

Boris Yeltsin's Russia: Constitutional Conflicts, NATO, and the Dawn of Putin

By

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Thesis

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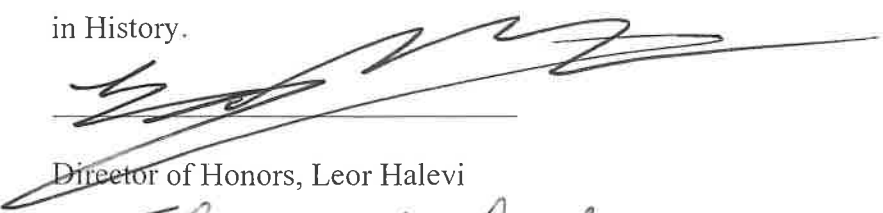
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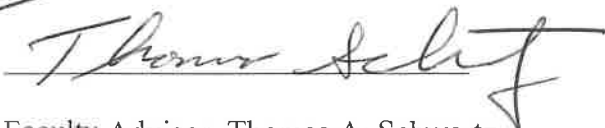
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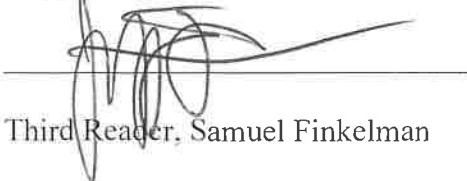
On the basis of this thesis defended by the candidate on April 8, 2025
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Most importantly, I want to thank my parents, for their love and dedication, and for supporting intellectual pursuits at Vanderbilt University.

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“The question of what went wrong in the 1990s in Russia, why our democratic transition was botched, holds to my mind much more than historical or academic interest. Because there will be another window of opportunity for change in Russia, and we do not have a right to repeat those same mistakes. And from that, we need to know them, and we need to learn from them.”

Vladimir Kara-Murza, Russian politician, historian, and dissident¹

¹ Vladimir Kara-Murza, “Robert G. Wesson Lecture 2024: A Discussion with Vladimir Kara-Murza,” Stanford University, 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W3GcLz3Vk_A; Though history does not repeat itself exactly, it still rhymes, after all.



Figure One²

“Portrait of Boris Yeltsin,” Boris Yeltsin is portrayed as a dinosaur.

DINO: Democracy In Name Only.

² Kerry Waghorn, “Portrait of Boris Yeltsin,” January 13, 1992, Library and Archives of Canada, ID Number 2970814, <http://central.bac-lac.gc.ca/.redirect?app=fonandcol&id=2970814&lang=eng>.

Introduction

*“Yeltsin’s nineties...[...]They were a happy time...a crazy decade...terrifying years...the age of fantastical democracy...the fatal nineties...hands down, a golden age...the age of self-denunciation...mean and hard times...a bright dawn...aggressive ...turbulent...”*¹

—An anonymous Russian within the chapter “Snatches of Street Noise and Kitchen Conversations (2002-2012)” in Svetlana Alexievich’s *Secondhand Time: The Last of the Soviets*.

After the dissolution of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (U.S.S.R.) in 1991, the world questioned what Russia would become at the end of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. During Boris Yeltsin’s presidency from July 10, 1991, to December 31, 1999, Russia faced an unstable political environment, both at home and abroad.² Moments of instability included former Soviet republics gaining independence from the U.S.S.R. and two *coups d’état* on Russian presidential power.³ A new Russian constitution was created, with enormous powers given to the executive. The Yeltsin government implemented intense economic policies that brought extreme financial hardships. Yeltsin ordered a gruesome war in Chechnya, a direct effect of political embarrassment. Organized crime spread, and the oligarch class materialized. The political West balanced its approach by welcoming Eastern European countries into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)—a collective defense

¹ Svetlana Alexievich, *Secondhand Time: The Last of the Soviets*, trans. Bela Shayevich (Random House, 2017), 287.

² Occasionally spelled “Y’eltsin” on the record of primary sources and within the existing secondary scholarship. The author will maintain “Yeltsin” spelling throughout the document, and any direct quotes from sources with “Y’eltsin,” “E’ltsin,” or “E’ltsina” are in reference to president Boris Yeltsin. With exception of select primary sources, I have transliterated Russian names according to standard practice in English.

³ *Coup d’état* against Gorbachev in 1991; *Coup d’état* against Yeltsin in 1993.

organization—while simultaneously pursuing a cooperative foreign policy with Russia.⁴ NATO conducted out-of-area bombings during the Kosovo War in the former Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Finally, in 1999, Yeltsin chose Vladimir Putin to inherit the role of President of Russia. Although these are only a few key moments of the complete chain of events, they emphasize their impact on the early twenty-first century.

This thesis sheds new light on critical moments of Yeltsin’s presidency within three chapters. The events under investigation are the following: the 1993 Constitutional Crisis, the First Chechen War (1994-1996), and the negotiations leading up to the NATO-Russia Founding Act of 1997. All three chapters utilize new primary source materials. The research process included nearly 400 primary sources, seventy-five of which are government declassifications released from January 2024 to March 2025, along with sixty-nine video footage sources from the Chechen Archive by the Society of Threatened Peoples.⁵ Source materials range from English,

⁴ The term “political West” was first seen by the author in Richard Sakwa, *The Lost Peace: How the West Failed to Prevent a Second Cold War* (Yale University Press, 2023). The author favors the shorthand reference to “the political West” as opposed to “the West” because it is more geographically inclusive of the Western-led international order countries that are not necessarily located in the ‘West.’ It also accounts for countries in the ‘West’ that do not necessarily align with the Western-led international order. “The political West” also specifies the ownership of actions to the political establishment of the ‘West,’ just as how the “Clinton Administration” is a more accurate description than using “the United States” when discussing presidential actions.

⁵ Signed Researcher’s Statement at the Chechen Archive, Bern, Switzerland, on March 1, 2024: “The principal aim of the Chechen Archive is to make its holdings available for research. [...] The Chechen Archive is not responsible for checking the authenticity, accuracy, completeness and timeliness of data recorded in the documents in its care. I understand that the documents prove only the fact that these data were preserved by the originator, keeper or donor of the documents [...] I declare that I am aware of my special obligation to respect the privacy rights of individuals in any publication of biographical data from unpublished sources contained in the Chechen Archive [...] I hereby declare that I will use the copied material solely for my own research and/or for educational purposes. I will not supply a copy of it to any other person, nor will I use it for any commercial or for-profit activities.”

Russian, and Chechen languages.⁶ The chapters also include memoirs and oral histories; the author conducted two oral history interviews with former National Security Council (NSC) member and U.S. Ambassador to NATO Alexander Russell “Sandy” Vershbow, regarding U.S.-NATO-Russia relations, and former NSC member Steven Pifer, regarding U.S.-Russia relations.

Yeltsin’s leadership during moments of crisis was escalatory and driven by self-preservation. It often was his own political survival first, democracy after. Though he presented himself as someone who wanted to integrate Russia with the political West, his reliance on force and constitutional maneuvering consolidated Russian executive power and weakened the credibility of his democratic reform movement. In doing so, he gained constitutional powers that resembled those of a tsar more than a president. The consequence was a Russia ripe for a succession of authoritarians. By the late 1990s, Yeltsin’s health and legitimacy deteriorated, and his government had become what I would call a “Democracy In Name Only” (DINO). The term DINO also accounts for the fact that the political West publicly presented Yeltsin’s government as a hopeful democracy, but internally, it became clear that the regime had little appearance of a democracy by 1999.⁷ The political West knew this reality, as declassifications reveal that the political West prioritized bolstering the personal power of Yeltsin in hopes of a better Russia instead of warning about the regime’s democratic decline. Yeltsin capitalized on the democratic

⁶ Non-English language video translations were completed by first transferring the video via software to a digital transcript to read, to which the author utilized that foreign language transcript to best determine translations.

⁷ This neologism “Democracy In Name Only” (DINO) captures the “viewing experience” of the Yeltsin presidency by the political West. Political science terms such as “competitive autocracy” define a situation where a country is missing traits of a democracy. But those terms do not necessarily capture in its name the contradictory (and erroneous) nature of “viewing” a competitive autocracy as a democracy.

framing of the Russian government for his own purposes, while the political West continued to hope and dream the word democracy into existence.

Previous scholarship on Yeltsin emphasized that he was the father of Russian democracy, to which it was written that Yeltsin protected the budding democracy from the old Soviet guard and created a comparatively hopeful future for Russia to be integrated into the political West. For instance, as biographer Timothy Colton wrote, Yeltsin “made fateful decisions that put his society on a much more promising road” and that he was “a hero in history.”⁸ Now that time has passed and the Yeltsin effect is largely complete, there is overwhelming evidence that shows these claims about Yeltsin are outdated. The truth was better captured by Sergei Kovalev’s public resignation letter as Russian Human Rights Commissioner to Yeltsin in 1996: “If democracy is fated to someday exist in Russia (and I believe it will), it will exist not because of you, but in spite of you.”⁹ Yeltsin left Russia on New Year’s Eve in 1999 without a strong political incentive for Russians to continue his democratic experiment, and worse, he gave Vladimir Putin a metaphorical roadmap to reshape Russia into a state overweight in executive power. Yeltsin also helped Putin’s domestic credibility to challenge the global order as he wished. Rather than the narrative of Yeltsin as ‘the democrat’ vs. Putin ‘the tyrant,’ Yeltsin constructed key institutional and political aspects that allowed for Putin’s dominance.

Chapter One focuses on the height of the struggle between executive power vs. parliamentary power in Russia: the 1993 Constitutional Crisis. This was no quaint constitutional ‘crisis:’ by October of that year, it was a matter of whether a civil war would start. The crisis

⁸ Timothy J. Colton, *Yeltsin: A Life* (Basic Books, 2011), 6.

⁹ “Sergei Kovalev Resignation Letter to Boris Yeltsin 1996,” 24 January 1996, originally published in *Izvestia*, *New York Review of Books*, trans. Catherine A. Fitzpatrick, National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/27561-document-3a-sergei-kovalev-resignation-letter-boris-yeltsin-1996-translation>.

began with the Russian parliament's political retaliation against Yeltsin's shock therapy and privatization economic policies. The political fight boiled with the confirmation vote of Yegor Gaidar, who created those policies, for the post of Yeltsin's Prime Minister. A reneged political compromise on Gaidar's failed confirmation vote led to a standoff between the executive and legislative powers, with the result of death in the streets of Moscow. Within declassified government documents, one sees Yeltsin's brutal honesty and vulnerability in sharing his thoughts, dilemmas, and strategy in the constitutional crisis with the leaders of the political West. I created three new theoretical dichotomies for understanding Yeltsin in the crisis—"personal power vs. regime defender," "reckless actions vs. reasonable actions," and "democratic decline vs. spectacle." These reflect the main divergent arguments in scholarship about the crisis. Yeltsin saw himself as a regime defender, and he cynically viewed the Chairman of the Supreme Soviet Ruslan Khasbulatov as seeking personal power. Even though the political West publicly encouraged Yeltsin's actions, leaders and analysts shared serious worries about them behind his back, especially regarding the creation of the post-crisis constitution that tilted so heavily toward executive power. The political West's consistent encouragement publicly and privately to Yeltsin may have increased his overconfidence to act recklessly. Even though Yeltsin granted amnesty to the *coup* plotters, the effect of the crisis was not merely a spectacle and did exhibit indicators that Russia was on a return to authoritarianism. The ultimate outcome of the 1993 constitutional crisis—which was won through a necessary use of force—was a hyperinflation of Yeltsin's own personal power and likely the guarantee of his own political survival.

Chapter Two analyzes Russia's first post-Soviet war against Chechnya from 1994 to 1996.¹⁰ Contrary to Yeltsin's claim that the war was to restore constitutional order and stop their independence, Russian sources reveal that his decision to go to war was largely a direct effect of political embarrassment from the failed covert operations to remove Chechen President Dzhokhar Dudayev in 1994. This is also logically substantiated by the fact that Shamil Basayev issued an ultimatum on Yeltsin's Chechnya policy by conducting a terrorist attack (hijacking a Russian airliner with passengers) three years earlier in November 1991, which did not warrant a war response by Yeltsin. In conducting the 1994 failed covert operation, Yeltsin ignored the Russian parliament's decision to not engage militarily with Chechnya. Not only was his secret decision in November 1994 to go to war more of a political survival concern than one rooted in national security but also was one that ignored advice from key advisors who would have told him not to go to war. His act of war was predicated on his overconfident assumption that—as briefed by Defense Minister Pavel Grachev—the war would only last eight days. Because the war was not well-planned nor well-sold to the Russian public, Yeltsin's political mandate as a democratic leader diminished as it soon became evident that he would not receive a quick victory. In the process of the war, Yeltsin compromised the national security of Russia with an increased threat of terrorism and ignored Russian human rights violations. But the end to the First Chechen War was equally a disappointment in that it was to be the first war. Within the negotiations for the Khasavyurt Accords and the Peace Treaty, Chechnya's determination of sovereign status was delayed until 2001, and no serious measures were set up to revitalize the economic conditions of Chechnya. Yeltsin likely used the negotiations to score a political victory

¹⁰ The Transnistria War (1990-1992) was not directly a war with Russia. Instead, Russia played a significant supporting role for Transnistria against Moldova in the war.

before the Russian Presidential Election of 1996. Yeltsin's staff even asked the U.S. National Security Council what Clinton's response would be if Yeltsin delayed the Russian Presidential Election of 1996 due to electoral worries.¹¹ In the negotiations, Yeltsin also acted unfairly toward the Chechen delegation and OSCE. Although some, such as Tim Guldemann, who oversaw the OSCE negotiations, said that the peace deal was all that was "realistically possible," the possibilities were heavily limited by Yeltsin himself. It is no surprise, then, that Yeltsin's inability to create a strong peace deal allowed for organized crime to continue to flourish between Moscow and Grozny in the post-war settlement. This resulted in Putin prosecuting the second war from 1999-2008 and dangerously increasing the powers of the president further. The First Chechen War might not have been a war at all if Yeltsin had been more pragmatic in 1994, nor would the first war have easily led to a second if he committed himself more closely to genuine peace strategies in 1996-1997.

Finally, Chapter Three traces the negotiations that led to the NATO-Russia Founding Act of 1997. The Warsaw Pact disappeared after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and there existed a temporary period when the "Russian Menace" did not reign supreme (though it still existed) in Russia's "near abroad."¹² In response, Eastern European countries petitioned the political West

¹¹ Steven Pifer: "Another interesting moment, which I'm not sure has been reported. There's no reason not to report it now. But in the spring of 1996, when Chip Blacker was still there. I had moved from NSC Director for Ukraine to become NSC Director for Russia. And we had [Yeltsin's Presidential Advisor] Sergei Karaganov come. And he paid a call to us, wanting to talk about things. And at the end of the meeting, he said, 'What would the reaction of your boss be if Yeltsin were to postpone the election this summer [in 1996]?' And we said, 'Very bad.' We said, 'One of the reasons that we engage and support Yeltsin is we see him as a democrat and democratic presidents normally do not postpone elections'" (William Ledesma, Oral History of Steven Karl Pifer, 11 March 2025).

¹² Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Russian Menace to Europe*, ed. Paul W. Blackstock and Bert F. Hoselitz (The Free Press, 1952); Author note: the repurposing of Marx and Engels' nineteenth century concept for the late twentieth century is for symbolic purposes, not an attribution to the complete reality.

to solve their deepening security dilemma. As the U.S. was in its unipolar moment under President Bill Clinton, the U.S. and NATO held a principal interest in growing the NATO-led international order. Initially, Yeltsin was supportive of NATO partnerships with Eastern European countries and Russia, but his opinion changed upon hearing that this partnership would evolve into NATO membership. Thus, when NATO enlargement was announced in 1994, Yeltsin diplomatically sought to stop Eastern European countries from joining NATO, despite his weak bargaining position. Instead of fully capitalizing on cooperation to build a productive and long-lasting relationship with NATO's mission post-Cold War, Yeltsin sought political gains with Russian anti-Westerners to try to broker a deal to stop NATO expansion but ultimately failed. He thus focused on issues in the negotiations that seemed as if he was abandoning his original Western integration platform, legitimizing Russian anti-Western concerns about stopping NATO expansion. Yeltsin himself called the Founding Act a forced document. After the Founding Act was signed and the Visegrad countries joined NATO in 1999, Yeltsin directly engaged in anti-Western rhetoric in meetings with Clinton such as "Just give Europe to Russia. The U.S. is not in Europe. Europe should be the business of Europeans. Russia is half European and half Asian. [...] I will take Europe and provide them security. Well, not I. Russia will."¹³

Together, the chapters advance the argument that Yeltsin tore into Russia's democratic foundations and laid the constitutional groundwork for an authoritarian restoration, making a DINO. Chapter One shows how the constitutional crisis allowed Yeltsin to centralize power and sideline democratic methods under the guise of his reform platform. Chapter Two reveals how

¹³ "Memorandum of Conversation - President Boris Yeltsin of Russia," *Clinton Digital Library*, accessed March 1, 2025, <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/101582>, [19 November 1999]; The Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland (Visegrad-3) joined NATO on March 12, 1999.

