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WHO'S WHO IN THE RUSSIAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

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INTRODUCTION

On June 16, Russian voters across 11 time zones will vote for their next president. This will be a hard choice. The decision Russians will make is not only about the personalities of the candidates. It also is about what direction Russia will take in domestic and international policy. At stake is nothing less than whether there will be continued cooperation or renewed conflict between Russia and the West.

Boris Yeltsin, the incumbent, presided over the collapse of communism and the Soviet Union but now faces a resurgent Communist Party calling for the restoration of the Soviet Union. Yeltsin's opponent is Gennady Zyuganov, head of the Communist Party. Yeltsin was trailing Zyuganov in the polls until mid-May, but now they are running neck-and-neck, with each candidate receiving a 28-30 percent approval rating.

There are other contenders in the presidential election as well: for example, liberal economist Grigory Yavlinsky, the most pro-reform and pro-Western of all the candidates, including Yeltsin; nationalist General Alexander Lebed; neo-fascist Vladimir Zhirinovsky; and former Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev.

The free-market, democratic alternative personified by Yavlinsky remains weak. He is expected to receive only 8-10 percent of the vote. While surprises are always possible, the race appears to have come down to a choice between Boris Yeltsin and Gennady Zyuganov. Yeltsin's record has been marred by the unsuccessful war in the breakaway republic of Chechnya and the skyrocketing levels of crime and corruption, while communist turned nationalist Gennady Zyuganov has been compared to a Russian Slobodan Milosevic armed with nuclear weapons.¹ With almost one-third of the voters still undecided and popular discontent with Russia's current situation so widespread, it will be difficult, though not impossible, for Yeltsin to win.

1 Alexander Yanov, *Weimar Russia and What Can We Do About It* (New York, N.Y.: Slovo/Word, 1995).

Electoral Behavior. According to recent polls, over 70 percent of the Russian people blame Boris Yeltsin for their difficult economic situation; 92 percent consider their economy to be in "bad" or "critical" condition.² In a poll taken in January 1996, 56 percent of the respondents said Yeltsin should resign immediately.

This distress is understandable. While privatization has occurred, the main beneficiaries have been the old communist elite and the criminal element. With the rule of law conspicuously absent, Russian society has fallen prey to an unprecedented wave of crime and corruption. Many in the electorate believe that the situation is Yeltsin's fault, and so are attracted to the communists. Indeed, over 50 percent of those polled indicated that they would not fear a Communist Party takeover.³ In fact, many see the communists as the only party capable of providing a social safety net and safeguards against rampant crime.⁴

The elderly, who make up Russia's most active voting bloc, are staunchly pro-communist, nostalgic for a mythic Soviet past, and opposed to reforms by a margin of two to one. By contrast, young voters under 30 years old tend to be pro-reform, but their support for Yeltsin is soft, and their turnout is expected to be low.

Election Mechanics. Russian law allows anyone who registers and collects one million signatures to run for president. The Central Electoral Commission (CEC), nominated jointly by both houses of the Russian parliament and the president, approves the signatures and certifies the candidates as eligible to run. In 1996, 42 candidates threw their hats in the ring, and 11 were approved by the CEC. A voter turnout below 50 percent would invalidate the election, in which case Yeltsin would remain in office and new elections would have to be scheduled within three months.

Russian elections are conducted by paper ballot: pre-printed sheets of paper on which voters check off the names of their preferred candidates. The results are aggregated by local and regional electoral commissions and then transferred electronically to a central computer run by the CEC. Reportedly, the security service in charge of electronic communications (known by the Russian acronym FAPSI) is in charge of the data processing. It is controlled by the Yeltsin administration, a fact which raises some questions concerning the reliability of the vote count.

In the runoff, scheduled for 15 days after the results of the first round are counted if no candidate wins a clear majority, the two top candidates will face each other. Presumably, they will be Boris Yeltsin and Gennady Zyuganov. Currently, Yeltsin is slowly pulling ahead of his formidable rival.

BORIS YELTSIN: THE SITTING CZAR

At 65 years of age, Boris Yeltsin has all the advantages and handicaps of incumbency. While he is blamed for falling living standards and other social ills, he is also a known quantity and a guarantor of stability. Despite his communist roots, Yeltsin has cast himself as an anti-communist during this campaign.⁵ Certain sectors of Russian society, especially the business elite and intellectuals, fear a communist restoration and prefer Yeltsin as the lesser of two evils. Yeltsin is particularly strong with urban, educated voters under 35 years old and with the business community.

2 Professor Richard Rose, Centre for the Study of Public Policy, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, presentation at International Foundation for Electoral Systems, Washington, D.C., April 24, 1996.

