

AFTER YELTSIN'S VICTORY: WHAT NEXT?

Boris Yeltsin's resounding victory in the April 25 national referendum has finally ended debate over who enjoys the trust and support of the citizens of Russia: Even as they cast their ballots for Yeltsin and the reformers, the voters went out of their way to make clear their antipathy to the hardline-dominated parliament. Defying predictions in Russia and the West that the electorate would sullenly record its ambivalence or even opposition to Yeltsin and his government, Russians handed their president a victory on each of the four questions posed.

Yeltsin's principal task now is to translate his triumph into concrete results by maintaining the political initiative—something he failed to do after his heroic stand in the failed coup of August 1991. His priorities should be completing the reform of the government structure he inherited from the Soviet Union by implementing a new constitution and replacing the heavily communist parliament with a modern, democratic legislature. Of equal importance is relaunching his economic reform program and removing the many obstacles in the path of a free market economy.

Despite Yeltsin's victory, however, the political situation in Moscow remains stalemated. Stung by their rejection—three-quarters of the voters called for new elections for the legislature—leaders of the parliament, led by its Speaker, Ruslan Khasbulatov, quickly asserted that they would not be bound by the referendum's results and vowed to continue their resistance to democratic and economic reforms. Said Khasbulatov, "Even if there is a 100 percent vote of confidence in the president, he does not have the right to make constitutional changes." Khasbulatov and his allies have already announced that yet another "extraordinary" Congress of People's Deputies—the Soviet-era superparliament—will assemble in an attempt to win back the power that the population had taken from them.

For his part, however, Yeltsin is equipped with a new and unambiguous mandate to pursue his reform objectives. As the results from the referendum make clear, his support extends beyond the young, educated professionals in the urban areas who have most visibly embraced his democratic and free market reforms. Yeltsin's victory was due to the support of the average Russian who, despite the great hardships and uncertainty imposed by Russia's severe economic problems, not only rejected the appeals of the hard-liners to turn back the clock but voted to support Yeltsin and his free market reforms as well.

New Constitution Needed. Yeltsin must now move deliberately and firmly to implement a new and democratic constitution. The current Brezhnev-era constitution, which was adopted in 1978 and since adorned with patchwork of over 200 amendments, is the principal source of political problems in Russia, as it was never intended to serve as the basic document of an independent, democratic state. The parliament elected under that constitution is dominated by hard-liners opposed to any real political or economic reform, whose resistance has brought Russia to the point of economic collapse. All attempts by Yeltsin to compromise have been rebuffed.

With the results of the referendum—which the leaders of the parliament confidently predicted would go against Yeltsin—the Russian president need no longer be deferential to his opponents. He is now in a position to set his own conditions. His approach should be twofold, a combination of olive branch and club: The parliament should be invited to cooperate in the adoption of a new constitution this summer, followed by elections

this fall. Conversely, should cooperation not be forthcoming, the parliament should be bypassed altogether by a direct appeal to the population through another referendum or the election of a constituent assembly.

Yeltsin's chances are aided by the fact that the parliament is not monolithic. To add to his minority support in it, Yeltsin should attempt to split the "moderates" from his most bitter opponents. Wary of their own political futures, this group is likely to have lost much of their enthusiasm in opposing Yeltsin in the aftermath of the referendum. Because much of the opposition to reform in the parliament stems from members rightly fearing a loss of their position and privileges if new elections are held, Yeltsin should sweeten the deal by offering to continue these perks until next spring when the members' current terms would have ended.

At the same time, Yeltsin should press ahead with his economic reforms. Again, parliament should first be asked for its cooperation but should be pushed aside if its obstruction continues. Yeltsin should introduce a broad program of hitherto blocked reforms, including private ownership of land and an acceleration of the establishment of private farming. Executive branch control over the Central Bank should be established and its inflationary policies ended immediately. Privatization should be accelerated.

The U.S. Role. Yeltsin's triumph is also a victory for the U.S. and the West. Not only have the people of Russia definitively demonstrated their support for Yeltsin and his reforms, they have at the same time rejected those such as Khasbulatov and Vice President Aleksandr Rutskoi who oppose cooperation with the West and advocate a more aggressive, imperialist policy toward Russia's neighbors.

The view of Yeltsin as a transitional figure inherited from the Bush Administration must now be firmly rejected, and President Clinton must reiterate his support not just for Yeltsin but also for his efforts to implement a new constitution.

As important, the U.S. must ensure that any assistance that it and the West provide to Russia be firmly tied to progress in establishing a free market economy. These conditions are not intended to punish or pressure Yeltsin but instead to equip him with weapons to use against his opponents, whose resistance to reform will only result in a cut-off of Western assistance. In addition, the U.S. should lead its Western allies in opening their markets to exports from Russia and the other countries of the former Soviet bloc, allowing these newly free nations to earn their money rather than receive it in aid.

By defying their detractors in Russia and the West, Yeltsin and the Russian people have clearly demonstrated that they are determined that Russia become a democracy and will not turn back from the goal of a free market. Few events hold such promise for the U.S. and the West, and it is their responsibility to ensure that Russia's re-entry into the civilized world be welcomed with open arms.

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