Yeltsin's war in Chechnya undermined his democratic legitimacy, while endorsing principles of force and empire. Chapter Three demonstrates how Yeltsin's inconsistent and reactive foreign policy with NATO was a retreat from integration with the West, legitimizing anti-Western sentiments regarding NATO. Each chapter focuses on a flashpoint in his presidency in which Yeltsin prioritized personal power and facilitated conditions for Putin's meteoric rise. The key is acknowledging perhaps the error in the collective foreign policy of the political West to keep the sunk cost of relentlessly supporting Yeltsin's personal power, publicly and privately.

This thesis includes three appendices to bring additional understanding of the Russian 1990s, and generally, expanding references to these sources. The Epilogue shows how Yeltsin upended the remnants of his democratic movement by following through with his plan for Putin to become President of Russia. Appendix One is my interview with Alexander Russell "Sandy" Vershbow. Appendix Two is my interview with Steven Karl Pifer. Appendix Three includes various primary sources collected—some of which are new sources that have not been utilized by other scholars yet—and images not explored directly in the thesis for more contextualization on the Russian 1990s.

Chapter One: Yeltsin's Constitutional Crisis has “Totally Gone Out of Control”

Introduction

*“Bill, the Supreme Soviet has totally gone out of control. It no longer supports the reform process. They have become communist. We cannot no longer put up with that.”*¹

—Russian President Boris Yeltsin to U.S. President Bill Clinton over the telephone on September 21, 1993.

Missing in the scholarship of the Constitutional Crisis of 1993 are frameworks (and their categorical organization) for better discerning Yeltsin’s strategy and opinions as the crisis unfolded. Of course, the full picture of Yeltsin is hidden in the potentially still-classified Russian documents. Thankfully, this thesis helps fill the gap by analyzing newly declassified government sources from Germany, the United States, and the United Kingdom. One may wonder how such sources can reveal Yeltsin’s potential strategy and opinions. But it is quite evident upon review of the sources: in frequent phone calls, Yeltsin vulnerably confided in and gossiped with interlocutors from the political West about how he was handling the power struggle rooted in the outdated Soviet constitution and his reform policies, which turned into a bloody *coup*. This phenomenon of Yeltsin’s comfort in sharing information is largely exclusive to him; no Russian leader prior or after to date has placed such confidence and trust in the political West.²

Additionally, the declassifications showcase information from Yeltsin not previously acknowledged by scholars. By applying my new dichotomous frameworks of “personal power

¹ “Memorandum of Telephone Conversation - President Boris Yeltsin of Russia,” *Clinton Digital Library*, accessed February 28, 2025, <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/101341>. [21 September 1993]; Quote is as seen in the document. “We cannot no longer” was a confusing statement, but in short, Yeltsin said he cannot put up with the *coup* plotters anymore and was convincing Clinton to support him.

² Steven Pifer: “I don’t recall an instance where we said, ‘Gosh, Yeltsin just lied to the President [Clinton]’” (William Ledesma, Oral History Interview of Steven Pifer, 11 March 2025).

vs. regime defender,” Yeltsin’s “reckless actions vs. reasonable actions,” and “democratic decline vs. spectacle,” I have created and categorized convenient shorthand frameworks to reference the main disagreements among scholars regarding the crisis.

This research finds that Yeltsin saw himself as a regime defender and viewed Chairman of the Supreme Soviet Ruslan Khasbulatov as seeking personal power, and the political West shared the same thinking. In accordance with this framework, both Yeltsin and his opposition embraced an anti-totalitarian discourse toward each other which blurred the lines. Although the political West publicly deemed Yeltsin’s actions as reasonable, leaders and analysts had serious worries about Yeltsin’s actions. This suggests that Yeltsin was overconfident and acted recklessly in the crisis. Although the political West did not necessarily help Yeltsin ‘win’ the crisis, their outspoken support as they watched the events unfold likely bolstered Yeltsin’s confidence to act in an escalatory fashion. Additionally, some in the political West believed that Yeltsin’s post-crisis constitution exhibited indicators that Russia was on a return to authoritarianism. This supports the view that, even though Yeltsin granted amnesty to the *coup* plotters, the effect of the crisis was not merely a spectacle that secured the victory of Yeltsin against the Soviets. It was instead the beginning of Russia’s democratic decline, enumerated in Yeltsin’s post-crisis constitution.

Shaping the Historiography on the Constitutional Crisis

*“The formal structures of the Soviet Union—the ‘most democratic Constitution in history,’ [...] all mimicked the institutions of a modern liberal state. They were all, of course, a sham. [...] from the start it rigged every election.”*³

³ “Yeltsin and the Style of Russian Politics,” Confidential memorandum from Sir Rodric Quentin Braithwaite, U.K., 12 January 1993, William J. Clinton Presidential Library, National Security

—U.K. Ambassador to the former Soviet Union and Russia Sir Rodric Braithwaite in a telegram to Bill Clinton, 12 January 1993.

Russia's dual power (*dvoevlastie*) constitutional system and legal culture after the fall of the Soviet Union presented a "moment of truth" for Yeltsin, which led to the tragic deaths of at least 123 people and 384 wounded in October 1993.⁴ Scholarship and memoirs have already defined the legal issues surrounding the crisis.⁵ Yeltsin considered the constitutional culture to be

Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/30725-document-01-yeltsin-and-style-russian-politics-confidential-memorandum-sir-rodric>.

⁴ The Russian term *dvoevlastie* derives from a Leninist constitutional thinking leading up to and following the October Revolution of 1917. It is a rejection of Western constitutional models that focus on constitutional checks and balances, placing instead an emphasis on the supremacy of the party of Soviets. Lenin justified this thinking in his "April Theses" (1917); On the "moment of truth" quote: John Kampfner, *Inside Yeltsin's Russia: Corruption, Conflict, Capitalism* (Cassell Illustrated, 1994), 148; Political sociologist Leon Aron wrote that Yeltsin's bodyguard observed that Yeltsin "took very hard" the crisis and "was severely depressed, even suicidal" (Leon Aron, *Yeltsin: A Revolutionary Life* (St Martins Pr, 2000), 506). Thus, Yeltsin's thoughts and actions must be perceived through the lens that he considered this moment existential to his own life, not merely his political career and platform; For official Russian Government numbers of deaths and wounded (Aron, 551); Other estimates say 187 deaths, with 437 wounded (Timothy J. Colton, *Yeltsin: A Life* (Basic Books, 2011), 279). Shockingly, some newspapers concluded that as many as 1,400 to 2,783 were killed (David Satter, *The Less You Know the Better You Sleep: Russia's Road to Terror and Dictatorship under Yeltsin and Putin* (Yale University Press, 2016), 61-62).

⁵ Notably, these issues were that i) the executive and parliament had a constitutional right to shape the federal system, ii) the executive was incentivized to escalate the crisis to a state of emergency, iii) the norms of constitutional accountability were hardly existent, iv) the executive was not subordinate to the law, v) and the crisis happened in a state of political insurgency; Cindy Skach, "Russia's Constitutional Dictatorship: A Brief History," *University of Miami International and Comparative Law Review* 21, no. 1 (2021): 193-194, 200-201, and 206; Richard Sakwa, "Constitutionalism and Accountability in Contemporary Russia: The Problem of Displaced Sovereignty," in *Russia and its Constitution: Promise and Political Reality*, ed. Gordon B. Smith and Robert Sharlet (Brill NV, Leiden, 2001), 1 and 15; Aron, 514; Jerzy Maćków, "Russian Legal Culture, Civil Society, and Chances for Westernization," in *Russia's Engagement with the West: Transformation and Integration in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Alexander J. Motyl, Blair A. Ruble, and Lilia Shevtsova (Routledge 2015), 34, 39, and 54; Ruslan Khasbulatov, *The Struggle for Russia: Power and Change in the Democratic Revolution* (Routledge, 1993), 210 and 225.

“legalized anarchy” whereby the former Soviets used the constitution to subvert him.⁶ It is important to recognize that the political arguments leading up to the day of bloodshed cannot be reduced to a clash of personalities nor viewed through a good vs. evil lens. Rather, the struggle was rooted in the constitution and the fact that both the executive and parliamentary powers abused the constitution and usurped its norms to defeat the opposing party.⁷

Despite resolving the questions of which constitutional issues led to the crisis, secondary scholarship presents divergent conclusions and unorganized interpretations of the historical narratives of the crisis. This section adds much organizational clarity for future scholarship by creating three simple dichotomous relationships. These dichotomies are still up for serious debate, especially with the new declassifications.

The first dichotomy is “personal power vs. regime defender,” which covers motivations of both parties: Did the crisis begin due to Yeltsin and/or parliament clashing to gain personal power, or alternatively, to defend their visions of Russian governance? Arguments in favor of the personal power thesis see that Yeltsin or Khasbulatov (or both) intentionally used the constitutional crisis as a means to obtain more power, if not absolute, power.⁸ Conversely, the regime defenders thesis holds that either Yeltsin sought to “save democracy,” or Khasbulatov strove to stop a “dictatorship” in Russia.⁹ Unsurprisingly, scholars have often created an inverse

⁶ Skach, 193; Aron, 516.

⁷ Richard Sakwa’s Foreword in Ruslan Khasbulatov, *The Struggle for Russia: Power and Change in the Democratic Revolution* (Routledge, 1993); Wayne Merry Oral History Interview, “Yeltsin Under Siege — The October 1993 Constitutional Crisis,” Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training; The “good” vs. “evil” lens can only be applied in confidence once Yeltsin’s opposition resorted to violence in the streets of Moscow and allowing neo-Nazi militias to support their cause.

⁸ For Yeltsin on personal power: Maćków, 39. For Khasbulatov and parliament on personal power: Aron, 497-498.

⁹ For Khasbulatov to stop a “dictatorship:” Richard Sakwa’s Foreword. Also see Khasbulatov public speeches in the crisis.

relationship that only one party to the crisis (either Yeltsin or Khasbulatov) was seeking personal power, whereas the opposing party was defending their respective regimes.

The second dichotomy is “reckless actions vs. reasonable actions,” which assesses the question of Yeltsin’s due diligence: Did the crisis escalate primarily due to Yeltsin’s alleged recklessness, or could his actions be deemed reasonable responses to the Khasbulatov threat? This question is heavily tied to the extent Yeltsin was liable. Arguments in favor of Yeltsin’s recklessness assert that his provocative responses emboldened the opposition. This view frequently argues that his recklessness derived from his failure to strategize well.¹⁰ On the contrary, arguments that side with Yeltsin’s reasonableness sympathize with his responses to the combative opposition, whose actions froze the efficiency of the government and threatened Yeltsin’s own life and those in his cabinet.¹¹ This view is well stated by journalist John Kampfner: “Once the situation had deteriorated into personal vendettas, Yeltsin had two choices—to give in to Congress or to fight. And he could no longer fight while abiding by the constitution.”¹² Some scholars and pro-Yeltsin political pundits at the time even believed Yeltsin was too compromising with Khasbulatov and that he should have acted sooner to take escalatory risks.¹³

¹⁰ Khasbulatov, 210 and 225; Wayne Merry Oral History Interview, “Yeltsin Under Siege — The October 1993 Constitutional Crisis,” Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training; Peter Rutland, “The Boris Yeltsin of History,” *Demokratizatsiya* 6, no. 4 (1998): 696; Nikolai V. Zlobin, “Finita la Comedia?: If Democracy Is to Survive, Yeltsin Must Learn to Compromise,” *Demokratizatsiya* 2, no. 2 (1993): 173.

¹¹ Aron, 503; Yury Polsky, *Russia During the Period of Radical Change, 1992-2002* (Edwin Mellen Pr, 2003), 115; Andrei Kolesnikov, “Why The Constitution Is Not To Blame For Today's Regime: A Hard Look At The 1993 Russian Constitutional Crisis,” 4 October 2023, https://russiapost.info/politics/crisis_1993.

¹² Kampfner, 138.

¹³ Kolesnikov.

Lastly, the third dichotomy is “democratic decline vs. spectacle,” which determines the effect of the crisis: Was authoritarianism created, or was the crisis merely the final spectacle between Soviet power and Yeltsin? Despite this divergence, both intellectual camps recognize the obvious fact that Yeltsin’s victory in the crisis generated a “hypertrophic” presidency or “superpresidency” vested in the 1993 Constitution.¹⁴

The spectacle camp places a high premium on Yeltsin not becoming a dictator in the traditional sense after the crisis, in which he essentially had “unlimited power.”¹⁵ Additionally, the spectacle camp sees the post-crisis constitution as merely a response to the “impossibility” of implementing Yeltsin’s economic reforms, not a death knell to liberalism.¹⁶ Some adherents to this perspective also cheer on Yeltsin’s victory in the 1993 constitution as it legally defeated Soviet power.¹⁷ They view Yeltsin’s survival in the crisis as achieving a more hopeful future for Russia’s integration with the political West, regardless of how great the odds were against Yeltsin actually accomplishing that goal. The spectacle camp places value on the legal culture following the crisis: they note that parliament adhered to the new constitutional norms under Yeltsin, instead of resurrecting a civil war.¹⁸ These scholars tend not to equate an inflated

¹⁴ Robert Sharlet, “Russian Constitutional Change: An Opportunity Missed,” *Demokratizatsiya* 7, no. 3 (1999): 437; Robert Sharlet, “Constitutional Law and Politics in Russia: Surviving the First Decade,” *Demokratizatsiya* 11, no. 1 (2003): 123.

¹⁵ Sharlet, “Constitutional Law and Politics in Russia,” 127; John Lloyd, “Nowhere to Turn But Yeltsin,” *Demokratizatsiya* 4, no. 3 (1996): 328.

¹⁶ Kolesnikov.

¹⁷ Kolesnikov.

¹⁸ Wayne Merry Dissent Channel Cable from American Embassy Moscow to Secretary of State, “Whose Russia is it Anyway? Toward a Policy of Benign Respect,” 28 March 1994, U.S. Department of State, National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/32704-document-1-wayne-merry-dissent-channel-cable-american-embassy-moscow>; Michael McFaul, *Russia’s unfinished revolution: political change from Gorbachev to Putin* (Cornell University Press, 2001), 423 and 425; David W. Lovell, “Nationalism and Democratisation in Post-Communist Russia,” in *Russia after Yeltsin*, ed. Vladimir Tikhomirov (Ashgate, 2001), 37-38.

presidential constitution, merely a document, as the stand-alone reason for the rise of the authoritarian Vladimir Putin. Rather, they underscore how individuals within Yeltsin's regime governed in inflated executive power conditions that led to Putin.¹⁹ This group of scholars maintain the authoritarian return is due to the turn of events pre-and-peri Putin, not necessarily the Russian constitution itself.

Conversely, for the democratic decline camp, the 1993 Constitution was so obvious in its authoritarian nature that it cannot be discounted as a mere response to the legislative impasse.²⁰ Often, the democratic decline camp views Yeltsin in line with the personal power argument.²¹ Additionally, democratic decline arguments stress that Yeltsin was able to free himself from popular oversight, accountability, and his own constituency, while "becoming parasitic" toward the state.²² Democratic decliners note that post-crisis, Yeltsin lacked credible public legitimacy.²³ They also emphasize how the crisis "guaranteed" Yeltsin's power survival and allowed him to intimidate his way into an "undeserved" second presidential term in 1996.²⁴ To democratic

¹⁹ Kolesnikov.

²⁰ Andrei A. Kovalev, *Russia's Dead End: An Insider's Testimony From Gorbachev to Putin* (Potomac Books, 2017), 111; Zlobin, 176; "Under the proposed constitution, the Supreme Soviet would be replaced with a smaller body, the State Duma, which would have virtually no control over the executive branch. The president would have the power to appoint without interference all ministers except the prime minister, who would have to be confirmed by the Duma. If the Duma rejected three of his candidates for prime minister, the president would be able to dissolve the Duma. The president would have control over the budget and appoint the director of the Central Bank and the justices of the Constitutional Court. Removing the president would require a two thirds majority of the parliament as well as approval by the Supreme Court and the Constitutional Court. Laws would be passed by the Duma, but they could be vetoed by the president, and the veto could be overridden only by a two-thirds vote of the Duma, a near impossibility in a parliament expected to contain numerous factions" (Satter, 63).

²¹ Sakwa, "Constitutionalism and Accountability in Contemporary Russia," 7.

²² Sakwa, "Constitutionalism and Accountability in Contemporary Russia," 8.

²³ Alexander Sokolowski, "Institutional Determinants of Chronic Policy Failure in Yeltsin's Russia," *Demokratizatsiya* 11, no. 3 (2003): 414.

²⁴ Satter, 65; Polsky, 113-114.

decliners, Yeltsin played his trump card in the crisis, triggering the start of authoritarianism, which Putin later leveraged to his advantage.²⁵

Yeltsin Eventually Falls for the Cockroach Race

“Profoundly aware of his status as leader of the nation, he [Yeltsin] simply cannot take part in cockroach races with the Khasbulatovs and Rutskoyes of the world.”²⁶

—Vyacheslav Vasilyevich Kostikov, Boris Yeltsin’s Press Secretary, commenting on the drama between the Supreme Soviet and Yeltsin.

Although Yeltsin did not want to engage in political skirmishes, he eventually fell for the cockroach race with the Supreme Soviet. The race began due to Russia’s transition and economy after the fall of the Soviet Union, as it was an existential experience for many Russians.²⁷ The confrontational nature of the crisis began with Yeltsin’s nomination of Acting Prime Minister Yegor Gaidar to the post of Prime Minister. Gaidar was the architect of the January 2, 1992, shock therapy and price liberalization economic policies that caused hardship for Russians. Many in parliament despised Gaidar, as his policies caused “almost all the money in people’s

²⁵ Sakwa, “Constitutionalism and Accountability in Contemporary Russia,” 10.