3 *Ibid.*

4 See Ariel Cohen, "Crime and Corruption in Russia and Eurasia: A Threat to Democracy and International Security," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 1025, March 17, 1995.

5 Yeltsin was first secretary of the Sverdlovsk regional party committee, first secretary of the Moscow city party committee, and a nonvoting member of the Politburo under Mikhail Gorbachev.

But Yeltsin's anti-communist claims are somewhat disingenuous. The survivors in his administration are former party *apparatchiks* or communist industrial managers, including hard-line chief of staff Nikolay Yegorov, Prime Minister Victor Chernomyrdin, First Deputy Prime Minister Oleg Soskovets, and many others. Radical reformers have not fared nearly as well. Over the past four years, they have been forced out of the Yeltsin government, and Soviet-era *nomenklatura* now occupy most of the key posts. This phenomenon was epitomized by the nomination of the hard-line Russian Foreign Intelligence Service chief, Yevgenii Primakov, to the post of Foreign Minister in the fall of 1995. Primakov spent a lifetime in the Soviet foreign intelligence service, becoming one of Leonid Brezhnev's top Middle Eastern policymakers. He has personal ties to the Islamic fundamentalist regime in Tehran, as well as to both Iraq's Saddam Hussein and Libya's Muammar Qadhafi.

Yeltsin increasingly has adopted old communist symbols as a way to take votes away from Zyuganov. For example, he gave an order to have the old red banners flown during the most recent celebration of V-E day on May 9. Moreover, surrounded by generals, he delivered a speech from the podium on top of Lenin's mausoleum and addressed the veterans as "comrades." He has become more favorably disposed to the idea of interfering in the Russian "near abroad." Indeed, Russian troops are stationed in Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, Belarus, and Tajikistan, and Russia is pursuing an ambitious policy of integrating the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the loose confederation formed upon the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. This integration includes cooperation between the former KGB security services as well as among border guard troops, joint air defenses, and far-reaching economic policy coordination.

Yeltsin has brought in a number of leading politicians, including some democrats, to work on his campaign. His former chief of staff, Sergei Filatov, former First Deputy Prime Minister and architect of privatization Anatoly Chubais, and Independence Television (NTV) Executive Director Victor Malashenko are among the leading Russian liberals working for him. Former acting Prime Minister Yegor Gaidar has endorsed Yeltsin, despite their bitter disagreements over the war in Chechnya.

In addition to the pitfalls faced by any incumbent, Yeltsin has made several mistakes that have come to haunt him. First, he still has not ended the fighting in Chechnya, despite the recent cease-fire which may or may not hold. Even if Chechnya remains a part of the Russian Federation, the high casualty figures (over 30,000 dead and more than 400,000 refugees) and the sheer brutality of the war will dog Yeltsin throughout the election.⁶

Yeltsin's Defense Minister, Pavel Grachev, is extremely unpopular not only inside the Russian armed forces, but with the general population as well. He is held responsible for the abysmal performance of the Russian military in Chechnya and for the widespread and growing corruption. Grachev is famous for his opulent lifestyle and goes by the nickname "Pashka the Mercedes." Reformers want to replace Grachev with a civilian, but they have been thwarted by military leaders who resist both civilian control of the armed forces and overdue reforms of the bloated and rusty Russian war machine. Yeltsin apparently either prefers to stick with the loyal and controllable Grachev or is incapable of finding a suitable replacement.

One of Yeltsin's biggest political failures has been his refusal to create a political party of his own. The 500,000-strong communists are the leading political force in the country, beating the Yeltsin campaign in grass-roots organizing, turn-out-the-vote tactics, and pre-election meetings. Yeltsin controls the electronic media and the state budget. Everywhere he goes, he promises state subsidies

⁶ The war may cost Yeltsin the support of young voters, who refuse increasingly to fight in Chechnya and hope that Zyuganov will stop the war.

for enterprises and other would-be constituencies. But most Russian voters are fed up with his promises. Lacking a political base outside of government, Yeltsin may discover—as Central and East European reform governments already have—that controlling the media is no guarantee of victory.

Rampant crime and corruption continue to plague Yeltsin's presidency. He could use a crime fighter in a prominent position, such as head of the Ministry of the Interior (MVD) or head of the Internal Security Services (FSB). Instead, the current Minister of the Interior, who is in charge of the police, is known more for opposing privatization and denouncing foreigners than for combating crime. General Mikhail Barsukov, Director of the FSB and Yeltsin's confidante, has lately embarked on a spy-catching mission, hurting Russia's relations with the West in the process. His latest "success" was uncovering an alleged British spy ring. Yet the arrest may have been little more than a cover-up for Russian organized crime outfits supplying the Irish Republican Army (IRA) with weapons, and possibly with nuclear materials.⁷ Yeltsin's lack of leadership in the war on crime has been a great handicap, raising serious questions about the extent of corruption in his administration.

