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## TEPSIS PAPERS February 2014

Myriam Désert

# RUSSIA, OCTOBER 1993. TWENTY YEARS LATER, EVALUATING THE CRISIS

On September 21, 1993, president Boris Yeltsin issued an ukase (decree) by which the duties of the Congress of the People's Deputies and the Supreme Soviet of the Russian Federation were suspended. Presented by some as a way out of a conflict pitting the President against the Parliament that had been going on for several months, decried by others as a coup, the decree led to a 14-day crisis which saw political conflict fall into violent confrontation.

Refusing to comply with the presidential decree, a number of deputies supported by General Rutskoi, Russian Vice-President, met in extraordinary session in the White House and held a siege against security forces. Demonstrations were organised in the city: Yeltsin supporters gathered near the Moscow Soviet, the deputies supporters assembled near the White House. The political conflict ended on October 4 with the army's shelling of the Parliament under presidential orders, and the arrest of the rebel

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deputies and their supporters. The toll: over 150 dead and 400 wounded. On December 12, 1993, a new Constitution - still current in Russia - was adopted by referendum

Twenty years later, the October 1993 crisis has become the subject matter for numerous publications, conferences and events (1). This amount of material and sources contrasts with the shroud of silence that surrounded these events for so long. However, despite the fact that participants are still available, audio, video and photographic sources abound, and documents collected in the semi burnt down White House were preserved by the State Archives, the October crisis itself remains to be analysed.

Accounts of the events by the participants, whose recollections can be at odds with one another, are still rife with passion. Unsurprisingly, then, when exploring this material, one emerges without any unequivocal vision of the events. Twenty years of hindsight is indeed too short for a rational depiction of an event of such complexity and importance for the political future of the country. Twenty years later, however, it is possible to probe the memory of the event and see how it is analysed by actors and witnesses.

## THE CRISIS BEFORE THE CRISIS

On the eve of these events, the game remained largely undecided, and the road to follow still undetermined for the young Russian Federation, borne of the demise of the USSR. The “shock therapy”, initiated in early 1992 by Yeltsin’s “reform government” was quickly deemed a “shock without therapy”, throwing a large percentage of society in deprivation. A number of Supreme Soviet deputies, elected in 1990, then decided to take a stand in defence of populations weakened by the reforms, upholding less radical action and challenging the executive power, instigator of the reforms, despite the fact that it had a few months before been endowed with special powers by the Supreme Soviet to carry out these reforms, precisely.

The monetarist policy, another aspect of the economy “stabilization” was railed at, following protests which saw workers siding with the “red managers” running factories - which would remain collective property until the launch of privatizations in the fall of 1992. These unexpected alliances bear witness to the uncertainty that typified the period. The country was midstream in the process of conversion to market economy, while deputies and executive authorities were unable to agree on which regime (presidential, parliamentary or mixed) to instate. In this context of tensions, supporters of a “third way” were unable to make themselves heard.

Institutional life remained shaped by a constitution dating back to 1978 that didn’t anticipate the conflicts brought about by mutations in post-soviet Russia, nor provide for

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(1) See compiled sources and material at <http://russie.hypotheses.org/1070>. One will also find at <http://russie.hypotheses.org/> (under the header 1993) a scientific bibliography, several reports of conferences held in Moscow, as well as material from the conference “Un octobre oublié? La Russie en 1993” held in Paris in November 2013, on which conclusions this paper is namely based.

any means of regulation. In April of 1993, a referendum sought popular ruling. Consisting of four questions (2) hardly capable to yield univocal answers, its outcome was interpreted to their advantage by both representatives of the executive and the deputies.

While the change of course had been welcomed with an equally naive and fervent faith in market economics as the new “bright future”, the reality check came as disturbing and reactions were contrasted, even amongst groups which in the past had been united behind the common goal of liberalization, whose relevance was crumbling. There were wide fluctuations in the motives and goals of those who would be fighting in October 1993, as well as in the shape, the means and even the meaning of their struggle. Between each side, a logic of confrontation prevailed, even though the positioning of many was vague and the participants ignored who their actual allies were. This uncertainty had considerable effects on perceptions, expectations, calculations and planning by the main participants. On top of this came the spontaneous and chaotic intervention of “the crowd”, mass demonstrations having become, with the Perestroika, a legitimate and common means of expression.

This is the context in which the clash would take place, with a lack of operational and unified “headquarters”, be it around B. Yeltsin or the White House. Hence, this chaos remains difficult to analyze, while the traumatic dimension of the events heightens the difficulty to account for them.

