

The October 1993 Crisis in Russia – some notes for discussion

“I order the suspension of the parliamentary, administrative and supervisory functions of the Congress of People's Deputies and the Supreme Soviet of the Russian Federation... The Constitution... and legislation... will remain in force to the extent that they do not conflict with this Decree”
Moscow, Kremlin, 21 September 1993, 8pm, Presidential Decree (*Ukaz*) n° 1400.

Presented by some as a way out of the intractable conflict which had opposed the President and Parliament for months, denounced by others as a coup, Boris Yeltsin's decree provoked a crisis which would last fourteen days, during which political conflict turned into violent confrontation. From 21 September to 4 October 1993, Russia experienced a major political crisis. In response to Yeltsin's *Ukaz*, Members of Parliament supported by General Rutskoi, Russian Vice-President, met in extraordinary session, refused to comply with the presidential decision, occupied Parliament (the White House) and held out against the security forces. Protests were organised in the city: Yeltsin's supporters gathered near the Moscow Soviet (*Mossoviet*), those supporting the deputies assembled near the White House. The political confrontation ended with the storming of Parliament by the army on 4 October, under the orders of the President, and the arrests of the rebel deputies and their supporters. The toll: more than 150 dead and 400 injured.

Twenty years after October 1993, this Conference aims to propose a sociological analysis of this crucial but neglected political crisis. To this end, it seeks to question the official version of the event, which was principally the work of the victors, who imposed their vision of the confrontation and its consequences, in particular concerning the institutional outcomes. The Conference will also restore the place of alternative accounts and memories. It will analyse the diverse individual and collective trajectories of actors of the period. Focussing on the period prior to the conflict, its development and its consequences, the Conference will explore both the winners and the losers of the conflict, its active participants and its observers. Particular attention will be paid to the issue of the explosion of violence, its effects on the crisis and its outcome.

Before the crisis, political actors of the period operated in an uncertain and complex context. The ascent towards conflict cannot be analysed as a conspiracy or as a linear rise to violent crisis. This outcome was in large part unexpected and in no way inevitable. The October 1993 crisis was that of a Russian power which had built itself in opposition to the power of the Soviet Union, with the election in 1990 of the Congress of People's Deputies of the RSFSR. Boris Yeltsin, elected President of the Supreme Soviet (upper house) in May 1990, then of Russia in June 1991, had obtained the support of a composite majority of parliamentarians in his struggle to gain powers from the Union. Until mid-1991, the President and those deputies who did not support him (representing two thirds of seats) had fairly convergent interests. With the fall of the USSR in December 1991, these points of convergence diminished. Questions began to be asked about the type of regime to be established: presidential, parliamentary or mixed? Doubts grew over the implementation of the economic programme of “shock therapy”, with its heavy social and economic consequences. Divisions between opposition groups within the Congress of People's Deputies became more marked (emergence of a “red-brown” opposition, divisions among “democrats”...). In the course of 1993, there were several attempts at conciliation conducted by various intermediaries. Multiple agreements were concluded between the two powers, varying in degrees of transparency and in the extent to which they were implemented, yet the situation remained unstable.

In Autumn 1993, after the publication of Yeltsin's decree (*ukaz*), actors involved in the conflict, both within the Supreme Soviet and the Presidency, were improvising. From this perspective, the Conference will attempt to shed light on what was happening in the crisis, focusing on the following aspects:

1. The context of widespread uncertainty which reigned between 21 September and 4 October. This will be evaluated and the way in which it affected the actors' perceptions, expectations and calculations will be explored. Information circulating at the time was incomplete and partisan, favouring misunderstandings, bluffs and the propagation of rumours. Some actors decided to take an active part, while others played the waiting game.
2. How did mobilizations affect the various social worlds and institutional sites in which they took place (the political sphere and Parliament, army and police, Presidency, state sectors, press, TV, radio, etc.)? What splits occurred within these worlds and how did they develop during the course of the crisis? What coalitions emerged? What was the role of the trade unions, parties and social organisations (in particular those who refused to take sides but provided assistance to the injured)? Did these mobilizations reach other actors (federal ministries, regional powers, judiciary...) and to what effect?
3. Succession of moves between the protagonists: How was it decided to dissolve Parliament? How did the response of the opposing parliamentarians emerge? What was the role of street protests in the development of events? How did events turn violent and what made that possible? How did the army and the police intervene? How was order maintained during those days in October? Did the police have the required "know-how"? How can relations between the Presidency and the higher echelons of the Army be explained and described during this period? How and when was it decided to strike Parliament?
4. Finally, what negotiation and mediation attempts took place during these fourteen days? The efforts of the Orthodox Church are well-known. Were there other, less publicised, mediation attempts (Western States, Post-Soviet States or other actors)?