²⁶ Kampfner, 136; “Yeltsin rarely read carefully the press releases he authorized and Kostikov took full advantage of this. His aggressive and often rude remarks began to infuriate not only Khasbulatov but also many of the deputies, who felt humiliated that their leader was being insulted by a second lieutenant in the president’s cohort” (Andrei Kozyrev, *The Firebird: The Elusive Fate of Russian Democracy* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2019), 152).

²⁷ Skach, 201; Satter, 42 and 53; Colton, 230; Aron, 497; The national budget deficit was 26% of Russia’s GDP in 1991, real national economic output dipped from 14.5% in 1992 to 3.5% in 1996, inflation rose to 2,520% in 1992, 99% of Russia’s population could not afford goods in stores, the Russian ruble lost over 40% of its value against the U.S. dollar, one billion dollars were taken out of Russia every month from June to October 1992, wages and government pensions were withheld, the wealth inequality gap grew with the rise of the oligarch class, prices increased by a factor of 25 to 30 by April 1992, and former Soviet Union republics declared independence from the former U.S.S.R.

savings accounts—money saved for decades” to disappear.²⁸ The relationship between the Supreme Soviet under Chairman Ruslan Khasbulatov and Yeltsin became increasingly hostile with the confirmation vote on Gaidar.²⁹ The day after the failed Gaidar vote, Yeltsin went to parliament and warned that the Supreme Soviet was “creeping” a “*coup d’état*” by blocking his economic reforms and creating “unbearable conditions” for the government.³⁰ Between August and December 1992, Yeltsin and the Supreme Soviet eventually negotiated a political compromise. On December 12th, Yeltsin and Khasbulatov agreed that the ‘war of laws’ was to stop under a political exchange of Viktor Chernomyrdin as prime minister for Yeltsin’s request to hold a constitutional referendum. However, this did not signal the end to Yeltsin’s actions to challenge parliamentary power: Yeltsin signed over 1,150 presidential decrees in January 1993.³¹

In the run-up to the Eighth Congress of People’s Deputies (CPD) on March 10-13, 1993, Yeltsin had a phone call on March 3rd with German Chancellor Helmut Kohl that revealed Yeltsin’s strategy, along with his thoughts on the opposition.³² Yeltsin saw that the “situation was worse than in December [1992]” and admitted that Russia was in “a constitutional crisis,” as the CPD and Supreme Soviet had “the power to turn back the clock [of history].”³³ He vented to Kohl that he was “confronted with neo-fascists” and that “it would cost many billions if the

²⁸ Satter, 42.

²⁹ For instance, in the spring of 1992, the parliament accused Yeltsin of “selling out,” “impoverishing,” and “tormenting” Russia. And in the fall of 1992, parliament said that Yeltsin was returning Russia to “totalitarianism,” while Yeltsin claimed that the Supreme Soviet was attempting to “turn back history” by bringing back communism (Aron, 498-499).

³⁰ Aron, 502.

³¹ Aron, 511 and 514.

³² Kohl’s declassified phone conversations with Yeltsin in the 1993 constitutional crisis provide invaluable insights on Yeltsin’s actions and decision-making.

³³ “The Chancellor’s [Helmut Kohl’s] Meeting with Russian President Yeltsin on Wednesday, 3 March 1993,” March 3, 1993, Wilson Center Digital Archive, BArch, B 136/59731, 35-42, Contributed, transcribed, and translated by Stephan Kieninger, <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/300201>.

Western countries had to defend themselves against a reactionary Russia.”³⁴ Yeltsin told Kohl that he suggested to the CPD and Supreme Soviet three options: “first, a referendum; second, some sort of constitutional agreement. A third opportunity involved accommodation with the Deputy People’s Congress and the Supreme Soviet.”³⁵ Yeltsin confessed that, truthfully, he “did not know what Khasbulatov was planning” for the Eighth Congress and suggested that perhaps Khasbulatov “would take a position against the referendum—which would be against the constitution.”³⁶ This verifies with more accuracy previous assumptions by scholars that Yeltsin did not know the plans of the Supreme Soviet. Yeltsin told Kohl that, in a situation such as this, he “might be forced to take extreme measures” against the opposition. Kohl sought clarification on this suggestion, and Yeltsin said he would be forced to act like “a variant of ‘[French President Charles] de Gaulle [in] 1958,’” if Yeltsin was confronted with “no, no, no” by Congress for a constitutional referendum.³⁷ Yeltsin justified this reasoning to Kohl: “This was to save democracy and market economy, and to avoid Russia’s disintegration.”³⁸ Kohl affirmed that

³⁴ “The Chancellor’s [Helmut Kohl’s] Meeting with Russian President Yeltsin on Wednesday, 3 March 1993,” Wilson Center Digital Archive, <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/300201>.

³⁵ “The Chancellor’s [Helmut Kohl’s] Meeting with Russian President Yeltsin on Wednesday, 3 March 1993,” Wilson Center Digital Archive, <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/300201>.

³⁶ “The Chancellor’s [Helmut Kohl’s] Meeting with Russian President Yeltsin on Wednesday, 3 March 1993,” Wilson Center Digital Archive, <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/300201>.

³⁷ “The Chancellor’s [Helmut Kohl’s] Meeting with Russian President Yeltsin on Wednesday, 3 March 1993,” Wilson Center Digital Archive, <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/300201>; In summary, Charles de Gaulle announced that he would take over the government by seeking the role of Prime Minister with political maneuvering that was bloodless. He created a new constitution that expanded executive powers. It is interesting that Yeltsin makes this comparison, as the crisis de Gaulle faced was different in nature than Yeltsin’s.

³⁸ “The Chancellor’s [Helmut Kohl’s] Meeting with Russian President Yeltsin on Wednesday, 3 March 1993,” Wilson Center Digital Archive, <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/300201>.

Germany wanted to “help President Yeltsin in this” and that it was in “Russia’s interest and our own.”³⁹ Kohl then requested that Yeltsin explain his view on the power structures in Russia, and Yeltsin responded that he could “absolutely” count on his ministers.⁴⁰ Yeltsin said that he believed his Vice President, Minister of Defense, and Minister of the Interior would support him if he needed to act like de Gaulle. Shockingly, Yeltsin told Kohl that he received an assurance from the Chairman of the Constitutional Court Valery Zorkin that “extreme measures were absolutely constitutional if they helped the cause of democracy, the maintenance of peace, the success of the reforms, and not least Russia’s unity.”⁴¹ This assurance by Zorkin was not documented by other scholars and was a profound political statement that would give Yeltsin more constitutional comfort.⁴² Accordingly, this also suggests that Yeltsin was somewhat proactive in planning for the worst with retaliatory actions against the Supreme Soviet. Beyond Yeltsin’s strategy with the opposition, he proclaimed to Kohl that he was “not a coward” and that

There was no democratic leader except himself, but only figures who were clearly against democracy, reform, and the liberal economy. He himself had constant consultations with parties, societal movements, and associations.⁴³

³⁹ “The Chancellor’s [Helmut Kohl’s] Meeting with Russian President Yeltsin on Wednesday, 3 March 1993,” Wilson Center Digital Archive, <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/300201>.

⁴⁰ “The Chancellor’s [Helmut Kohl’s] Meeting with Russian President Yeltsin on Wednesday, 3 March 1993,” Wilson Center Digital Archive, <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/300201>.

⁴¹ “The Chancellor’s [Helmut Kohl’s] Meeting with Russian President Yeltsin on Wednesday, 3 March 1993,” Wilson Center Digital Archive, <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/300201>.

⁴² The author had no way of verifying Zorkin’s alleged promise to Yeltsin outside of its existence in this new primary source, as it is not mentioned elsewhere. One can only assume, as of now, to take Yeltsin’s honesty with the political West in the 1993 crisis as an indicator that Zorkin’s promise may be true.

⁴³ Yeltsin’s “There was no democratic leader except himself” is reminiscent of Lenin’s “There is such a party!” declaration at the First Congress of Soviets in 1917.

Thus, Yeltsin saw himself as the main historical actor in the crisis and a defender of democracy. He also considered that his actions were proactive and that he was sufficiently communicating with the Russian political spectrum. Alternatively, he may have also found that such a narrative was convenient to leverage leaders of the political West for international support.

Regarding Russia's integration with the political West, he confessed to Kohl that he was somewhat suspicious of their intentions. Specifically, Yeltsin told Kohl, "Helmut, you must forgive me, but I am increasingly gaining the impression that someone is interested in Russia's disintegration," because the London Club and Paris Club had not finalized their decisions on the Russian debt rescheduling.⁴⁴ In response, Kohl affirmed support to Yeltsin and assured him that he would provide updates.

As it turns out, Yeltsin—despite not knowing Khasbulatov's plans—correctly guessed over the telephone with Chancellor Kohl what Khasbulatov would do. Khasbulatov reneged on the December 1992 compromise during the Eighth Congress. Khasbulatov notoriously said, "the devil confused me" (*"bes poputal"*) and asserted that there would be no more compromises with the Yeltsin government.⁴⁵ Khasbulatov invoked Article 104 of the 1978 Constitution to declare that Congress had "supreme power" in the country and asserted that this power is above the president, who was merely the "highest official."⁴⁶ Commentators during the Eighth Congress even discussed a "post-Yeltsin" Russia.⁴⁷ Despite the pushback, Yeltsin gave a speech at

⁴⁴ "The Chancellor's [Helmut Kohl's] Meeting with Russian President Yeltsin on Wednesday, 3 March 1993," Wilson Center Digital Archive, <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/300201>.

⁴⁵ Aron, 505.

⁴⁶ Aron, 505.

⁴⁷ Kampfner, 138.

Congress that advocated for the constitutional referendum.⁴⁸ Most of the measures in the referendum conflicted with the interests of Congress and the Supreme Soviet.

Sources from the political West accentuate the importance of the crisis for Yeltsin. Specifically, U.S. President Bill Clinton's closest Russia confidant Strobe Talbott noted in a meeting that Russia was "the single biggest and most dangerous political mess on the face of the earth [...] these transformations [from Soviet power to democracy] [...] constitute nothing less than a miracle [for the political West] [...] I would frame the issue as a matter of doing what we can from the outside [...] to keep that miracle going."⁴⁹ On the question of supporting Yeltsin in his constitutional battle against the Supreme Soviet, Clinton said before the Vancouver Summit of April 1993, "I'm not worried about backing a loser as long as he's the right loser."⁵⁰ This is important to note, as Clinton willingly adopted a policy of backing Yeltsin no matter the outcome as the alternative candidates looked more bleak. Additionally, primary sources gave insights into inter-communications between allies regarding Yeltsin. In a memorandum to Bill Clinton from the U.K. Ambassador to Russia, Sir Rodric Braithwaite, he wrote that "Russia has no tradition of constitutional limits on the power of the executive, or of the rule of law [...] it is

⁴⁸ In his speech, Yeltsin said the referendum's purpose was to have the Russian public decide whether i) Russia should be a presidential republic, ii) the Congress and Supreme Soviet should be smaller, iii) the constitution should be adopted by a constituent assembly rather than by the Congress, and iv) if Russian citizens should be given the right to land ownership (Aron, 505).

⁴⁹ "Russia Briefing for Christopher [Strobe Talbott speaking]," February 6, 1993, U.S. Department of State, National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/29755-document-3-strobe-talbott-briefing-secretary-state-warren-christopher-russia>; Additionally, Talbott viewed the Russian experience as "the greatest single task facing American foreign policy for the years to come" (Stephan Kieninger, *Securing Peace in Europe: Strobe Talbott, NATO and Russia after the Cold War* (Columbia University Press, 2025), Forthcoming).

⁵⁰ Kieninger, Forthcoming.

whether the future political system should be ‘Presidential’ or ‘Parliamentary.’”⁵¹ He noted that Yeltsin was operating through “President’s men” in the Supreme Soviet and “at least held his own with his main opponent” Khasbulatov.⁵² Therefore, analysis of Yeltsin in the early parts of the crisis suggested that perhaps Yeltsin was somewhat effective, especially as it pertained to rising against the Khasbulatov challenge. Braithwaite’s recommendation to Clinton was that “It is in the West’s interest that Russia should not descend into chaos, or reconstitute itself under an authoritarian and potentially aggressive regime.”⁵³ He also recommended that the political West needed to help Russians see that “cooperation with the West is not turning Russia into a mere satellite” in the Western-led international order.⁵⁴ Thus, discussions of Russia’s future role with the political West were considered during the crisis. Key figures, such as U.K. Ambassador Braithwaite, advocated for the outcome that Russia would be a cooperative, democratic, productive, and major player in international affairs, not a puppet to be strangled.

⁵¹ “Yeltsin and the Style of Russian Politics,” National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/30725-document-01-yeltsin-and-style-russian-politics-confidential-memorandum-sir-rodric>.

⁵² “Yeltsin and the Style of Russian Politics,” National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/30725-document-01-yeltsin-and-style-russian-politics-confidential-memorandum-sir-rodric>.

⁵³ Yeltsin and the Style of Russian Politics,” National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/30725-document-01-yeltsin-and-style-russian-politics-confidential-memorandum-sir-rodric>.

⁵⁴ Yeltsin and the Style of Russian Politics,” National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/30725-document-01-yeltsin-and-style-russian-politics-confidential-memorandum-sir-rodric>; So too did Yeltsin agree on this note, as he said to Bill Clinton “I believe you will play a great role in the life of the U.S. which will benefit America’s national self-awareness as well as its foreign policy. I stand ready to cooperate in the future. I am anxious to meet with you and to get to know you as ‘Bill.’” (“Memorandum of Telephone Conversation - President Boris Yeltsin of Russia,” *Clinton Digital Library*, accessed March 1, 2025, <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/101311>. [23 January 1993]).

Follow the Law “Khasbulatov-style” or Bend the Law “à la Yeltsin”⁵⁵

“Upon the [German] Chancellor’s [Kohl’s] query about the parliament’s expected reaction in the imminent dispute, President Yeltsin says that the majority in the Deputy People’s Congress would presumably see this battle as a hopeless endeavor.”⁵⁶

—Meeting notes on German Chancellor Helmut Kohl’s Meeting with Russian President Boris Yeltsin on April 29, 1993.

Despite Yeltsin’s words to leaders of the political West, such as the statement above, the crisis worsened after the Eighth Congress. Yeltsin’s assumption that the CPD and Supreme Soviet would see an escalation as a hopeless endeavor was proven wrong. Others who supported Yeltsin acknowledged this frightening reality.⁵⁷ Even European leaders foresaw this outcome. For instance, German Chancellor Kohl had a conversation with French President François Mitterrand, in which they planned to tell the Clinton Administration that the political West “ought to do anything to support” Yeltsin and that a “wait-and-see” position would be “very costly” because it would “end up in disgrace.”⁵⁸ This hyper-encouragement to Yeltsin may have bolstered his personal understanding of his capabilities in the crisis. On March 20, 1993, Yeltsin acted with overconfidence and upended constitutional norms. Specifically, Yeltsin addressed the

⁵⁵ The quotes come from a newspaper (Aron, 519).

⁵⁶ “The Chancellor’s [Helmut Kohl’s] Telephone Conversation with President Yeltsin on 29 April 1993 at 15.00 hours,” April 30, 1993, Wilson Center Digital Archive, BArch, B 136/59731, 263-264, Contributed, transcribed, and translated by Stephan Kieninger, <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/300210>.

⁵⁷ Notably, Sergey Mikhaylovich Shakray, who later became co-author of the 1993 Russian constitution and Russian Deputy Prime Minister in 1994, examined that “The Congress has led the country to the threshold beyond which lies the path to revolution, street rule, and chaos” (Kampfner, 139).

⁵⁸ “The Chancellor’s [Helmut Kohl’s] Telephone Conversation with French President Mitterrand on Thursday, 18 March 1993,” March 19, 1993, Wilson Center Digital Archive, BArch, B 136/59731, 85-86, Contributed, transcribed, and translated by Stephan Kieninger, <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/300205>.

Russian public via television and said that the CPD “buried” the December 1992 compromise.⁵⁹ He acted to ban any parliamentary activities that limited executive power. Yeltsin made any laws passed that “suspend” or “revoke” his executive decrees illegitimate.⁶⁰ Yeltsin declared a ‘special rule’ over Russia until hostilities ceased. He scheduled—without CPD approval—a constitutional referendum on April 25, 1993. Yeltsin’s television speech agreed with his opinion on the opposition that was shared privately with Kohl. Specifically, Yeltsin publicly stated in his address

At the [Russian] Congress, the imperial ideology was loudly expressed. [...] We know what this means [...] a new global confrontation with the entire world. [...] It is as if there are two governments in Russia, one is the constitutional one, the other is the Supreme Soviet. [...] Russia cannot survive a second October Revolution.⁶¹ It would be a jump into the abyss. [...] I have taken this step because I was elected not by the Congress, not by the Supreme Soviet, but by the people. It is up to the people to decide whether I should continue to perform my duties.⁶²

Framing his executive authority as constitutional—despite breaking away from constitutional norms—and labeling the opposition *de facto* unconstitutional was dubious political framing. Additionally, Yeltsin bypassed the CPD by saying that his constitutional authority was up to the people. This technically disavowed CPD’s legal right to determine whether there would be a referendum. Nonetheless, the political West backed Yeltsin’s attempt to expand power. Notably, U.S. White House communications released a statement after Yeltsin’s speech that “what matters

⁵⁹ Boris Yeltsin, “Russian Presidential Address,” C-SPAN, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?38920-1/russian-presidential-address>.