GENNADY ZYUGANOV: THE COMMUNIST CHALLENGER

Yeltsin's main challenger is Communist Party leader Gennady Zyuganov.⁸ The 52-year-old Zyuganov is a quintessential Communist Party *apparatchik* who rose steadily through the ranks of the Soviet power structure, only to have it destroyed by Gorbachev's *glasnost* and *perestroika*.

Zyuganov believes in the imminent collapse of Western civilization. He refers to the West as "ultra-materialist, selfish and spiritless" and regards the reforms of the 1980s as the greatest treason executed against Russia by Western intelligence agencies and their agents in Russia (the reformers). He also has condemned both former Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin as traitors.

Zyuganov deeply distrusts the West and is preoccupied with restoring Russia's "old glory." He articulates the frustration of those who see Russia as a wounded superpower betrayed by its leadership and relegated by scheming adversaries to the sidelines of history. Parallels between pre-Hitler Germany, which had just lost World War I, and Russia, which was defeated in the Cold War, are too obvious to be ignored.⁹ Russian communists and nationalists, like the German Nazis before them, are appealing to the sort of militant and xenophobic nationalism that leads inevitably to disastrous military adventures.

Zyuganov has revised communist ideology, making it more nationalistic and imperialistic than in the Soviet era. He offers an ideology to fill the spiritual void left by the collapse of the USSR—something Yeltsin has failed to do.¹⁰ But Zyuganov's message is poisonous. He speaks and writes about a Western conspiracy, led by the U.S. and aimed at destroying first the Soviet Union and then Russia. As Zyuganov tells it, Gorbachev and Yeltsin are traitors, and the U.S. is the embodiment of all that is evil in the world; corrupt and materialistic, the U.S. and the West are doomed. At the same time, however, Zyuganov and his aides talk about the need for trade and investment with the West, and Zyuganov touts himself as a pragmatic, even pro-business Russian leader when speaking to Westerners. Like Lenin, Stalin, and Brezhnev before him, Zyuganov talks the tough anti-Western line at home but tries to portray himself as an innocuous reformer interested in Western investment when talking to Western audiences.

7 Terence Nelan, "The Plot Thickens," *Time Daily*, May 13, 1996, CompuServe.

8 For a detailed profile of Zyuganov, see Evguenii S. Volk, "Who Are You, Comrade Zyuganov?" *Heritage Foundation F.Y.I.* No. 108, June 6, 1996.

9 Yanov, *Weimar Russia*.

10 David Remnick, "Hammer, Sickle, and Book," *The New York Review of Books*, May 23, 1996, p. 46.

Flirting with God. In their attempt to build a broad nationalist-communist coalition, the “new” communists have even dropped the traditional atheism from their party’s platform. Today, an open believer can be a member of the party, but only if he is a member of “the three Russian traditional denominations”—Orthodoxy, Islam, or Buddhism. This newly professed religious tolerance does not apply to Protestants, Catholics, or Jews, however, despite their deep roots in Russia. According to the communist-sponsored draft law on religion (vetoed previously by President Yeltsin), these minority denominations would become subject to severe regulation by the state. Unchecked, the communists conceivably could move to ban Western-based Protestant denominations outright. In order to steal religion’s thunder, Zyuganov has announced that the socialist ideas he espouses are grounded in the 2,000-year-old Christian tradition and have deep roots in the Russian Orthodox Church.

While not personally charismatic, Zyuganov is a master tactician whose organizational skills have won grudging praise from his opponents. He organized the resurgence of the Communist Party after the blow it suffered in the 1991 coup. He won in court against proceedings initiated by the Yeltsin administration to ban the party in 1993 and then led the party to electoral victory in the Duma elections of December 1995. Zyuganov also is credited with building a broad coalition with the nationalists for the 1996 presidential elections.

The Communist Party has the strongest organization in Russia. No one, including President Yeltsin, can match its network of political hacks, propagandists, union organizers, and influence peddlers. The party enjoys unparalleled popularity in the cash-starved military, obsolete heavy industry, and inefficient agricultural sectors and has largely restored its network of grass-roots cells in factories, schools, universities, and government offices. As in Soviet times, membership is by co-optation only, and three recommendations from party members in good standing are needed in order to join. Thus, the party is not a mass political movement in the Western sense.