At the end of the conflict, new power relations emerged in the political contest. The history of the bodies that grew out of the crisis has been widely documented. The parliamentary elections of December 1993 and the referendum which led to the adoption of the Constitution have been fully analysed. Yet, the institutional choices made during this period raise questions. They resulted in a reduced range of possibilities, in terms of the forms that could be taken by Russian democracy, and froze contingent institutional solutions, which prior to 1993 were intended to be temporary. After the crisis, the future of the defeated opposition was neglected. Yet, it is important to see how the opposition reorganised, what were its forms of action and the means of control) by the Federal government and what were the fates of former opponents to Boris Yeltsin after October 1993. As for Yeltsin's supporters, 1993 also marked a break in the political careers of many of them, for example the "democrat" deputies who were not re-elected in 1993 and the many citizens involved in the "democratic movement" in support of perestroika: some completely abandoned political activity, others reconverted to careers in associations or economics.

While attention was focussed on events in Moscow, the only place where they degenerated into violent confrontation, the dissolution across Russia of local and regional soviets marked the beginning of long-lasting disillusion with politics, while accelerating the rebuilding of regional power, in particular around the division of property.

In the longer term, the new practices and representation that developed in the Russian political arena should be explored. October 1993 has been considered as a stage in the regime's derailment from democracy and as forming the matrix of political developments in the country leading to Vladimir Putin. The conflict has also been considered as a precursor to the use of violence to internal ends (in particular for re-establishing order in Chechnya). October 1993 also raised questions for the relationship between Russia and the West. What were the effects of this confrontation on Russia's role on the international scene?

In order to explore these issues, the Conference aims to give a central role to the various actors of the conflict. To this end, the call for contributions is divided into six main themes:

- **Questioning actors from the period to provide new sources of knowledge about the events.** Without access to archives and in the absence of the establishment of an investigation commission at the end of the conflict, current research is based on the testimonies of actors from one side or the other, accounts of journalists and compilations of documents. The Conference could enable discussion of the establishment and use of these sources and contribute to supplementing them.

- **Understanding the stakes of the conflict as identified by the actors:** What political models were competing in their eyes? What were they fighting for? What was the importance of institutional questions, of questions of legitimacy, but also of modes of exercising power? What were the debates about economic reforms and their significance?

- **Highlighting the diversity of the trajectories of political actors,** the resources available to them and utilised at different times. The analysis will pay attention to the positioning of different types of actor: institutional, political, trade unions, economic, religious... as well as to those who acted as mediators. The ways in which the crisis changed their trajectories and careers will also be explored.

- **Understanding the dynamics of the crisis.** The motives, objectives and stakes that gave birth to the crisis were shaken and transformed by events, through mobilizations and strategic moves by the various actors, and the conflict gained an independent dynamic. In a situation of widespread uncertainty, within several days competition for power turned into a struggle for the political survival of the protagonists and for those bodies they claimed to represent. The conflict took place on sites considered to be strategic or symbolic (the White House, the Kremlin, the Ostankino television tower, the Mossovet...). The conflict thus had its own social topography, i.e., social spaces and institutional arenas – political sphere, Parliament, Presidency, state sectors (including the army and the police), regional powers, the media world, etc. where mobilizations, counter-mobilizations and succession of moves took place. While everything seemed calm elsewhere in and around Moscow, what was happening in other regions? How was the conflict perceived in the former Soviet republics?

- **Analysing the time-frame of the conflict and its consequences.** During the crisis, actors participated according to varying time-frames. Time was not linear, there were moments of acceleration and tipping points (in particular the recourse to violence). The time-frame of institutional reforms differed from that of economic reforms. How can parallels be drawn between 1991 and 1993? Between 1993 and the Soviet past? In this history of the 1990s? And since 2000 has there been a policy of forgetting?

- **Making sense of 1993:** What memory of the conflict is perpetuated and within which groups? Which sites commemorate these events? Beyond political interpretations of the conflict, which literary, cinematographic or other artistic works contribute to the commemoration of this event? How does the Russian State recognise responsibilities and respective roles (military decorations, amnesty)? What forms of justice and reparations were envisaged? Did the development of the crisis and its outcomes constitute the beginning of the disintegration of the Central power over the regions and asymmetric federalism. How have researchers in Russia and elsewhere analysed this event and how have their analyses contributed to an understanding of the “sense” of the crisis of 1993?

Practical Information:

The Conference will take place at CERI, 56 rue Jacob, on 18-19 November 2013.

Working languages: French, English, Russian (oral presentations may be delivered in these three languages. Only translation from French to Russian and from Russian to French will be provided).

The final program will soon be available on this website : <http://russie.hypotheses.org/category/octobre-93>

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