⁶⁰ Boris Yeltsin, “Russian Presidential Address,” C-SPAN, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?38920-1/russian-presidential-address>.

⁶¹ The Bolshevik *coup d’état* led by Vladimir Lenin which installed Soviet power in Russia on November 7, 1917 (On the Julian calendar the revolution occurred from October 24 to 25th, hence, “October” revolution).

⁶² Boris Yeltsin, “Russian Presidential Address,” C-SPAN, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?38920-1/russian-presidential-address>.

most is that Russia is, and must remain, a democratic country moving toward a market economy.”⁶³ Note here that the press statement stated that Yeltsin’s Russia was a democracy, rather than utilizing language of a hopeful or future democracy.

Yeltsin’s March 20th television address was not received well in Russia, even though he gained international support. The Russian Constitutional Court on March 23, 1993, called Yeltsin’s address unconstitutional: “The announcement which the President made today presents us with an attempt at a *coup*.”⁶⁴ This also likely means, if not a fabrication by Yeltsin, that the Chairman of the Constitutional Court reneged on a potential promise to Yeltsin that extreme measures would be deemed constitutional if they protected Russian democracy. Yeltsin’s vice president, national security advisor, and chief prosecutor condemned the television address.⁶⁵ This is the opposite of Yeltsin’s assumption over the phone with Kohl that his vice president would support him. The least surprising of responses to the television address came from the Supreme Soviet, who called for Yeltsin’s impeachment. The glaring political fallout for Yeltsin from the March 20th television address made him revoke his claim to ‘special rule,’ as he realized he had gone too far. Even though Yeltsin did not enforce his special rule, Khasbulatov still moved to impeach Yeltsin on March 28, 1993.⁶⁶ As the vote was occurring, over 60,000 pro-Yeltsin demonstrators rallied outside of the building. 617 People’s Deputies voted ‘yes’ to

⁶³ The Clinton White House, “U.S. Statement on the Yeltsin Speech,” 20 March 1993, <https://clintonwhitehouse6.archives.gov/1993/03/1993-03-20-us-statement-on-yeltsin-speech.html>.

⁶⁴ Kampfner, 139-140.

⁶⁵ Richard Bourdeaux, “Top Russian Court Rules Yeltsin Act Unconstitutional: Politics: But jurists reportedly stop short of calling for president’s impeachment in wake of his power grab. Sources say three members voted against the decision,” *The Los Angeles Times*, 23 March 1993, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1993-03-23-mn-14184-story.html>.

⁶⁶ Yegor Gaidar, emphasizing the weight of the impeachment vote with the political slant against Khasbulatov, said that it was “one of the most dangerous moments in the post-Second World War history of our country, and probably mankind” (Aron, 506-507).

impeach Yeltsin. As political sociologist Leon Aron notes, this was 72 votes short of the two-thirds majority necessary for impeachment.⁶⁷

Despite Yeltsin's fallout from his March 20th address, declassifications show that the political West continued to bet on Yeltsin. After the failed impeachment vote, Clinton and Kohl had a phone call to discuss the situation and the next steps. The two leaders doubled down on Yeltsin's power. Kohl told Clinton that he was confident that "Yeltsin would [eventually] win the game" and was "glad" that Clinton was "on the same page" regarding the "fundamental question" of supporting Yeltsin.⁶⁸ Kohl continued his prior belief that "If the West did not help Yeltsin out now, he would not have any chance."⁶⁹ Clinton agreed and added that "even if Yeltsin did not survive, one would have a chance to keep the door open [with Russian cooperation]."⁷⁰ Kohl stated that French President Mitterrand was pessimistic regarding this suggestion.⁷¹ Kohl also singled out veteran presidential advisor Henry Kissinger's public comments that warned of supporting Yeltsin. Kohl disagreed with Kissinger.⁷² Kohl, continuing,

⁶⁷ Aron, 506-507.

⁶⁸ "The Chancellor's [Helmut Kohl's] Meeting with U.S. President Clinton on Friday, 26 March 1993 in Washington," March 29, 1993, Wilson Center Digital Archive, BArch, B 136/59731, 111-116, Contributed, transcribed, and translated by Stephan Kieninger, <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/300206>.

⁶⁹ "The Chancellor's [Helmut Kohl's] Meeting with U.S. President Clinton on Friday, 26 March 1993 in Washington," Wilson Center Digital Archive, <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/300206>.

⁷⁰ "The Chancellor's [Helmut Kohl's] Meeting with U.S. President Clinton on Friday, 26 March 1993 in Washington," Wilson Center Digital Archive, <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/300206>.

⁷¹ "The Chancellor's [Helmut Kohl's] Meeting with U.S. President Clinton on Friday, 26 March 1993 in Washington," Wilson Center Digital Archive, <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/300206>.

⁷² Kohl: "Kissinger's thinking was apparently guided by the ideas of Metternich whom he had studied as a historian." This is in reference to Foreign Minister of the Austrian Empire Klemens von Metternich, who created the "Metternich system" that suppressed revolutionary movements across Europe, with the goal of maintaining the status quo of European monarchy.

said that “even if it did not go well [with Yeltsin], we could say that we had even tried. Our support for Russia did not necessarily cost a lot of money.”⁷³

Separately, in a U.S. declassification based upon a completed U.S. Congressional delegation to Russia on April 9, 1993, the U.S. Embassy in Moscow noted that “Yeltsin intends to expand executive power, define his opponents as resisting the inevitable reforms that Russia needed, and here brags that he has 60 percent popular support.”⁷⁴ This analysis suggested that Yeltsin sought to challenge the power of the Supreme Soviet by April 1993 and he legitimized this under the guise of alleged majority popular support and his economic program.

Yeltsin once again took this thinking into action. On April 25, 1993, Yeltsin followed through with the “yes-yes-no-yes” (“*da-da-net-da*”) constitutional referendum.⁷⁵ The referendum read (in translation):

1. Do you trust the President of the Russian Federation, Boris Yeltsin?
2. Do you approve of the socio-economic policies carried out by the President of the Russian Federation and the government of the Russian Federation since 1992?
3. Do you consider it necessary to hold early elections for the Presidency of the Russian Federation?
4. Do you consider it necessary to hold early elections for the people’s Deputies of the Russian Federation?⁷⁶

⁷³ “The Chancellor’s [Helmut Kohl’s] Meeting with U.S. President Clinton on Friday, 26 March 1993 in Washington,” Wilson Center Digital Archive, <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/300206>.

⁷⁴ Cable from American Embassy Moscow 010697 to Secretary of State Washington DC, “CODEL Gephardt Meeting with Yeltsin,” 9 April 1993, U.S. Department of State, William J. Clinton Presidential Library, National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/30727-document-03-cable-american-embassy-moscow-010697-secretary-state-washington-dc-codel>.

⁷⁵ Aron, 508.

⁷⁶ Aron, 509.

As political sociologist Leon Aron noted, it stunned “virtually everyone” with its results in favor of Yeltsin.⁷⁷ However, because the vote for an early presidential election did not reach more than 50%, the “referendum had changed nothing in the battle between the legislative and executive branches.”⁷⁸ There was also a noteworthy allegation on foreign influence with pro-Yeltsin advertising on the constitutional referendum.⁷⁹



Figure Two⁸⁰

Pro-Yeltsin Propaganda Poster on the April 25, 1993, Referendum.

⁷⁷ 53% (36.6 million Russians) approved of Yeltsin’s economic and social policies; 58.7% (40.5 million Russians) expressed confidence in Yeltsin; 49.5% approved of an early presidential election; 67.2% approved of early parliamentary elections (Aron, 509).

⁷⁸ Aron, 509.

⁷⁹ Journalist David Satter claimed that the referendum results were possibly “achieved in part with the help of George Soros, whose secret contributions to offshore accounts controlled by Anatoly Chubais, the head of privatization [economic policy], funded a massive advertising campaign that overwhelmed the opposition” (Satter, 54).

⁸⁰ “*Im ne veril nikogda. Moi otvet: Da! Da! Net! Da!*” Moscow, Russia, 1993. Political propaganda poster. Translation: “I never believed them. My answer: Yes! Yes! No! Yes!” The red bow on the bundle of snakes reads “Congress.” The black ink in the bottom right is “Moscow, Russia.”

In the days following the referendum, Yeltsin was invigorated with a sense of more power. In a phone call between Kohl and Yeltsin on April 29, 1993, Yeltsin said he was to “take a tougher line” against parliament.⁸¹ The notes of the call mention that Yeltsin presented “a new constitution without any sort of a People’s Deputy Congress” and that he “ought to have the right to dissolve parliament.”⁸² His strategy was to “have a 2-3 week discussion in the autonomous republics and territories of the country” and then develop a “constituent assembly” for a new constitution.⁸³ Yeltsin asserted that he “Had no other opportunity.”⁸⁴ Yeltsin reasoned that “the current conservative People’s Deputy Congress would not agree to a new constitution. Only he, President Yeltsin, was democratically legitimized in the execution of his power.”⁸⁵ Yeltsin added that he “would act courageously and decisively toward parliament but stay within the constitution’s framework.”⁸⁶ It is in this phone call that Yeltsin deemed the opposition’s perspective of a civil war as a hopeless endeavor. Despite the attempted impeachment and

⁸¹ “The Chancellor’s [Helmut Kohl’s] Telephone Conversation with President Yeltsin on 29 April 1993 at 15.00 hours,” Wilson Center Digital Archive, <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/300210>.

⁸² “The Chancellor’s [Helmut Kohl’s] Telephone Conversation with President Yeltsin on 29 April 1993 at 15.00 hours,” Wilson Center Digital Archive, <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/300210>.

⁸³ “The Chancellor’s [Helmut Kohl’s] Telephone Conversation with President Yeltsin on 29 April 1993 at 15.00 hours,” Wilson Center Digital Archive, <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/300210>.

⁸⁴ “The Chancellor’s [Helmut Kohl’s] Telephone Conversation with President Yeltsin on 29 April 1993 at 15.00 hours,” Wilson Center Digital Archive, <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/300210>.

⁸⁵ “The Chancellor’s [Helmut Kohl’s] Telephone Conversation with President Yeltsin on 29 April 1993 at 15.00 hours,” Wilson Center Digital Archive, <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/300210>.

⁸⁶ “The Chancellor’s [Helmut Kohl’s] Telephone Conversation with President Yeltsin on 29 April 1993 at 15.00 hours,” Wilson Center Digital Archive, <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/300210>.

impressive margin on the vote, Yeltsin's exuberant confidence remained toward the Supreme Soviet because of the referendum.

On May 20, 1993, Yeltsin called for a Constitutional Assembly. In response, the opposition became more hostile.⁸⁷ Yet, both Yeltsin and the opposition seemed to enjoy public support. This spelled doom for further political conflict when both sides had maximalist aims. Instead of finding a solution, the opposition licked its wounds from the referendum to get revenge on Yeltsin. Meanwhile, Yeltsin fired back statements such as "Soviets and democracy are incompatible."⁸⁸ Fatefully, he did so without having a political interest to piece together a successful constitutional assembly by the end of the summer of 1993. As U.S. Embassy Moscow analyst Wayne Merry argued in an interview, Yeltsin's loss of personal momentum in the summer of 1993 for a successful constitutional assembly—when accompanied by his newly implemented currency reform and fiscal tightening measures in the summer of 1993—made the impression among many in Moscow that Yeltsin could not be trusted.⁸⁹ Once autumn began in 1993, Russia teetered on the verge of civil war.

Was the Use of Force Yeltsin's Last Resort?

*"We don't want to use force. Everything will take place peacefully. We do not in any circumstances want bloodshed."*⁹⁰

⁸⁷ Khasbulatov said that this was "tantamount to an attempted *coup*." Yeltsin's vice president Alexander Rutskoy—who now aligned with Khasbulatov—said that Yeltsin should be removed from government in three months and that his policies were a "crime against the people" (Aron, 510).

⁸⁸ Aron, 511.

⁸⁹ Wayne Merry Oral History Interview, "Yeltsin Under Siege — The October 1993 Constitutional Crisis," Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training.

⁹⁰ "Memorandum of Telephone Conversation - President Boris Yeltsin of Russia," *Clinton Digital Library*, accessed February 28, 2025, <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/101341>. [21 September 1993].

—Boris Yeltsin on the telephone to Bill Clinton, on September 21, 1993.

On September 21, 1993, Yeltsin again attacked the constitutional power of the CPD and Supreme Soviet when he published the infamous Presidential Decree No. 1400. This decree abolished the parliament and declared that a new constitution be ratified by December 1993. In a TV address, Yeltsin expressed, “Literally, all state institutions and political leaders have been drawn into a fruitless and senseless fight to the death.”⁹¹ Affirming his decision, Yeltsin said, “Being the guarantor of the security of our state, I am obliged to propose a way out of this deadlock, I am obliged to break this ruinous vicious cycle.”⁹² Pausing to take a long sip out of a teacup, Yeltsin then resumed his speech. He said—by asserting the authority of the April 1993 referendum—that he created a Federal Assembly as the new two-chamber legislative power which would hold elections in December 1993. He abolished the Supreme Soviet and CPD not through constitutional norms, but rather, by stating that he was the elected president. In justifying the decree, he hoped that all citizens would “understand the need to hold elections to the State Duma of the Federal Assembly for a peaceful and legitimate exit from the protracted political crisis.”⁹³

⁹¹ C-SPAN, Video of Boris Yeltsin’s Presidential Address on September 21, 1993.

⁹² C-SPAN, Video of Boris Yeltsin’s Presidential Address on September 21, 1993.

⁹³ Boris Yeltsin, “Address to the citizens of Russia,” Electronic Museum of Constitutional History of Russia, <http://rusconstitution.ru/timestream/event/311/>.



Figure Three⁹⁴

Yeltsin sipped a cup of tea in his September 21st TV address as pictured on C-SPAN.

Surveying the damage of Yeltsin's address, Clinton phoned Yeltsin on September 21.⁹⁵ Instead of shunning or praising Yeltsin, Clinton inquired about the future. He asked whether Yeltsin would apply force against the opposition. Yeltsin assured Clinton that he did not "want to use force," that the events would "take place peacefully," and that "democratic forces" supported him. Clinton then asked Yeltsin about the opposition.⁹⁶ Yeltsin told Clinton that the opposition would merely "try to not recognize" his authority and that further events would occur

⁹⁴ C-SPAN, Video of Boris Yeltsin's Presidential Address on September 21, 1993.

⁹⁵ It is in this phone call that Yeltsin told Clinton that the opposition has "totally gone out of control."

⁹⁶ "Memorandum of Telephone Conversation - President Boris Yeltsin of Russia," *Clinton Digital Library*, accessed February 28, 2025, <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/101341>. [21 September 1993].

“peacefully.”⁹⁷ Yeltsin’s action on September 21st may be rooted in an earlier opinion that month, where Yeltsin told Clinton on September 7th that the crisis had turned into a full-blown fight that was distracting his presidential objectives. Still, he was confident that he would win: “I’m right now engaged in a bit of fighting with parliament which is moving away from reforms and the changes we are trying to make. But I hope that in the long run, I will prevail.”⁹⁸ Once again, Yeltsin’s overconfidence in the opposition’s lack of will to battle him made him take risks while still foreseeing positive outcomes.

Contrary to Yeltsin’s words with Clinton, the opposition reacted with chaos on September 22nd: the parliament and Russian Constitutional Court both decided to support the impeachment of Yeltsin.⁹⁹ The following day, the Supreme Soviet implemented criminal codes to punish those who attempted to “change by force the constitutional system” with execution or 10-15 years in prison, whereas outside supporters would be put in jail for 6-12 years.¹⁰⁰ Zorkin, head of the Constitutional Court, asked Yeltsin and the opposition to hold new elections for both president and parliament, but Yeltsin rejected this compromise. On September 23rd, Vice President Alexander Rutskoy was sworn in by the CPD and Supreme Soviet as Russia’s acting president; now Russia technically had two sitting presidents. Afterward, the opposition

⁹⁷ “Memorandum of Telephone Conversation - President Boris Yeltsin of Russia,” *Clinton Digital Library*, accessed February 28, 2025, <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/101341>. [21 September 1993].

⁹⁸ Memorandum of Telephone Conversation, “Telcon with President Boris Yeltsin of the Russian Federation,” 7 September 1993, The White House, William J. Clinton Presidential Library, National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/30729-document-05-memorandum-telephone-conversation-telcon-president-boris-yeltsin-russian>.

⁹⁹ After midnight, early in the day on September 22nd, the CPD voted 136 in favor and 6 against to impeach Yeltsin Under Article 121-6 of the 1978 Constitution. The Russian Constitutional Court voted 9-4 to approve parliament’s impeachment.

¹⁰⁰ Khasbulatov even remarked that “all who supported President Yeltsin [would] be severely punished” (Aron, 523).

barricaded themselves in the parliament building, colloquially known as the White House.

