

# Paving the Way for Violence

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On 21 September 1993, Russian president Boris Yeltsin dissolved the Russian parliament and called for new parliamentary elections. Yeltsin's move was an open and blatant violation of the Russian constitution, and no wonder that the parliament voted to impeach Yeltsin, and appointed the vice president Alexander Rutskoi as acting president. Some politicians and parties, as well as regional leaders, proposed a return to the previous status quo and simultaneous early presidential and parliamentary elections. These proposals were negotiated, but the process broke down on 3 October 1993, when supporters of the parliament launched riots in Moscow and attacked a major television station. The next day army troops shelled the parliament's seat using tanks. Several opposition figures, including Rutskoi, were arrested. This was a zero-sum solution to the intra-elite [conflict](#), which involved a major confrontation between the Yeltsin-led executive and the Russian legislature. Since Yeltsin effectively eliminated their rivals, the idea of executive accountability before the legislature in Russia was [buried](#), as was that of checks and balances. Yeltsin's camp used the outcome of the conflict to maximize presidential power: new rules of the game codified in the Russian constitution, approved through the popular vote on the referendum, held on 12 December 1993, the same day as new parliamentary [elections](#).

This episode was one of the key events on Russia's path towards personalist [authoritarianism](#), established and consolidated in the 2000s-2010s. Although analysts mostly concentrated on recent trends of authoritarian regime building, and tend to [juxtapose](#) Yeltsin's period of seemingly democratic rule with the autocratization under Putin, an in-depth analysis of Russia's political trajectory requires an exploration of causes and effects of the 1993 conflict and its impact on Russia's developments.

## Sacrificing Democratization

Claus Offe [stated](#) that the complexity of post-Communist changes in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union implies the need for the simultaneous transformation of the political regime, economic systems, and state- and nation-building. As Offe argued, the "dilemma of simultaneity" had a paradoxical solution: only the simultaneous pursuit of democratization, economic reforms, and state and nation-building could bring post-Communist countries relative success, while step-by-step changes could only deepen numerous crises. Unlike most East European countries, Russia's leadership prioritized market reforms over democratization. Economic changes, however, [faced](#) excessively high inflation and a deep and protracted recession, while democratization was curtailed in the 1990s and done [away](#) in the 2000s. Russia's approach resulted in inconsistent outcomes for economic reforms and had a negative impact on democratization.

Probably the most important critical juncture in post-Soviet Russian politics occurred in October 1991. Russia's political leaders, who became full-scale rulers of this country after August 1991, faced the choice between alternative pathways for Russia's political and economic reforms. The Russian parliament refused to discuss the draft of the new constitution, proposed by the commission, led by Yeltsin. Instead, the parliament granted Yeltsin extraordinary powers to issue presidential decrees (which had legal force similar to laws adopted by the legislature) and to appoint and dismiss members of the government without parliamentary approval. Market reforms became the top priority, and Yeltsin appointed his new [government](#), launching the process of economic transition. The very agenda of political changes, which sought further democratization of Russia, turned down in favor of market reforms without hesitation. While the relative costs and benefits of this choice were dubious at best, its consequences for political regime dynamics in Russia became irreversible.

The logic of strategic choice in October 1991 was driven mostly by the self-interests and expectations of Russia's new rulers. While the goal of power maximization was already achieved because of the end of Communist power, the new Russia's rulers had little interest in losing power through electoral means. Moreover, the priority was to pursue unpopular market reforms while being insulated from public influence. That abandonment of democratization was fueled by fears of mass resistance to market reforms during the inevitable [decline](#) in living standards during a transformational recession. Under these conditions, the electoral defeat of the Russian elites, who just received access to major levers of power, was believed to be a highly likely outcome of democratization. The coalition around Yeltsin had no strong incentives for building an electoral democracy because of the lack of rational motivation for election-related risks. Building democratic institutions in Russia was sacrificed for the sake of market reforms: it was postponed as the default option in 1991, and then disappeared from the agenda of Russian politics, especially after the conflict of 1993.

## Legitimacy versus Legality

The painful and protracted economic reforms in Russia were conducted under conditions of failed financial [stabilization](#). The transformation recession in Russia became much deeper and longer than in many East European countries, and only the financial default of Russia marked the end of this process. The failure also posed new political challenges. When the [parliament](#) delegated extraordinary powers to Yeltsin but did not receive any returns in terms of political and policy influence, a sizable part of its members naturally felt deceived. This is why some of Yeltsin's former [supporters](#) – including his own running mate Rutskoi, and chair of the parliament Khasbulatov – loudly criticized the government, which largely ignored the parliament. While before 1991, Yeltsin relied upon a slight majority of his supporters in the parliament, over time this base of support [disappeared](#).

Still, Yeltsin had a certain amount of room for maneuver. He could revise a list of priorities, opt for political and policy compromise, drop the pursuit of a radical drive for economic reforms, and instead propose a major government reshuffle, returning to the agenda of political reforms, including the adoption of a new constitution and

holding of new elections. Most probably, such a solution could make Russia's path to financial stabilization even more painful and protracted, but it could have avoided major conflict and helped to build democratic political institutions. Such a road was not taken because it did not suit the interests of Yeltsin and his camp. Instead of searching for compromise, Yeltsin preferred an alternative: he shifted the blame for the hardships of economic reforms onto the shoulders of his political rivals.

The parliament was an easy target for harsh [criticism](#). Its many decisions and statements were often incompetent, and pro-inflationist, adding much to Russia's economic problems. However, it was neither the major and nor the only source of these problems, and the dissolution of the parliament in 1993 did not benefit the Russian economy. Yet shifting the blame for high inflation onto the parliament was a successful strategy for Yeltsin. It enabled him to effectively use the rise of political polarization to maximize power at the expense of opponents.