## UNLIKELY AGREEMENT, IMPOSSIBLE DEFINITION

In early October 1993, after several days of tension in and around the besieged White House, where water, electricity and communications have been cut, while negotiations are under way under the auspices of the Orthodox Church, events seem to abruptly take a turn for the worse: violent fighting on October 2nd near the Arbat, demonstration on October 3rd overflowing police lines, armed confrontation near the Ostankino television tower on the evening of the 3rd, shelling of the White House on the 4th.

In the speeding up and loss of control that characterize how events unfolded, the stakes themselves were shattered: for the main participants, the struggle for power became a struggle for political survival, then for mere survival. Violence catches everybody off guard, all the more since the peaceful scenario of the USSR demise in 1991 had led them to believe it was from then on improbable,

The pulse of those few tragic days of Fall 1993 explains both the confusion and volatility of perceptions, and the weight of rumour. At the highest level of state, even, watching

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(2) Electors were asked to vote on: confidence in the President of the Federation (for: 58%), support for the President’s socioeconomic policy (for: 53%), early presidential elections (for: 49,5%, hence against: 50,5%) and early elections of the People’s Deputies (for: 67,2%).

CNN is how one keeps abreast of the news. Information is only sparingly available, and “given that journalists lie, anything can be true”. The information building process calls into question the reality of identities as well as facts: did these snipers even exist, who are said to be responsible of many casualties? Was it “real” shells that hit the building? Were there 165 dead (per the official version) or hundreds shot?

While establishing the facts remains difficult, in the absence of any credible investigation, their definition becomes a particularly contentious exercise. A number of accounts rail against such shams as the pretense of the power of the soviets, the illusion of B. Yeltsin’s democratic ambitions, the wrongful use of the term “Parliament” to designate the Supreme Soviet. Not only are the institutions and individuals to be “unmasked”, but the stigmata are reversed: Boris Yeltsin is called a “bolshevik”, even though he pledges to eliminate the “communist plague”.

This event also creates a challenge for individuals and their representations: it constitutes a clash between political beliefs and ethical stance and instigates a blurring of one’s own identity. How can one in the military, having sworn allegiance to the motherland, arbitrate between the White House and the Kremlin? Being part of the “power structures” does not mean choosing the same side for everybody. Indeed, many will eschew siding with one camp or the other. And what does siding with one camp mean? Defending the Supreme Soviet is not the same thing as siding with those who, inside the building, resist B. Yeltsin.

All those aspects prevent the creation of a consensual account, be it at the lowest level. Defining the events as a civil war or not, a question raised on many occasions during the November 2013 Paris conference, appears all the more crucial to the participants, since it outlines the boundaries of legality, and hence, the political regime borne of this conflict.

## A MOMENT OF HISTORY - OR A STORY TO BE WRITTEN

In everybody’s view, however, it’s a historical moment, as one can attest from the many parallels with past revolutions brought up in accounts and analyses: Thermidor or Brumaire, moments of dual power such as 1917 or Chile 1973. By summoning “laws of history” in presentations and accounts, as well, lessening the role of the key participants.

This aspect is illustrated by the narratives created: they depict an event devoid of heroes or villains and point out the significant role of spur-of-the-moment actions in the context of a hurried sequence of events, governed by uncertainty. This calls for an accurate depiction of the street clashes: it’s all the more crucial to know who was “holding” this or that location, who were the security forces who, as was pointed out repeatedly, were heterogeneous. To better understand the unfolding of the event, the participants should be pluralized: it’s not just two “powers” coming head to head. Regional powers interfered, and their role remains to be accounted for.

October 1993 is also a historical marker. It marks an end, here again diversely identified: is it the end of the Soviet system (attacked in its symbolic place par excellence, the

Soviet) or the end of democratization (the White House then embodying the hope of a parliamentary republic)? Victory of future over past for some, curtailing of a different future for others. These events were in any case regarded as the onset of a sequence going from the 1993 Constitution (establishing a strong presidential regime) to the authoritarianism of the Putin system, seen by some as an inevitable evolution, the blood shed requiring the transmission of power to follow a dynastic framework and to safeguard oneself from score settlements, wether judiciary or political.

Although it was often heard that “all sides had lost”, defining not only who won or who lost, but also what was lost or won is difficult. Establishing a global assessment remains too ambitious a goal, considering the lack of hindsight, but the matter could come about in the study of individual paths, in the way the events impacted individuals and their representations. The “defeated” in the White House may have seen their careers terminated, but that also seemed to be the case for Yeltsin’s entourage, few of which still hold prominent positions in the political sphere today.

In truth, aside from a few parallels between the 1993 events and the 2011-2012 protests, the impact of the 1993 events on the current political system, and the shaping of institutions that they originated were relatively absent from the discussions surrounding the commemoration. They however determined an evolution on the perception of the nature of politics, of the relationship between power and society, of conflict resolution practices, and originated new rules and attitudes, providing as many topics for future research.