Khasbulatov gave another speech, declaring that any deputies who disagreed with the Supreme Soviet would “see to it that they wash their faces in their own blood.”¹⁰¹ In contrast, Yeltsin proclaimed, “There is, cannot, and must not be any dialogue. But there will be no blood. I tell you. I think we have had enough of parliament making fools of us and the people. Enough.”¹⁰² In an odd attempt to reduce hostilities, Yeltsin gave blanket amnesty for those who disregarded Decree No. 1400 on September 25th. At this point, Yeltsin was trying to problem-solve his path to a victory with the little bargaining power he had out of the messy conflict he had created.

After ten days of protesting, the conflict turned bloody on October 3, 1993. Early in the day, the Khasbulatov forces successfully overtook the mayor’s office with gunfights.¹⁰³

Kampfner’s book showed a conversation with Rutskoy in the White House, during which Rutskoy ranted in room 3-110 that

Another tragedy. Shame before the world. The people believed in Yeltsin; they believed the country would follow the path of law, the path of democratic transformation, but in the end, the very idea has been discredited. It’s time to

¹⁰¹ Aron, 526; On the day of the barricade, Khasbulatov forcefully said that there would be no compromise with Yeltsin’s “fascist” regime and “What compromise, what are you talking about? [...] Let’s not talk nonsense. There has been a *coup d’état*, it must be suppressed; that’s your compromise” (Aron, 524-525); “The talk now was of lynching [Yeltsin], of taking no prisoners. There was hardly a sympathetic character among them” (Kampfner, 150); Khasbulatov-aligned protestors occupied Smolensk Square and yelled “Hang Kozyrev” in front of the Russian Foreign Ministry building (Talbot, *The Russia Hand: A Memoir of Presidential Diplomacy*, 88); It was even known that militia factions in the opposition endorsed Neo-Nazism and were seeking to take advantage of the moment to gain power (Polsky, 113-114).

¹⁰² Kampfner, 150; Prime Minister Chernomyrdin, who was chosen by the Supreme Soviet in exchange for Gaidar, reversed his former ties and condemned Khasbulatov. Chernomyrdin assessed that the “cancerous tumor” of dual-power by Khasbulatov could only be removed “surgically” (Aron, 521).

¹⁰³ Khasbulatov’s spokesman, Zlobin, was running down the sixth floor of the White House saying “We’ve done it. Yeltsin’s on the run. Hundreds of police are coming to our side [...] the army is never going to obey him” (Kampfner, 148).

begin living normally, like human beings. Laws, laws, and laws again. Then society will be stable.¹⁰⁴

Later in the night, the Khasbulatov forces unsuccessfully attempted to seize the central news station Ostankino Television Center in a devastating exchange. Before the finale of the crisis, political sociologist Leon Aron wrote that Yeltsin said to his team that he wanted to “neutralize” the threat and repeatedly asked, “So how are we going to smoke them out?”¹⁰⁵ On the night of October 3, 1993, Minister of Defense Pavel Grachev recalled in an oral history interview drinking with Yeltsin about the situation, and that Yeltsin gave him a verbal order (but no written order) to fire on the *coup* members and to “capture these men.”¹⁰⁶ The next morning, their plan began at about 7 A.M. Troops gathered around the White House, and then suddenly, Russian bystanders heard Pavel Grachev order the shelling as his tanks fired upon the Russian White House for an hour. Grachev stated, “A fire started. It was beautiful. [...] I ordered the 119th Regiment to storm the building. [...] Nine of my men died. [...] We also killed many.”¹⁰⁷ After the tanks, the deadly sniper wars began on top of Moscow rooftops. Khasbulatov’s spokesperson Konstantin Zlobin, as written in journalist John Kampfner’s book, recalled the final moments of the crisis in the White House:

¹⁰⁴ Kampfner, 151.

¹⁰⁵ Aron, 542; The plan was to put tanks in front of the White House, warn the people inside, and fire shots at the upper floors for a “psychological effect,” followed by a swift assault by Spetsnaz and Alpha units (Aron, 542).

¹⁰⁶ Interview conducted by Petr Aven and Alfred Kokh and ultimately published in their book, *Gaidar’s Revolution: The Inside Account of the Economic Transformation of Russia*, (London: I. B. Tauris, 2015), pp. 297-333, National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/30739-document-15-russian-defense-minister-pavel-grachev-oral-history-excerpt>.

¹⁰⁷ Interview conducted by Petr Aven and Alfred Kokh and ultimately published in their book, National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/30739-document-15-russian-defense-minister-pavel-grachev-oral-history-excerpt>.

We sang old Soviet songs. Rutskoy came in once shouting slogans. Khasbulatov came in three times to jolly us along. ‘No surrender. The ultimate victory is ours,’ all that stuff. [...] Then Yeltsin’s Alpha troops came in, men from outer space with all their wires on their backs and high-tech. They said they could guarantee our lives, nothing else.¹⁰⁸

Many have contentiously debated whether Yeltsin’s act of force in Black October was his last resort. The violence-seeking nature of the Supreme Soviet after September 21st and their barricade in the parliament suggests that it was. The Supreme Soviet and its supporters simply did not want to negotiate or have Yeltsin as president after September 23rd. The escalatory debates about the constitutional referendum ceased at this point; it was simply about power, political survival, and achieving victory. However, as analyst Wayne Merry notes in a newly declassified cable, “Russians who were very relieved that Yeltsin won the battle did not thank him for initiating the confrontation.”¹⁰⁹ Yeltsin acted to escalate the conflict in seeking to obtain more executive power and plainly disavowed the constitutional system by declaring to dissolve the CPD and Supreme Soviet on September 21, 1993. The September 21st television address and Decree No. 1400 were the main catalysts for the bloodshed that occurred in October. Yeltsin, in conversation with the political West, was incorrect in his assumption regarding the opposition’s lack of interest to respond aggressively. It was this assumption that made extreme measures especially attractive to Yeltsin. However, Yeltsin’s baseline objective was regime survival and protecting his own life, and he succeeded. As U.S. Ambassador to Russia Thomas Pickering said, “Were Yeltsin to have failed to do what he did [...] I cannot but believe that would have

¹⁰⁸ Kampfner, 159.

¹⁰⁹ Wayne Merry Dissent Channel Cable from American Embassy Moscow to Secretary of State, “Whose Russia is it Anyway? Toward a Policy of Benign Respect,” National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/32704-document-1-wayne-merry-dissent-channel-cable-american-embassy-moscow>.

resulted in greater bloodshed and a long civil conflict.”¹¹⁰ The opposition had an opportunity to reconstitute the Soviet Union—or something else—if Yeltsin fell.

The International Reception and Aftermath of the 1993 Constitutional Crisis

*“Now that these events are over, we have no more obstacles to Russia’s democratic elections and our transition to democracy and a market economy. [...] I plan to move forward in a strong way.”*¹¹¹

—Boris Yeltsin on the telephone to Bill Clinton, on October 5, 1993.

When the smoke cleared, Yeltsin kept his power. And through brute force, Yeltsin intimidated the opposition into accepting the December 1993 constitution. The Clinton Administration quickly determined how to respond. U.S. Ambassador to Russia Thomas Pickering recalled that he said to Strobe Talbott, “it’s a no-brainer. We have no other alternative in this situation, as difficult as it is.”¹¹² This is because Pickering said the U.S. State Department viewed the Russian constitution as “a hangover from the Soviet regime and its constitution rather than something that we would necessarily have considered to be a democratic, legitimate document.”¹¹³ It is interesting to note here that perhaps Pickering weighed the legitimacy of Russian constitutionalism based upon his own satisfaction with the Russian constitution rather than prioritizing what Russians themselves considered constitutionally legitimate. The

¹¹⁰ Foreign Affairs Oral History Collection, Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, Arlington, Virginia, pp. 357-362 (15th of December, the Ides of December 2006) and pp. 386-391, 19th of February 2007, Thomas Pickering Interview.

¹¹¹ Memorandum of Telephone Conversation: “Telcon with President Boris Yeltsin of Russian Federation,” 5 October 1993, The White House, William J. Clinton Presidential Library, National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/30732-document-08-memorandum-telephone-conversation-telcon-president-boris-yeltsin-russian>.

¹¹² Foreign Affairs Oral History Collection, Thomas Pickering Interview.

¹¹³ Foreign Affairs Oral History Collection, Thomas Pickering Interview.

perspective by the political West that the Soviet constitution was not legitimate undoubtedly played into Yeltsin's confidence and fueled his belief he was doing the right thing.

Always overconfident, Yeltsin told Clinton over the phone on October 5, 1993, that he “plans to move forward in a strong way” and that “we have no more obstacles to Russia’s democratic elections and our transition to democracy and a market economy.”¹¹⁴ Additionally, Yeltsin said that any deaths occurring that day were entirely “the fault” of the *coup* members that he deemed “terrorism and banditry at work.”¹¹⁵ At the end of the conversation, Yeltsin told Clinton that “no real rivals to me are visible” and that his current rating stands at 90%.¹¹⁶ Yeltsin’s overconfidence was couched in a dangerous assumption that all was well after firing on the White House with tanks and crafting a new constitution in his favor. Unlike Yeltsin, internal U.S. analyses were not as enthusiastic. In a U.S. Embassy Moscow cable on October 19, 1993, James Collins wrote that the 1993 constitution was a “half-baked document” that gave a “preponderance of authority” to the executive power, while also “not adequately” defining the roles of the national, regional, and republican governments and maintaining the “neurological issue” of the ethnic republics.¹¹⁷ This was in contrast with the words personally shared to Yeltsin by the Clinton Administration. Specifically, in an evaluation of the situation, U.S. Secretary of

¹¹⁴ Memorandum of Telephone Conversation: “Telcon with President Boris Yeltsin of Russian Federation,” National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/30732-document-08-memorandum-telephone-conversation-telcon-president-boris-yeltsin-russian>.

¹¹⁵ Memorandum of Telephone Conversation: “Telcon with President Boris Yeltsin of Russian Federation,” National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/30732-document-08-memorandum-telephone-conversation-telcon-president-boris-yeltsin-russian>.

¹¹⁶ Memorandum of Telephone Conversation: “Telcon with President Boris Yeltsin of Russian Federation,” National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/30732-document-08-memorandum-telephone-conversation-telcon-president-boris-yeltsin-russian>.

¹¹⁷ James Collins, Cable from American Embassy Moscow to Secretary of State: “Secretary's Visit to Moscow: Domestic Political Dynamics,” 19 October 1993, U.S. Department of State, National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/30734-document-10-cable-american-embassy-moscow-secretary-state-secretarys-visit-moscow>.

State Warren Christopher praised Yeltsin on October 22, 1993, for his “superb handling” of the crisis.¹¹⁸

Although Yeltsin prevailed, democracy promotion was tainted. The new constitution gave Yeltsin dictatorial powers. The legal culture after the crisis was also questionable: the newly created Duma and Federation Council behaved as a ‘transitional’ legislature rather than a strong legal authority, despite that there was a norm of adhering to the law of Yeltsin. As Russian State Duma member Grigory Yavlinsky lamented: “A regime under which the constitution is violated, the judicial system is not working, and parliament is forced to keep moving from building to building like a bunch of bums is not a democratic regime.”¹¹⁹

A declassified U.S. Embassy Moscow dissent channel cable by analyst Wayne Merry—dubbed “The Long Telegram of the 1990s”—warned about the U.S. approach of bolstering Yeltsin’s power.¹²⁰ Merry began his argument with the statement that: “Democratic forces in Russia are in serious trouble” and that “we are not helping with a misguided over-emphasis on market economics.”¹²¹ He wrote that “1994 will be a very difficult year for Russian

¹¹⁸ “Secretary Christopher’s Meeting with President Yeltsin, 10/22/1993, Moscow,” U.S. Department of State, National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/16380-document-08-secretary-christopher-s-meeting>.

¹¹⁹ McFaul, *Russia’s unfinished revolution*, 423.

¹²⁰ This nickname is likened to George Kennan’s 1946 “Long Telegram” which discussed Joseph Stalin’s adversarial foreign policy. It can be said that Kennan’s telegram arguably deflated much more dire warnings from other U.S. experts on Russian affairs, however; Steven Pifer: “It was a dissent channel cable [where Merry sent the telegram]. And so that means that, the way I read it was that that was his view. In the end, his view perhaps turned out to be right, but it was not the view of the U.S. embassy at the time. Had it been an embassy view at the time, it would have come in as a front channel message. He had every right, and it’s good for him to do that kind of dissent. But again, when I’m reading it there with all the other cable traffic coming in from Moscow, I’m thinking, ‘Okay, well, that’s one person’s view, but it doesn’t seem to be consistent with the other things we’re hearing from the embassy’” (William Ledesma, Oral History Interview of Steven Karl Pifer, 11 March 2025).

¹²¹ Wayne Merry Dissent Channel Cable from American Embassy Moscow to Secretary of State, “Whose Russia is it Anyway? Toward a Policy of Benign Respect,” National Security Archive,

democrats.”¹²² In discussing the post-crisis December 1993 parliamentary election results that did not go in Yeltsin’s favor, Merry wrote that the U.S. should “now recognize that the [Russian] radicals [party of Yeltsin] lost a general election, lost it badly, and lost it fair and square.”¹²³ He criticized Yeltsin’s government in the document, saying that they were “Out of touch with the realities of life in their own country” and that “Yeltsin no longer has his finger on the pulse of average people. More to the point, average people know it.”¹²⁴ He noted that “The diminishment of Yeltsin’s standing [due to the December parliamentary elections] would be comparatively unimportant if compensated by an increase in the credibility and effectiveness of other democratic political forces. The opposite is the case.”¹²⁵ Merry pointed out that Yeltsin did not sufficiently promote democratic forces and paid the consequences of only focusing on personal power. He forewarned the political fallout of Yeltsin’s reform movement. According to Wayne Merry, the result of Yeltsin’s actions in the crisis was the potential growth of Russian nationalism. Specifically, he wrote that

<https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/32704-document-1-wayne-merry-dissent-channel-cable-american-embassy-moscow>.

¹²² Wayne Merry Dissent Channel Cable from American Embassy Moscow to Secretary of State, “Whose Russia is it Anyway? Toward a Policy of Benign Respect,” National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/32704-document-1-wayne-merry-dissent-channel-cable-american-embassy-moscow>.

¹²³ Wayne Merry Dissent Channel Cable from American Embassy Moscow to Secretary of State, “Whose Russia is it Anyway? Toward a Policy of Benign Respect,” National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/32704-document-1-wayne-merry-dissent-channel-cable-american-embassy-moscow>.

¹²⁴ Wayne Merry Dissent Channel Cable from American Embassy Moscow to Secretary of State, “Whose Russia is it Anyway? Toward a Policy of Benign Respect,” National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/32704-document-1-wayne-merry-dissent-channel-cable-american-embassy-moscow>.

¹²⁵ Wayne Merry Dissent Channel Cable from American Embassy Moscow to Secretary of State, “Whose Russia is it Anyway? Toward a Policy of Benign Respect,” National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/32704-document-1-wayne-merry-dissent-channel-cable-american-embassy-moscow>.

The prevailing mood in Moscow toward neo-imperialism (for now) is *caveat emptor* [let the buyer beware] [...] If linked to constitutional democracy [and] to the steady growth of representative institutions, Russian nationalism can become a positive force, as patriotism and national feeling are in Western democracies. Divorced from democracy, Russian nationalism will become a terror.¹²⁶

Merry suggested it was not inconceivable that nationalism could eventually overtake the Yeltsin government.¹²⁷ In arguably the most important recommendation in the cable, Merry concluded that

If the West, with the United States in the front rank, prefers the role of an economic missionary to that of a true partner, we will assist Russian extremists in undermining the country's nascent democracy and will encourage a renewal of Russia's adversarial stance toward the outside world. Incidentally, we will also fail on the economic front.¹²⁸

Statements such as Merry's suggest that the Clinton Administration was warned about continuing to back Yeltsin's personal power instead of the democratic forces in Russia. Merry's telegram had everything to do with reminding the political West not to forget that democracy did

¹²⁶ Wayne Merry Dissent Channel Cable from American Embassy Moscow to Secretary of State, "Whose Russia is it Anyway? Toward a Policy of Benign Respect," National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/32704-document-1-wayne-merry-dissent-channel-cable-american-embassy-moscow>.

¹²⁷ He warned that "even democrats may come to share [the poet Alexander] Pushkin's bitter judgment of Russia's status, 'if we did not stretch across half the earth, who would notice us?'" (Wayne Merry Dissent Channel Cable from American Embassy Moscow to Secretary of State, "Whose Russia is it Anyway? Toward a Policy of Benign Respect," National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/32704-document-1-wayne-merry-dissent-channel-cable-american-embassy-moscow>).

¹²⁸ Wayne Merry Dissent Channel Cable from American Embassy Moscow to Secretary of State, "Whose Russia is it Anyway? Toward a Policy of Benign Respect," National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/32704-document-1-wayne-merry-dissent-channel-cable-american-embassy-moscow>; For Wayne Merry's discussion of his own telegram after-the-fact, "Dissent Message: The 'Long Telegram' of the 1990s," The Wilson Center, 10 March 2025, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/event/dissent-message-long-telegram-1990s?utm_medium=email&utm_source=newsletter&utm_campaign=wilson&emci=b5071c50-6dfb-ef11-90cd-0022482a9fb7&emdi=80e99b88-b0fd-ef11-90cd-0022482a9fb7&ceid=155706.

not start and continue with Yeltsin: it started and continued with the greater Russian public. And neither did it start or continue with market economics.¹²⁹ If the foreign policy establishment continued to forget these understandings about how to grow a democracy, Merry warned that the political West would assist the growth of illiberal nationalism and the end of U.S. credibility in Russia.