Meanwhile, the parliament lost patience with Yeltsin, who disregarded his rivals and paid little attention to their policy proposals. More and more parliamentarians intended to take back the extraordinary powers delegated to Yeltsin and diminish his ability to rule unchecked. The problem was not only the asymmetry in the amount of resources held by Yeltsin and the parliament but also the asymmetry in the nature of these resources. The parliament based its actions upon the principle of unconstrained legality: according to the then-active Russian constitution, it was empowered to adopt any legal decision through the voting procedure. However, the mass support for the legislature fell drastically: claims made by parliamentarians met little public approval, and the parliament's legitimacy was dubious at best. As for Yeltsin, although his mass [support](#) had decreased, he was still perceived by the public as a legitimate leader. The contradiction between legitimacy and legality greatly affected the outcome of the conflict.

As Yeltsin demonstrated no intention of giving up his extraordinary powers, the parliament lacked effective levers of control, other than expressing disagreements with the actions of the president. After an unsuccessful attempt to impeach Yeltsin, the parliament scheduled the referendum regarding: 1) Confidence in the president; 2) Support for the socio-economic policy of the government; 3) Support for early presidential elections; 4) Support for early parliamentary elections. The referendum campaign was marked by the unprecedented domination of the pro-Yeltsin camp in the media. In the end, Yeltsin won the support of the majority of voters: however, the results of the referendum had no legal force; they only demonstrated public attitudes toward both sides of the conflict. A plebiscite, being a poor [substitution](#) for elections, cannot resolve the ongoing conflict. Instead, Yeltsin felt encouraged to establish his domination due to the unpopularity of his rivals. Despite the omnipotent constitution-based legality of parliament's actions, its public support remained very weak. For better or worse, under conditions of binary choice, many Russian citizens preferred Yeltsin to the parliament as a lesser evil.

The referendum prompted the adoption of a new constitution as well as calls for new parliamentary elections. The major disagreements between Yeltsin and parliament lay at the heart of power, and concerned institutional [constraints](#) on presidential rule in terms of appointment and dismissal of the government and the possibility

of cohabitation with an oppositional legislature. While Yeltsin's proposed draft of the constitution involved a presidential–parliamentary government with broad and poorly constrained presidential powers, the parliament offered a premier–presidential republic with parliamentary accountability of the government. These two drafts were incompatible.

The juxtaposition of the plebiscitary [legitimacy](#) of Yeltsin and the unconstrained legality of the parliament helped to avoid the search for alternative non-zero-sum ways of resolving conflict. The idea of holding early simultaneous presidential and parliamentary elections as a mechanism of conflict resolution was rejected by both sides of the conflict. Only when the conflict turned into an open confrontation after Yeltsin disbanded the parliament, did this idea return to the negotiation table as a possible alternative to political violence. It was, however, too late: negotiations did not have enough time to achieve results before the use of arms. In the end, while legitimacy won, legality failed.

## **Pernicious Consequences**

After the 1993 conflict, Yeltsin had free rein in the arena of constitution making: his team redesigned the proposed draft of the constitution and submitted it to a referendum. The new constitution was oriented toward securing the results of Yeltsin's victory over the parliament. While presidential powers were [maximized](#), parliamentary checks and balances were limited; the parliament had no rights to form the government or affect its policy, and the [president](#) could disband the lower chamber of the legislature if it proved disloyal. Even though the new constitution included a long list of declarations of human rights and freedoms, these declarations were an empty shell, since the document did not contain a mechanism for their implementation. Only the president, as the legal guarantor of the constitution, could implement these rights and freedoms on a principle of benevolence. The new constitutional doctrine was based upon the assumption that the president has the right to do anything not directly prohibited by law. The only legal constraint on presidential power was the limit on holding the presidency for more than two consecutive terms.

Apart from the institutional effects of the new constitution, the 1993 conflict had several political effects. It made the exit of Yeltsin from the political arena difficult. After using force against the parliament, he faced the threat of criminal prosecution: this episode was listed as one of the Yeltsin's alleged crimes during an unsuccessful impeachment [attempt](#) in May 1999 in the parliament. During the 1996 presidential elections, Yeltsin could not leave the Kremlin after losing at the polls, because he did not intend to bear legal responsibility for the 1993 conflict. In essence, the political choice in 1996 was between Yeltsin's victory in an unfair electoral contest and the abolishment of elections. Yeltsin left the presidential office only in December 1999 by [transferring](#) power to a chosen loyal successor, Vladimir Putin, who guaranteed Yeltsin impunity after his resignation. The non-democratic choice, made during the 1993 conflict, set off a chain of further non-democratic choices, made in 1996 and in 1999.

At the same time, the 1993 conflict as such had little impact on the agenda of market reforms: its salience greatly [diminished](#). Meanwhile, without the significant impact of the *siloviki*, Yeltsin probably could not have defeated his rivals in a zero-sum game. When the game was over, Yeltsin had to pay his debts to major supporters. The *siloviki* came to the [forefront](#) and dramatically increased their political [influence](#) over time. The resolution of the 1993 conflict sowed the seeds of evil of authoritarianism, which bloomed later on under Putin.

Overall, the negative effects of the 1993 conflict prevailed over the benefits from the end of a confrontation. Its outcomes raised a major barrier to the democratization of Russia and paved the way for the use of violence as a means of preserving power. This conflict contributed to the maximization of presidential power and to the weakening of checks and balances in the constitution, which included significant authoritarian potential. The political order established in Russia after the 1993 conflict largely determined the subsequent trajectory of Russian political evolution and its drift towards a personalist authoritarian regime.

*This blog post is based upon a forthcoming article in the journal [Russian History](#).*

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