration's attempts at economic reform is provided in Andrei Shleifer and Treisman's *Without A Map: Political Tactics and Economic Reform in Russia* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, forthcoming). Strobe Talbott's "Dealing with Russia in a Time of Troubles" (*The Economist*, November 21, 1998) outlines the deputy secretary of state's view of the challenges facing Russia. Rose Brady's *Kapitalizm: Russia's Struggle to Free Its Economy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999) is an accessible account of recent economic developments. In "Decrees, Laws, and Inter-Branch Relations in the Russian Federation" (*Post-Soviet Affairs*, 1998), Thomas F. Remington, Steven S. Smith, and Moshe Haspel analyze the relationship between presidency and parliament. For insight into Yeltsin's modus operandi, consult Timothy Colton's "Boris Yeltsin, Russia's All-Thumbs Democrat" in Colton and Robert C. Tucker, eds., *Patterns in Post-Soviet Leadership* (Boulder: Westview, 1995); the president's own memoir *The Struggle for Russia* (Random House: New York, 1994); and Lilia Shevtsova's *Yeltsin's Russia: Myths and Realities* (Washington: Carnegie Endowment, 1999). Readers interested in a racier local perspective should refer to *Boris Yeltsin, Ot Rassvieta Do Zakata* [*Boris Yeltsin: From Dawn to Sunset*] (Moscow: Interbook Publishing House, 1997), the tell-all memoir of Yeltsin's former bodyguard Alexander Korzhakov, reviewed by Shevtsova in the Winter 1997-98 FOREIGN POLICY.

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