Conclusion

“You know, guys, what hurts most? So many people [on different sides] claimed to be the winners after the events of [the] 1991 [coup on Gorbachev] and [the] 1993 [coup on Yeltsin]! So many tore their shirts claiming they had won.”¹³⁰

—Defense Minister Pavel Grachev in a 2015 Oral History Interview.

The declassifications add new dimensions to scholarship on the 1993 Constitutional Crisis by revealing Yeltsin’s private thoughts with the political West. Yeltsin’s trust in talking to the political West showed that he communicated himself as a regime defender and Khasbulatov as seeking personal power. However, it is likely more accurate to say both were seeking personal

¹²⁹ It is notable that in this document there is no mention of NATO, and additionally, the question of whether NATO expansion could ignite nationalism in Russia. Verified with a command search of “NATO,” “Alliance,” “Partnership for Peace,” and “North Atlantic Treaty Organization” in the OCR document. Potential claims that this document somehow warns about the expansion of NATO in respect to Russian nationalism are speculative assumptions at best, and are simply not present in Wayne Merry’s words at a baseline. In fact, Merry is only discussing Western institutions generally speaking, and he sees the potential for cooperation and integration: “The Yeltsin government’s aspiration as a great power is acceptance as a full participant in the Western community of states. The West should judge Russia’s acceptability primarily by political standards, reflecting its performance in adhering to agreed international norms in human and civil rights, in developing accountable and durable democratic institutions, and in conducting responsible relations with other countries. In all these areas, post-Soviet Russia has made considerable, if complete, strides and aspires to more.”

¹³⁰ Interview conducted by Petr Aven and Alfred Kokh and ultimately published in their book, National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/30739-document-15-russian-defense-minister-pavel-grachev-oral-history-excerpt>.

power. Though the political West projected to the world that Yeltsin's actions were reasonable—as they believed they had no other alternative but to support Yeltsin—there were worries among leaders and doubts among analysts regarding Yeltsin's actions. This suggests, along with other sources, that Yeltsin acted overconfidently and recklessly in the crisis. Yeltsin insufficiently enacted his own vision of a constitutional assembly in the summer of 1993, and analysts in the political West understood Russia could be on a path of democratic decline. The crisis was not merely a spectacle. The warnings of backing Yeltsin's personal power were ultimately not heeded—as the alternative options to Yeltsin seemed less attractive with the goal of integrating Russia into the Western international order. It could be argued that the democratic trajectory of Russia after the post-crisis constitution was wishful thinking by the political West.¹³¹ As historian Richard Sakwa wrote, “while the 1993 Constitution embodies the principles of liberalism, it is predicated on the assumption that the strong president will also be a liberal. In the event of this not being the case, the authoritative (if not authoritarian) elements in the Constitution come into contradiction with its liberal provisions. Is this what has happened?”¹³² Indeed, that is what happened.

¹³¹ As noted by a former Foreign Service Officer in the U.S. Embassy Moscow Thomas Graham in a podcast, “The people that we supported exacerbated some of the political problems in Russia. We acted in ways that were contrary to our own democratic rhetoric, and you saw that repeatedly in the first years of the Clinton administration, where we consciously supported Yeltsin in his struggle against the Congress of People's Deputies in October of 1993,” (Thomas Graham, et. al., “Episode 2: How Democracy Failed in Russia,” *None of the Above: A Podcast of the Institute for Global Affairs*, 12 February 2025, <https://www.noneoftheabovepodcast.org/episodes/s6ep2>).

¹³² Sakwa, “Constitutionalism and Accountability in Contemporary Russia,” 13.



Figure Four¹³³

“Russian President Boris Yeltsin and U.S. President Bill Clinton during a press conference at the Vancouver Summit on April 4, 1993.”

¹³³ Photo by Larry Downing/Sygma, seen on National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/russia-programs/2023-06-05/first-six-months-clinton-russian-relations-summits-yeltsin>.



Figure Five¹³⁴

Rutskoy in a tracksuit with a Kalashnikov rifle during the 1993 Constitutional Crisis.

¹³⁴ @GreyDynamics [private U.K. intelligence firm] posted on November 18, 2021, on X (Formerly Twitter), with the caption: “Alexander Rutskoy, acting Russian President during the 1993 constitutional crisis in Moscow with his security staff. Rocking AKS-74Us, tracksuit and Converse Sneakers. ‘It’s a whole vibe’ as the kids say...,” <https://t.co/TEtA3KFQOv>.

Chapter Two: Yeltsin's War to "Restore Constitutional Order" in Chechnya

Introduction

*“Please, Yeltsin, do you have a drop of conscience? Take the troops out, let the people live in peace. I ask you from all Russian people here and Chechens, take the troops out! Let the people decide their own fate! If they feel bad, they will ask for Russia. But let the people live in peace! [...] Yeltsin, aren’t you ashamed? You are shameless!”*¹

—A Russian woman from Grozny, Chechnya, makes a plea to Russian President Boris Yeltsin on August 11, 1996; the gunshots of war are heard in the background.

When the Soviet Union fell, Boris Yeltsin generally advocated for the independence of former Soviet regions.² Yet, slightly a year after the 1993 constitutional crisis, Yeltsin secretly decided to go to war on November 29-30, 1994. Yeltsin vowed to restore constitutional order in the secessionist republic of Chechnya (in the Caucasus region) under President Dzhokhar Dudayev, after failed covert operations against Chechen forces. From 1994 to 1996, the world witnessed the “tombstone of Russian power.”³ In the decision to go to war, Yeltsin and his ‘war

¹ “A Russian resident of Grozny appeals to Yeltsin, 11 August 1996,” Video File: CA-01-V-166-S03, 0:00-0:37, The Chechen Archive by the Society of Threatened Peoples.

² Yeltsin in 1995: “I have said, ‘Take as much sovereignty as you can.’ But a very profound meaning sits with this word ‘can.’ As much as you can—meaning, don’t take more than you can. And if you do, you will crack up, like Chechnya did” (Colton, 289); “In the prologue to the war, first the Chechens did essentially just what Yeltsin advocated when he was battling for the post of chairman of the Supreme Soviet of the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic in 1990” (Andrei A. Kovalev, 123-129).

³ Journalist Anatol Lieven used this term in his 1999 book: *Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power*; Similarly, “Conceived and prosecuted amid near unanimous public opposition, the Chechnya war revealed—just beneath the surface of Russia’s first democracy—militarism, incompetence, brutality and appalling disdain for the lives of Russian soldiers and Chechen civilians alike” and “Yeltsin suddenly looked to ‘democrats’ like a Soviet *vozhd*: blind in his obstinacy, brutal, incompetent and deaf to public opinion” (Aron, 564 and 568); For Western reception: “The [German] chancellor confided in the president [Bill Clinton] how much he disliked ‘calling [Yeltsin] every week and spelling out for him how Russia’s image is going downhill’ because of Chechnya. It was becoming tragically apparent to Kohl that Yeltsin ‘has a military who cheated him.’ [...] Kohl suspected instead that Yeltsin’s military officers were no longer obeying him, ‘perhaps to topple him.’ Yeltsin ‘doesn’t like it either. Nor does he like

party' did not exhaust preventative war measures, nor were they pragmatic.⁴ Rather, they took measures to increase the likelihood of war in response to the threat posed by Dudayev.⁵ The eventual decision to go to war was a direct effect of political embarrassment from Yeltsin's failed covert operation. Yeltsin's false assumption and overconfidence to begin the New Years military campaign in December 1994 was rooted in the belief that the war would only last "eight days."⁶

The first war was a catastrophe for Chechens and Russians: the total estimated lives lost, according to the Russian government, was 80,000 to 100,000.⁷ Russian military operations had a

being portrayed as a dictator'" (M.E. Sarotte, *Not One Inch: America, Russia, and the Making of Post-Cold War Stalemate* (Yale University Press, 2021), 228); Additionally, Strobe Talbott noted that "Chechnya is a dreadful lapse into the habits of the past and, simultaneously, a warning of horrors that await Russia in the future unless reformist, democratic, integrationist instincts prevail in Moscow" (Kieninger, Forthcoming).

⁴ Steven Pifer: "What I saw of Yeltsin, Yeltsin was determined not to let Chechnya go. Now, I don't think Yeltsin then managed the military. I think Yeltsin basically said there's going to be a Russian flag flying over Chechnya. And then the Russian military and Russian security services, which I think by nature, as we're seeing in Ukraine, are pretty brutal, they did it 'the Russian way' [...] My assumption was losing Chechnya at that point would have been a real gift to his opponents, who would have said, 'Look, he's now giving away parts of Russia.' So, even if Yeltsin was personally inclined to say we should be much less brutal about this, he still was going to be of a mind that Chechnya has to remain Russian. That, I think, would have been the kind of thing that he saw as very threatening to his presidency" (William Ledesma, Oral History Interview of Steven Karl Pifer, 11 March 2025).

⁵ Dzhokhar Dudayev was born in Chechnya in 1944, before him and his family were deported to Central Asia due to Stalin's genocide and ethnic cleansing of the Chechen people. He returned to Chechnya with his family in 1956 after Stalin died. He was a major general in the Soviet Air Forces. In 1991, he refused orders from Moscow to suppress Estonia's revolution for independence and resigned from the Russian military. Soon after he became president of Chechnya.

⁶ "[Russian] General [Pavel] Grachev personally briefed the plan for the capture of Grozny. It consisted of three stages: Stage I would begin on November 29, 1994, and be over by December 6 (eight days)" (Olga Oliker, *Russia's Chechen Wars 1994-2000: Lessons from Urban Combat* (RAND Army Research Division, 2000), 9-10).

⁷ Russian General Alexander Lebed "estimated the number of dead as 80,000 to 100,000. Most of the victims were civilians. In the battle for Grozny alone (December 1994 to February 1995), 23,000 to 25,000 people died. Of these casualties, 18,700 were killed as a result of Russian

blatant disregard for human dignity, and there was evidence of human rights violations: the indiscriminate bombing of urban centers, the killings of civilians of all age groups, and the torturing of prisoners at Russian ‘filtration points.’ At the same time, Chechen fighters committed acts of terror against civilians in Russia and Dagestan. Corrupt military officials and Russian elites profited from the war: Grozny, the capital of Chechnya, became an “open arms bazaar” and hostage taking, human trafficking, and assassinations occurred.⁸ The Chechen fighters sustained their war capabilities primarily through Russia by capturing resources and operating illicit bribes and sales.⁹ Thus, the conditions of the war made achieving a successful peace treaty extremely difficult.

When negotiations with Chechens were initiated, Yeltsin did not want a peace plan on terms unfavorable to him. In a similar fashion to how he started the war, Yeltsin prioritized his personal power and political legitimacy to end it. He understood that the war was limiting his chances for re-election in the summer of 1996, and he sought a political victory by obtaining a ceasefire with Chechnya. When negotiating peace with the Chechen delegation, Akhmed Zakaev’s memoir, which was released in 2018, claimed that Yeltsin’s negotiation style played unfairly.

bombing and artillery strikes” (Andrei A. Kovalev, 123-129); Though the numbers could possibly be above official Russian Government reporting.

⁸ James Hughes, *Chechnya: From Nationalism to Jihad* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008); Similarly, “Criminals of all kinds sought refuge there, confident that they would never be extradited to Russia. Kidnapping, money-laundering, gun-running and the printing of counterfeit rubles became vast and lucrative businesses” (Aron, 565).

⁹ “The money to finance our units came directly from the Russian Treasury” and “to summarize, all our military supplies came from Russia: the money, the weapons, and the ammunition. One we obtained from the puppet institutions; arms and ammunition we captured in battle or bought from the enemy with the money from the puppet regime. There was no ‘stream of Arab dollars’ into Chechnya” (Akhmed Zakaev, *Subjugate or Exterminate! A Memoir of Russia’s Wars Against Chechnya*, trans. Arch Tait (Academia Press, 2018), 43 and 68).

Russian archival sources, video footage from the Chechen Archive, and declassifications from the political West suggest that the First Chechen War should not be considered a “tragic exception” in Yeltsin’s ‘successful’ management of former Soviet regions after the collapse of the U.S.S.R.¹⁰ Rather, Yeltsin’s war in Chechnya set a dangerous precedent to how Russia interprets principles of sovereignty and responds to conflicts in the former Soviet regions—let alone its approach to Chechen affairs. This is because the war emboldened Russian rhetoric with respect to regions Russia believed were theirs. When it came to Putin’s Second Chechen War, the rhetoric from Putin and the Kremlin—outside of their general anti-terrorism messaging—was to ‘finish’ and ‘punish’ the Chechens and, unlike the years of Yeltsin, conduct a war in Chechnya ‘the right way’ (which meant more severely). Putin found his first tool of political legitimacy in the second war that was made possible by Yeltsin’s failures in the first. The Second Chechen War was declared at the end of Yeltsin’s second term on August 7, 1999, when he was into his presidential retirement due to depleting health, and Vladimir Putin continued the second war officially until April 16, 2009.

Chechnya: The Politics and Laws of Secession (1991-1994)

*“It is not only a question of the integrity of Russia. We need a small, victorious war to raise the President’s [Yeltsin’s] ratings.”*¹¹

—Oleg Lobov of the Russian Security Council, as quoted in David Satter’s *The Less You Know the Better You Sleep*.

¹⁰ The author did not obtain the sources from the Russian Government nor by being in Russia. Select Russian Government sources in this chapter are provided digitally by the National Security Archive; “Tragic exception” (Aron, 708).

¹¹ Satter, 64.

From 1990-1991, Yeltsin perceived Dzhokhar Dudayev as a leader capable of removing the Chechen-Ingush Supreme Soviet, at the time under Doku Zavgaev.¹² In May, Dudayev was successful in dissolving the Chechen-Ingush Supreme Soviet. As its replacement, Dudayev created the Chechen National Congress in May 1991 and declared it to be the only legitimate provisional government until Chechnya could hold elections.¹³ However, Russian politicians were becoming concerned about Dudayev: he declared a “Chechen National Revolution,” armed the male Chechen population, expelled 90,000 Slavs, and contributed to mafia wars.¹⁴ On September 25, 1991, ten Chechen groups demanded that Dudayev halt his efforts to seize power.¹⁵

In 1991, Ruslan Khasbulatov was a pivotal reason for the start of the war. As the Chairman of the Supreme Soviet and of Chechen ethnicity, he considered the region to be his “fiefdom.”¹⁶ Thinking that after successfully deposing Zavgaev, he could also remove Dudayev, Khasbulatov sent a telegram to the Provisional Council, to the Council of Ministers of the republic, and to OKChN on September 27, 1991, which stated that if “an informal organization [likely referencing Dudayev],” gained power, it would be deemed invalid by the Russian

¹² Scholarship often views Dzhokhar Dudayev as unstable; “Dudayev was a narcissist influenced by the Chechen mountaineers’ cult of the *jiggit*, the madcap or knight who proves himself in armed forays and lives on in heroic songs if he falls on the battlefield” and “Anatol Lieven [...] also recalls Dudayev in interviews before the war ranting at Yeltsin and the Russians as Nazis, totalitarian, satanic” (Colton, 288 and 290); Dudayev was “A brutal, erratic and paranoid dictator, whose enemies, both real and imagined, were swiftly murdered by his small army of bodyguards” (Aron, 565).

¹³ Hughes, 24; Dudayev even seized the KGB headquarters in Chechnya, with the “blessing, more or less,” from the Kremlin (Kristin Bakke, *Decentralization and Intrastate Struggles: Chechnya, Punjab, and Québec* (Cambridge University Press, 2015): 108-109).

¹⁴ Hughes, 63-64 and 180.

¹⁵ Matthew Evangelista, *The Chechen Wars: Will Russia go the way of the Soviet Union?* (Brookings Institution Press, 2002), 19.

¹⁶ Ruslan Khasbulatov lost his position as Chairman after the 1993 constitutional crisis; “Fiefdom” (Evangelista, 24-25).

parliament.¹⁷ Soon thereafter, Dudayev dismissed the Chechen provisional government and occupied the Chechen Council of Ministers in Grozny on October 9, 1991. Two days later, Khasbulatov gave a speech that Yeltsin should “detain” Dudayev and his associates under Russian constitutional powers.¹⁸ Khasbulatov followed through with his plan by passing a motion in the Russian parliament to define Dudayev and his government as illegal. According to Akhmed Zakaev’s memoir, this action by Khasbulatov made diplomacy difficult, as a Chechen delegation planned to negotiate with a Yeltsin delegation, but Khasbulatov’s actions caused the Chechen delegation to become illegitimate.¹⁹

Yeltsin also took steps that were bound to ignite a conflict in 1991. On October 19th, he issued a decree demanding that Dudayev surrender unconditionally.²⁰ In response, Dudayev held elections on October 27th, became president, and declared independence for the “Chechen Republic of Ichkeria” on November 1st, 1991.²¹ It is noteworthy that, according to Zakaev’s

¹⁷ John Dunlop, *Russia Confronts Chechnya* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 108; Oktiabrsky Committee of the National Congress of Chechnya (OKChN).