Zyuganov is considered a moderate by Communist Party standards, and there are many, both within and outside the party, who are more hard-line than he. Some of these allies, such as Viktor Anpilov, head of the Marxist-Leninist “Labor Russia” movement, support Zyuganov only on condition that he drop any kind of social democratic rhetoric. Anpilov believes in shooting and jailing political opponents and is vitriolic in his denunciations of the West. In the future, Zyuganov may be challenged and replaced by a more orthodox communist; he also could be challenged successfully by such other contenders as Valentian Kuptsov, former chairman and current number two figure in the party, or Duma Chairman Gennady Seleznev.

While Yeltsin and Zyuganov most probably will remain the two front-runners for the presidency, three other candidates could break into the second round of elections. If Yeltsin stumbles—for example, if he is incapacitated or there is a major terrorist event, possibly triggered by the war in Chechnya—one of the following candidates could appeal to Russian voters and cut Yeltsin out of the runoff elections.

GRIGORY YAVLINSKY: THE REFORMERS’ BEST HOPE

Grigory Yavlinsky, the leader of “Yabloko,” a reformist party with social democratic leanings and the only free-market party left in the Duma, is projected to receive about 10 percent of the popular vote in the first round of the upcoming elections. His supporters are those who did not gain property or power in the economic reform but still have anti-communist, pro-free market, and democratic convictions. His core support is in large cities, such as Moscow and St. Petersburg, among students, the intelligentsia, and some entrepreneurs. Yavlinsky rose to prominence by attacking former Prime Minister Yegor Gaidar and President Yeltsin for mistakes committed during the implementation of economic reforms, although today he admits that Gaidar’s reforms were “mostly

correct.”¹¹ He is the author of the reformist 500-day program, which was rejected by former Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev in 1990 and never implemented.

Born in Lviv, Ukraine, and 44 years old, Yavlinsky is the most Westernized of all the presidential candidates. He speaks English well and has a long-standing academic relationship with Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government. Western free-market economists sometimes consider his policies too Keynesian and inflationary, and many of the policies he advocates, such as raising pensions and salaries in the state sector, could lead to increased public spending and inflation if implemented.

Yavlinsky strongly opposes the war in Chechnya, and his criticism of Yeltsin's policies in Chechnya have split traditional democratic reformers. Those who support the war, such as former Finance Minister Boris Fedorov, also support Boris Yeltsin; those who oppose the war—for example, Andrey Sakharov's widow Elena Bonner and Yeltsin's former Human Rights Commissioner, Sergei A. Kovalev—support Yavlinsky. Yavlinsky criticizes the Yeltsin administration for violating human rights (especially in the Chechen conflict), allowing corruption to spread, and neglecting the rule of law. He also favors full economic integration of the Commonwealth of Independent States under the aegis of Russia. Such a merger would include a common market of goods, services, and labor, and possibly a single currency. At the same time, however, Yavlinsky recognizes the need for these countries to preserve their independence.

Yavlinsky lacks a strong party machine, is a poor campaigner, and has largely run out of funds. In addition, many in the democratic camp have not forgiven his vitriolic attacks on former Yeltsin Prime Minister and democrat Yegor Gaidar. Today, it does not appear that Yavlinsky can beat either Yeltsin or Zyuganov in the first round of elections; therefore, he is unlikely to be a strong challenger in the second round.

Yeltsin and Yavlinsky have conducted negotiations that could lead to Yavlinsky's withdrawing his candidacy in favor of Yeltsin, but these talks so far have been inconclusive. Yeltsin, hoping to receive several million of Yavlinsky's votes, has stated that, if re-elected, he would offer Yavlinsky the post of First Deputy Prime Minister in charge of economic reform.¹² This post, formerly occupied by the dynamic Anatoly Chubais, is occupied currently by industrialist Vladimir Kadannikov, who lacks strong credentials as a reformer. Yavlinsky is holding out, hoping for a strong showing in the first round of the elections, and possibly that he will be offered the post of Prime Minister if Yeltsin's position seems desperate enough. As his price for supporting Yeltsin for president, Yavlinsky also is demanding an end to the war in Chechnya and the firing of some the hard-liners in the current administration.

Yavlinsky could win in his campaign dealings with Yeltsin, or he could destroy his political future and reputation. If his demands are accepted, and if he can secure some guarantees that Yeltsin will not fire him, he could jump-start the economic reforms, end the war in Chechnya, and become the recognized leader of the democratic camp, greatly enhancing his chances of becoming the next president of Russia. He also could be pushed aside by Yeltsin after the election, meeting the same fate as Gaidar and Chubais. In short, lacking a strong political party machine, financial support, and executive experience, Yavlinsky could join the Yeltsin administration without enough power to accomplish anything, condemning himself to a swift political demise.

11 Speech at the Brookings Institution, Washington, D.C., September 6, 1995.

12 Open Media Research Institute *Daily Digest*, Vol. 2, No. 97, May 20, 1996.