¹⁸ “Under Article 218 of the RSFSR Criminal Code (which treated the illegal possession of weapons), and Articles 67 and 68 of the code (which concerned terrorism directed against lawful authorities)” (Dunlop, 110).

¹⁹ “Khasbulatov cynically and cold-bloodedly condemned his own people to a terrible war” (Zakaev, 29-30).

²⁰ Yeltsin’s decree said that if Dudayev did not follow his command “All measures provided for in the laws of the Russian Federation would be employed to normalize the situation and ensure the protection of the constitutional order” (Dunlop, 112).

²¹ When Dudayev became president, “The Moscow authorities fled the territory and left behind thousands of heavy weapons—the only province of Russia where they did so” (Colton, 288); Scholarship views Dudayev’s declaration of independence as either a farce, insufficient in principles of international law, a reflection of conflict between Russian and Chechen organized crime, or historically valid and genuinely in the interests of the Chechen people; Richard Sakwa, “Introduction: Why Chechnya?,” in *Chechnya: From Past to Future*, ed. Richard Sakwa (Anthem Press, 2005), 14: Chechnya’s sovereignty was an “invisible concept,” Bruno Coppieters, “Secession and war: a moral analysis of the Russian-Chechen conflict,” *Central Asian Survey* 22, no. 4 (2003): 383-384: “unilateral secession by Chechnya was unjust [in int. law principles] in relation to Russia,” Robert Bruce Ware, “A Multitude of Evil: Mythology and Political Failure in Chechnya, in *Chechnya: From Past to Future*, ed. Richard Sakwa 88: “the

memoir, Yeltsin never received a letter that Dudayev wrote to him when these events occurred that read:

The problems which today have become so acute do not deserve the needless spilling of a single drop of human blood [...] I extend to you the hand of friendship and propose that we should meet in the very near future to deal with all contentious issues for the sake of a better future.²²

This alleged unread letter would suggest that at the time of the declaration of independence, Dudayev sought the interests of his regime but still wanted peace with Yeltsin. However, this assessment is difficult to substantiate, as Dudayev awarded Shamil Basayev for leading a terror attack on November 9, 1991. Basayev had hijacked a Russian airliner with 178 passengers and threatened to blow up the plane unless Yeltsin rescinded his decree.²³ Regardless of whether Yeltsin read Dudayev's letter, awarding Basayev for a terror attack likely disinclined Yeltsin's interest in extending Dudayev a hand of friendship.

Still, two years later, Yeltsin publicly said in August 1994 that "armed [Russian] intervention [in Chechnya] is impermissible and must not be done."²⁴ Yeltsin was not the only one who shared this opinion: Khasbulatov also agreed. Astonishingly, video footage from the Chechen Archive uncovers interviews of Ruslan Khasbulatov and his anti-Dudayev "peace" visit

separatist myth;" On organized crime, Jakob Rigi, "Chaos, Conspiracy, and Spectacle: The Russian War against Chechnya," *The International Journal of Anthropology* 48, no. 1 (Spring 2004).

²² Zakaev, 28.

²³ Hughes, 303; The plane landed in Turkey and no one died in the terror attack. Basayev was treated as a "conquering hero by Dudayev, who awarded him the rank of colonel in charge of a regiment of special forces in the newly formed Chechen army." Shamil Basayev later becomes a senior commander in the Chechen forces.

²⁴ Jason J. Morrisette, "Rationality and risk-taking in Russia's first Chechen War: toward a theory of cognitive realism," *European Political Science Review* 2, no. 2 (July 2010): 198.

to Chechnya in September 1994, before the war began.²⁵ During his visit, Khasbulatov's delegation stressed Chechen independence and avoiding war, but only on the condition that relations with Russia would normalize. For instance, Khasbulatov, in front of a crowd of Chechens, said, "It is not in the interests of Russia or the Chechen Republic to kill here, to bring troops here."²⁶ His accompanying traveler, State Duma member Mikhail Petrovich Burlakov, connected the struggles of Chechnya to Russia by spewing a conspiracy of Western interventionism: "Look at what's happening here, but I want to tell you that all of Russia is also in ruins. [...] What is happening here is because the press television came with American money."²⁷ In a separate group with Chechens, Burlakov assured a reporter that "the peaceful way still remains a solution."²⁸ In other video footage, Khasbulatov gave a more pointed answer that is directed against the Dudayev regime. In a 1-1 interview with a journalist, Khasbulatov said

I am for sovereignty. I am for a sovereign Chechen Republic. [...] But I do not think that Dudayev's sovereignty is sovereignty. [...] The Chechen Republic has become more dependent on the Russian Federation, on its neighbors. It has become much more dependent than in the previous decades. [...] We have simple goals here. To overthrow Dudayev and establish a democratic regime. [...] So, at least once in history, I would like to give the small Chechen nation an opportunity, at least for an experiment, to determine their own fate.²⁹

²⁵ Khasbulatov's visit to Chechnya occurs after the 1993 Constitutional Crisis. He no longer held his chairman position at the Supreme Soviet.

²⁶ "The peacemaking group of Khasbulatov before the first war, September 1994," Video File: CA-03-V-092-S01, Files 1-5, 8:00-9:00, The Chechen Archive by the Society of Threatened Peoples.

²⁷ "The peacemaking group of Khasbulatov before the first war, September 1994," Video File: CA-03-V-092-S01, Files 1-5, 9:00-10:30, The Chechen Archive by the Society of Threatened Peoples.

²⁸ "The peacemaking group of Khasbulatov before the first war, September 1994," Video File: CA-03-V-092-S01, Files 1-5, 9:00-9:20, The Chechen Archive by the Society of Threatened Peoples.

²⁹ "The peacemaking group of Khasbulatov before the first war, September 1994," Video File: CA-03-V-092-S01, Files 1-5, 0:00-1:45, The Chechen Archive by the Society of Threatened Peoples.

Outside of the irony that Khasbulatov advocated for a democratic regime in Chechnya after the constitutional crisis in Moscow, it is clear from this video footage that a reason for traveling to Chechnya was to promote anti-Dudayev sentiments while still stating that he was for Chechen sovereignty. It is notable that Khasbulatov did not believe that Chechens could determine their own fate with Dudayev in power. He made it no secret in this interview that he did not want Dudayev in power.

Given the reception from the Russian political elite, Dudayev likely saw he was running out of options and foresaw a military confrontation. In November 1994, Dudayev threatened to create suicide battalions, and he taunted plans to order terror attacks in Russia.³⁰ Yeltsin issued a state of emergency decree on November 9, 1994, and sent troops to seek Dudayev's arrest. Dudayev responded by ordering martial law in Chechnya. Two days later, the Russian parliament denied Yeltsin's state of emergency decree with a vote of 177 'no' to four 'yes' because they did not want to escalate the conflict.³¹ But Yeltsin, once again, ignored the judgment of the Russian parliament. Yeltsin ordered a covert operation on November 28, 1994: supplying Russian troops and funding armaments for a Chechen opposition to take the capital of Grozny. It turned out to be a failed operation. Dudayev won the battle, took over seventy Russian

³⁰ Hughes, 303; Dzhokhar Dudayev: "We do not have armaments, military vehicles, military equipment, a military-industrial complex. We were left naked, and therefore we have been forced to establish suicide battalions" (Hughes, 303).

³¹ Svante Cornell, *Small Nations and Great Powers: A Study of Ethnopolitical Conflict in the Caucasus* (Routledge, 2001), 198-199; Dzhokhar Dudayev "managed to have over 600 prisoners escape from jail, and turned them into a personal guard [...] As interior ministry troops landed in Grozny, Dudayev's troops occupied the airport, forcing planes to leave, with only minor skirmishes occurring. As the parliament lifted the state of emergency, a total troop withdrawal was ordered."

soldiers as prisoners, and televised them. Chechens became outraged with the blatant evidence of Russian aggression and influence in Chechnya, dealing a large political blow to Yeltsin.³²

The day after, Yeltsin held a dubious Security Council meeting, where he preemptively decided to invade Chechnya. The meeting resembled that of how the traditional Russian tsar went to war. Reflecting on the deliberations of the meeting, Security Council member Kalmykov mentioned that Yeltsin asked everyone to vote on whether to go to war first, making it obvious that Yeltsin would vote ‘yes.’ They only discussed possible strategy options after voting on war, and the outcome sided with Yeltsin’s vote.³³ Turning his decision into administrative action on November 30th with Secret Order No. 2137-s “On Measures for Restoring Constitutional Law and Order on the Territory of the Chechen Republic,” Yeltsin chose the path of war. Oleg Lobov allegedly told Russian politician Sergei Yushenkov after the meeting that ‘It is not only a question of the integrity of Russia. We need a small, victorious war to raise the President’s ratings.’³⁴ The public legal justification for not recognizing the sovereignty of Chechnya is best summarized by Oleg Lobov, who was Secretary of the Russian Security Council: “Chechnya is a part of the Russian Federation. The present constitution does not allow any of its territories to leave.”³⁵ Yeltsin committed the Russian army to war under the auspices of legal principles to “restore constitutional order.” But in reality, the decision to go to war was instead a direct effect

³² “‘The President’s [Yeltsin’s] Appeal to the Participants of the Armed Conflict in the Chechen Republic,’” which contained an ultimatum that demanded the release of the prisoners, the disbandment of the illegal armed formations, and then laying down of weapons by all sides within forty-eight hours” (Ilyas Akhmadov and Miriam Lansky, *The Chechen Struggle: Independence Won and Lost* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 14).

³³ It is important to note that Yevgeny Primakov, head of the Foreign Intelligence Services (SVR), expressed his objections to Yeltsin’s decision after the vote. Kalmykov also resigned from the Council (Evangelista, 31-32).

³⁴ Satter, 64.

³⁵ “Chechnya: A Russian Nightmare,” A BBC Documentary, 1995, Video File: CA-01-V-017-S11, 40:00-41:00, The Chechen Archive by the Society for Threatened Peoples.

of Yeltsin under the influence of political embarrassment from a covert operation. In the process, he also did not heed the constitutional power and the interests of the parliament. Andrei A. Kovalev, a member of the Security Council, offered in 2017 an opportunistic reason for Yeltsin's decision to go to war:

The war in Chechnya might have been devised as a means of strengthening Yeltsin's power, perhaps as an excuse for introducing a state of emergency, for gradually extending it to other parts of the country, and postponing the 1996 presidential election. One should not forget that war is a lucrative business, especially when it is fought on one's own territory, and consequently entails rebuilding what was destroyed or its equivalent.³⁶

Despite political sociologist Leon Aron's statement that those "surrounding" Yeltsin "at the time agreed" on war, along with assessing that Yeltsin realized "what people wanted in these times of painful and confusing change was a show of Russia's military might," documents instead show that there was strong opposition to the war among Yeltsin advisors.³⁷ Although there was the 'war party' that pushed for war in Chechnya, the emphasis here is that Yeltsin's decision to go to war was heavy with self-interest, if not entirely decided by self-interest, rather than merely considering the national political will for war.

The rest of the Russian government was not yet cleared of Yeltsin's secret decision, and many important opinions and analyses on the matter were ignored. For instance, after meeting Dudayev in Chechnya on December 1, 1994, Chairman of the State Duma Defense Committee S. N. Yushenkov sent a message from Grozny to the Chairman of the State Duma of the Federal Assembly I.P. Rybkin that military planning and actions would be unacceptable. Yushenkov requested that Rybkin inform Yeltsin about the deputies' group opinion and "take all possible

³⁶ Andrei A. Kovalev, 128.

³⁷ Aron, 564.

measures” to not allow military actions in Chechnya.³⁸ In a telephone call from Grozny, Sergei Kovalev, just days before the New Year’s Eve Offensive on December 31st, shared extremely valuable insights that Yeltsin did not heed to before making the decision to go to war: “The reality is that Russia is dealing with an armed populace [...] you cannot ignore the entire people, you cannot think that you can defeat the people.”³⁹ Sergei Kovalev’s assessment was largely accurate: in every attempt by Yeltsin to sow oppositional distrust in Chechnya or to try to topple Dudayev, the Chechen people responded in a more united and confrontational manner to Russia.⁴⁰ In an interview, Sergei Kovalev reflected on the moment Yeltsin decided to go to war. He said that Yeltsin “calculated” the war would only take him eight days to win and that “The Security Council realized that Yeltsin wanted a war, so they decided ‘Ok, we support the war.’ This was the game.”⁴¹

Fatefully, an alleged dramatic conversation at an unknown date in December 1994 revealed the core dilemma before the invasion. According to the source in *Epokha El’tsina*, Russian Defense Minister Pavel Grachev visited Dudayev to request that he reconsider his position on independence. Dzhokhar Dudayev responded:

Dudayev: It’s already too late. Do you see the crowd [outside of the building]? If I concede to you, they will shoot both of us and put someone else in charge.

³⁸ “Telephone Message from Chairman of the State Duma Defense Committee Sergey Yushenkov to Speaker of the State Duma Ivan Rybkin from Grozny,” 1 December 1994, State Archive of the Russian Federation (Moscow, Russia), Fond 10100, Opis 2, delo 130, trans. National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/20248-national-security-archive-doc-01-telephone>.

³⁹ “Sergei Kovalev Telephone Report from Grozny,” 19 December 1994, Memorial Society Archive (Moscow, Russia), trans. National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/20250-national-security-archive-doc-03-sergei-kovalev>.

⁴⁰ Zakaev.

⁴¹ Interview with Sergei Kovalev, 28 March 1998, in Cindy Skach, “Russia’s Constitutional Dictatorship: A Brief History,” *University of Miami International and Comparative Law Review* 21, no. 1 (2021): 217.

Grachev: Dzhokhar, this is your last chance. Do you really think you're going to fight against us? In any case, I'll crush you.

Dudayev: Then it is war.

Grachev: Yes, war!⁴²

“The Emperor Has No Clothes:” The Invasion of Grozny on December 31, 1994⁴³

“This is not Stalingrad ‘42, this is Grozny ‘95.”⁴⁴

—*Literaturnai gazeta*, 17 May 1995.

In the leadup to the New Year's Offensive in Grozny, Yeltsin's advisory board vented with anger regarding their limited opinions on Yeltsin's decision to war. Despite the statement by political sociologist Leon Aron that “Virtually no one in Russia supported Chechnya's secession, and everyone recognized the need for Moscow to establish control over what was part of Russia,” this Russian document within *Epokha El'tsina* adds further proof that advisors did not agree with Yeltsin's decision.⁴⁵ Coincidentally, these conversations show considerations that Yeltsin missed when he decided to go to war.

For instance, presidential aide Georgy Satarov condemned the decision to deploy troops and expressed his view that the inconsistencies of Yeltsin would “sooner or later, lead to the demise of the existing regime in Russia.”⁴⁶ Special Advisor to Yeltsin on defense issues, Dmitry Volkognov, stressed that this war could turn into a greater Caucasus conflict and that Yeltsin

⁴² Alleged conversation between Dudayev and Grachev, December 1994; Baturin et. al., *Epokha El'tsina*, 604; This account is also seen in Evangelista, 32.

⁴³ “Sifting Through the Wreckage: Chechnya and Russia's Future,” January 11, 1995, From U.S. Embassy Moscow, Ambassador Thomas Pickering, to U.S. Secretary of State, U.S. Department of State, William J. Burns's *The Back Channel* Appendix.

⁴⁴ *Literaturnai gazeta*, 17 May 1995 (Hughes, 81).

⁴⁵ Aron, 578.

⁴⁶ “Information Report by Yeltsin's Security Service about the Meeting of the President's Expert Analytical Council,” December 28, 1994, in *Epokha El'tsina*, trans. National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/20251-national-security-archive-doc-04-information>.

needed to initiate negotiations with Dudayev.⁴⁷ Emil Pain, who was then Deputy Head of the Analytical Center, said this would negatively affect Yeltsin's 1996 re-election for president. Emil Pain also said that an "invasion"⁴⁸ into Chechnya would save Dzhokhar Dudayev politically and make him a continuous problem; he urged that if there were to be negotiations, they had to make concessions to Dudayev. Council member Leonid Gozman said Yeltsin's election possibilities were "reduced to zero" and suggested looking into "constitutional" options for the early removal of Yeltsin from performing official duties as president.⁴⁹ Council member Yuri Karyakin said: "It seems that we are being given the run-around, the security structures send obvious disinformation to the president. Again, it is totally incomprehensible, and who is at fault for this situation?!"⁵⁰ Otto Latsis responded to Karyakin:

The President needs to punish all of the perpetrators of the events in Chechnya (apparently, the [Russian] Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of Internal Affairs); if this is not done, then all responsibility for the outcome of these events will remain with the President himself. In Chechnya, it was necessary from the very beginning to use only democratic methods of conflict resolution.⁵¹

It is notable in Latsis' words that he considered Yeltsin's actions to be undemocratic and that the Ministry of Defense and Ministry of Internal Affairs were culprits in abiding by or influencing

⁴⁷ "Information Report by Yeltsin's Security Service about the Meeting of the President's Expert Analytical Council," trans. National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/20251-national-security-archive-doc-04-information>.

⁴⁸ Note: language that suggests Chechnya is not a part of Russia.

⁴⁹ "Information Report by Yeltsin's Security Service about the Meeting of the President's Expert Analytical Council," trans. National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/20251-national-security-archive-doc-04-information>.

⁵⁰ "Information Report by Yeltsin's Security Service about the Meeting of the President's Expert Analytical Council," trans. National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/20251-national-security-archive-doc-04-information>.

⁵¹ "Information Report by Yeltsin's Security Service about the Meeting of the President's Expert Analytical Council," trans. National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/20251-national-security-archive-doc-04-information>.

Yeltsin's decision. Division head of the Analytical Center L. Smirnyagin said in response that this was a "gloomy impression" and it would be a "disgrace" to "forcibly" remove Dudayev and that there should be a necessary change for how Yeltsin made decisions.⁵² The last individual in the meeting who shared their thoughts on this document was Minister for the Economy and Analytical Council member Yevgeny Yasin, who eerily predicted that Yeltsin's "plan for the financial stabilization of the Russian economy will go up in smoke."⁵³ This vivid commentary and criticism of Yeltsin's decision to go to war demonstrated that he did not make clear to the public he addressed these issues. The advisory board considered Yeltsin's actions unconstitutional, necessitating change. Unfortunately, the executive power conditions made it nearly impossible to change Yeltsin's approach to the war in a constitutional method.

In January 1995, the International Affairs Committee of the Russian State Duma, Vladimir Lukin, sent a memorandum to Yeltsin that was evidence of the lack of clarity Yeltsin gave to the Russian parliament. Perhaps more so, it also showed the lack of clarity with which Yeltsin himself viewed the war. Lukin asked basic questions of political legitimacy, such as why there was a no "legal basis" for using the military, why there was no knowledge of the human rights violations committed, and why Yeltsin had not been transparent to the government about the war he ordered.⁵⁴ These salient questions cast doubt that Yeltsin sought the advice of individuals who were likely to provide more cautionary directives on the decision to wage war.

⁵² "Information Report by Yeltsin's Security Service about the Meeting of the President's Expert Analytical Council," trans. National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/20251-national-security-archive-doc-04-information>.

⁵³ "Information Report by Yeltsin's Security Service about the Meeting of the President's Expert Analytical Council," trans. National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/20251-national-security-archive-doc-04-information>.

⁵⁴ "Memorandum from Chairman of the International Affairs Committee of the Russian State Duma Vladimir Lukin to President Yeltsin," 23 January 1995, State Archive of the Russian

As the invasion began, it became evident that the war would not go the direction that Yeltsin had hoped. According to declassified U.S. intelligence reports, the DIA had at least one human source (HUMINT) that shared the bleaker prediction of the implications of the war: that it “could interfere with the process of reform in Russia itself.”⁵⁵ However, the DIA report noted that “Western support for Yeltsin will clearly continue” as there are no alternative candidates favored by the political West.⁵⁶ Six days later, another DIA analysis reported on the unorganized military capabilities of Russia. This report also mentioned that Yeltsin’s bodyguard Alexander Korzhakov was “blatantly using his influence” by giving war orders to the Ministry of Defense.⁵⁷ This document thus suggests that Otto Latsis’ earlier comment about who is responsible for the war have more credibility, as Yeltsin’s bodyguard Korzhakov may have had some capacity in directing the war.⁵⁸ These DIA reports reveal both the unclear nature of the Yeltsin government and the Western acquiescence to supporting Yeltsin, given the belief that the alternatives were not convincing, despite the glaring deterioration of Russian power.

The political West’s relationship with Yeltsin once the war began showed that Yeltsin heavily dictated the terms of discussion about the war. In a January 6th letter from U.S. President

Federation, Fond 10100, Opis 2, delo 131, trans. National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/20256-national-security-archive-doc-09-memorandum>.

⁵⁵ “Chechnya Conflict,” 4 January 1995, Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/20252-national-security-archive-doc-05-defense>.

⁵⁶ “Chechnya Conflict,” National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/20252-national-security-archive-doc-05-defense>.

⁵⁷ “Military Disarray in Chechnya and Moscow,” January 10, 1995, Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/20254-national-security-archive-doc-07-defense>; Interestingly, this report also mentions that “Access to President Yeltsin is [...REDACTED...].”

⁵⁸ When Chechen fighters were defending Grozny, Russian embarrassment in the invasion made Minister of Defense Pavel Grachev remark that he wanted to “make the rubble bounce” in Grozny: he then ordered substantial aerial and artillery bombardment of the city (William J. Burns, *The Back Channel: A Memoir of American Diplomacy and the Case for Its Renewal* (Random House, 2019), 96).

Bill Clinton to Boris Yeltsin, Clinton privately expressed his view on the invasion of Grozny. Clinton recognized Yeltsin's earlier requests that the public dialogue on the war be sidelined as an "internal matter" for Russia, maintaining the language that "Chechnya is a part of Russia." They thus did not consider the question of Chechen independence.⁵⁹ But Clinton also tried to remind Yeltsin that the actions he took were violating international law. Clinton wrote that there was "no contradiction" with the U.S. Administration's position for not supporting Chechen independence and having the war resolved in line with international standards.⁶⁰ The language of the Chechen war as "an internal Russian matter" was a political move frequently advertised by Yeltsin to foreign leaders to prevent foreign intervention in Chechnya.⁶¹ Despite reminding Yeltsin that he was not abiding by signed documents, the political West was heavily constrained in their options on Chechnya because they relied on Yeltsin's personal power in Russia. In another U.S. analysis, U.S. Ambassador to Russia Thomas R. Pickering titled his telegram with the words "The Emperor with No Clothes," in reference to Yeltsin, and cited that Yeltsin lost substantial public support.⁶² Before the invasion of Grozny, only 18% of Russians expressed confidence in Yeltsin's leadership; Pickering wrote that Yeltsin was trying to "restore" his

⁵⁹ Bill Clinton: "We have said that Chechnya is part of Russia and that we oppose any attempt to change international borders by force, whether by means of aggression on the part of one state against another or by means of armed secessionism" ("President Clinton Letter to President Yeltsin," 6 January 1995, U.S. Department of State, National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/20253-national-security-archive-doc-06-president>).

⁶⁰ "President Clinton Letter to President Yeltsin," National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/20253-national-security-archive-doc-06-president>.

⁶¹ Unlike Yeltsin's honesty with the leaders of the political West in the 1993 constitutional crisis and matters concerning NATO, Yeltsin was more reserved and did not speak much to them comparatively regarding the First Chechen War.

⁶² "Sifting Through the Wreckage: Chechnya and Russia's Future," William J. Burns's *The Back Channel* Appendix.

“sagging” political fortunes by resorting to more “nationalistic rhetoric and policies.”⁶³ He noted that reformers and Yeltsin’s opposition were saying that Yeltsin was moving Russia toward “the path of an authoritarian restoration.”⁶⁴ He called the war a “disaster” for Yeltsin’s foreign policy objectives as it isolated Russia internationally, exposing Russian weakness to former Soviet states and “regional powers like Iran, China, and Turkey” while accelerating “the process of NATO expansion.”⁶⁵ He added a qualifier, however, that U.S. influence would “remain marginal, and our range of policy choices will often be unsatisfying.”⁶⁶ Pickering’s advice to manage Yeltsin on Chechnya was that “The broader point is that we should avoid the temptation to over-identify with, or overreact to, any particular political figure. [...] We can’t succeed if we define all our concerns as high priority.”⁶⁷ As Pickering stated, the war was not beneficial for Russia. The political West, however, continued to question to what end they would support the Yeltsin government. Additionally, the Clinton Administration did not think it could do much to change the direction of the Chechen War without sacrificing other priorities with Yeltsin.⁶⁸ The

⁶³ “Sifting Through the Wreckage: Chechnya and Russia’s Future,” William J. Burns’s *The Back Channel* Appendix.

⁶⁴ “Sifting Through the Wreckage: Chechnya and Russia’s Future,” William J. Burns’s *The Back Channel* Appendix.

⁶⁵ “Sifting Through the Wreckage: Chechnya and Russia’s Future,” William J. Burns’s *The Back Channel* Appendix.

⁶⁶ “Sifting Through the Wreckage: Chechnya and Russia’s Future,” William J. Burns’s *The Back Channel* Appendix.

⁶⁷ “Sifting Through the Wreckage: Chechnya and Russia’s Future,” William J. Burns’s *The Back Channel* Appendix.

⁶⁸ Steven Pifer: “It was a hard one to do because we were trying to do so many other things with Russia that were important to U.S. interests. So, perhaps we did not pay as much attention to trying to help out Chechnya as we could have [...] this came up again in the George W. Bush Administration during the Second Chechen War. We kept getting requests from the White House, they would schedule Deputies meetings on how we deal with Chechnya. And I finally called the guy, I think it was either Dan Fried or Tom Graham, who was doing this at the NSC, and I said, ‘We can’t get the Russians to lay off Chechnya unless we want to put pressure on them. So, what are we prepared to do? Are you prepared to tell the Russians we won’t do the new Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty with them? We won’t try to encourage American

Clinton Administration also saw that if they broke away from advocating for Russian territorial integrity in Chechnya, it would open up larger questions with other post-Soviet regions.⁶⁹

Yeltsin's Wall of Shame

*"I think it is high time that everyone in the world understood that international public opinion would like to nail Russia to the wall of shame for its 'war crimes.'"*⁷⁰

—Russian President Boris Yeltsin in his *Midnight Diaries* memoir.

When asked by the U.S. Government, Russian Vice President Chernomyrdin said he only spent about "30% of his time" on the "sore spot" of Chechnya. He confidently asserted that "certainly historians in the future will be able to positively judge the current period."⁷¹ He could not have been more wrong. Russia committed human rights violations. After the invasion of Grozny, another egregious battle in the war were the Russian raids on Samashki from April 7-8, 1995. Homes were set on fire with flamethrowers, grenades were blindly thrown into basements, tank shells were fired at homes, and Doctors Without Borders were denied a presence by the Russian military.⁷² With video sourcing from the Chechen Archive, there is ample evidence of

investment? What costs are you prepared for? And nobody wanted to go there" (William Ledesma, Oral History Interview of Steven Karl Pifer, 11 March 2025).

⁶⁹ Steven Pifer: "We ended up trying to find a compromise because we did not want to undercut Yeltsin on Russian territorial integrity, in part because that had implications. If all of a sudden we're saying well Chechnya can break away from Russia, how can we defend Crimea as part of Ukraine or Transnistria as part of Moldova? So, there was a U.S. position that the 1991 borders agreed with the Soviet Union collapsed are the borders, and for a variety of reasons, we did not want to see those borders endangered in any way because, if changed in one country, it could have a knock-on effect on another country" (William Ledesma, Oral History Interview of Steven Karl Pifer, 11 March 2025).

⁷⁰ Boris Yeltsin, *Midnight Diaries* (PublicAffairs, 2000), 340-341.

⁷¹ "Prime Minister Chernomyrdin: Meeting with Deputy Secretary Talbott," 10 April 1995, U.S. Department of State, National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/20260-national-security-archive-doc-13-u-s-state>.

⁷² "A Brief Description of Events in the Village of Samashki: Russian NGO Combined Report," drafted by Oleg Orlov and Sergey Kovalev, 15 April 1995, Memorial Society Archive (Moscow,

maligned and tortured bodies of civilians with mass graves and individual cases, such as a heart being torn out of the chest of a deceased body.⁷³

The Russian military “filtration points” were centers of torture. The official position of these “filtration” points by the Russian government was explained by Head of Territorial Administration Oleg Lobov to a journalist: “It is not a prison. The person has not been convicted but detained for carrying weapons or taking part in mass disorders. These are common state measures for temporary detention in order to investigate the person’s participation in illegal activities.”⁷⁴ On the contrary, a victim described one of these buildings as having a “special appliance to give you electric shocks,” as they “knock you unconscious and then throw you into the freezing water to bring you round,” and torture victims’ fingers.⁷⁵ The U.S. Mission in Geneva sent a cable of a specific case in which eighty-five non-combatant Chechens were tortured at a “filtration” point.⁷⁶ In a U.S. Embassy Moscow cable, it wrote that at least 361

Russia, trans. National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/20265-national-security-archive-doc-18-brief>; “At 6.00pm on 7 April, the Russian killers mounted a large-scale ground offensive against the defenseless village. Artillery was moved up and bombarded the centre at close range. The left-hand part of Samashki was in flames. Armored vehicles attacked the area around the mosque and Russian troops occupied the outskirts. At 8.00 pm bombs again rained down. Some of the Chechen fighters who were natives of Samashki made their way back into the village through the surrounding dense undergrowth [...] enabling a small number of villagers to escape. Tanks fired point blank at people’s houses. The next day, 8 April, the village was subjected to renewed air and artillery attacks. The worst atrocities took place that evening when troops stormed through Samashki. Some 500 villagers were sadistically butchered, the murderers sparing no one. In the school, thirteen boys in grades 1-3, were battered and hanged with wire. A nearby inscription written in the victims’ blood read, ‘Museum exhibit: the future of Chechnya;’ and ‘The Russian bear awakens’” (Zakaev, 54).

⁷³ “Reportage, The corpse of a man in a garden. His heart is cut out of his body,” 16 April 1995, Video File: CA-01-V-159-S02, The Chechen Archive by the Society for Threatened Peoples.

⁷⁴ “Chechnya: A Russian Nightmare,” A BBC Documentary, 1995, Video File: CA-01-V-017-S11, 24:00-25:00, The Chechen Archive by the Society for Threatened Peoples.

⁷⁵ “Chechnya: A Russian Nightmare,” A BBC Documentary, 1995, Video File: CA-01-V-017-S11, 25:00-27:00, The Chechen Archive by the Society for Threatened Peoples.

⁷⁶ “U.S. Mission Geneva Cable. Subject: Severe Maltreatment of Chechen prisoners, UNHCR Witnesses Shelling at Borders,” 18 April 1995, U.S. Department of State, National Security

homes were burned to the ground in Samashki, and through HUMINT, they uncovered that there was “torture” and “many had broken ribs” and were in a “bad condition,” while there was an “unusually sadistic nature” of the Russian military within “filtration” points.⁷⁷ The cable singled out the Russian OMON special forces unit.⁷⁸ In a “sick joke” on display, there is also footage of a Russian “filtration” point bearing a skull and bones flag.⁷⁹ Outside of the “filtration” points, there is a video source of an individual attempting to dig up the dust and bones remains of a family member, wrapped in “plastic” or “paper.”⁸⁰ The archival footage also showed the much-discussed march to Grozny that carried dead bodies of Chechens as evidence of human rights violations to the OSCE location.⁸¹ To all of this, Boris Yeltsin defensively responded in his memoir with the logic of whataboutism:

I think it is high time that everyone in the world understood that international public opinion would like to nail Russia to the wall of shame for its ‘war crimes.’ [...] We have never committed mass executions of unarmed people in Chechnya. There have been no ethnic cleansings or concentration camps. [...] I would like to ask about the other ‘war crimes.’ Isn’t it a ‘war crime’ that the bandits’ main

Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/20267-national-security-archive-doc-20-u-s-mission>.

⁷⁷ “U.S. Mission Geneva Cable. Subject: Severe Maltreatment of Chechen prisoners, UNHCR Witnesses Shelling at Borders,” National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/20267-national-security-archive-doc-20-u-s-mission>.

⁷⁸ “Subject: Russian Forces Attack on Samashki: Differing Views on Atrocities,” U.S. Embassy Moscow Cable, 28 April 1995, U.S. Department of State, National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/20271-national-security-archive-doc-24-u-s-embassy>.

⁷⁹ “Chechnya: A Russian Nightmare,” A BBC Documentary, 1995, Video File: CA-01-V-017-S11, 7:00-8:00, The Chechen Archive by the Society for Threatened Peoples.

⁸⁰ “VTS_01_2 (3),” Video File: CA-01-V-051-S01_2(3), 13:00-15:00, The Chechen Archive by the Society of Threatened Peoples; In another witness account, a Russian soldier is begged to not kill a family member—the Russian soldier agrees—only for a Russian soldier to throw a grenade under another family member’s legs; a Russian soldier subsequently took that family member’s life (“VTS_01_2 (3),” Video File: CA-01-V-051-S01_2(3), 16:00-18:00, The Chechen Archive by the Society of Threatened Peoples).

⁸¹ “Demonstration, March across Grozny to the building of OSCE,” 7 July 1995, Video File: CA-01-V-016-S05, The Chechen Archive by the Society of Threatened Peoples.

source of subsistence is the income from ransoms and the sale of people into slavery?⁸²



Figure Six⁸³

Russian Military ‘Filtration’ Point with a Skull and Bones Flag.

It is notable that Yeltsin puts war crimes in quotations, as if to implicitly suggest that all is fair in war. By brushing off the human rights violations of the Russian military in his memoir, it is evident that Yeltsin did not want to show remorse for these violations. The evidence of war crimes held by the Chechen Archive, along with other documented aspects of Russian military actions in the war, further incriminate Yeltsin and call into question his legitimacy to wage the war for the purpose of restoring constitutional order. It also shows to what end he desired to keep Chechnya a part of Russia by allowing these violations to occur. That said, the terror attacks of

⁸² Yeltsin, *Midnight Diaries*, 340-341.

⁸³ “Chechnya: A Russian Nightmare,” A BBC Documentary, 1995, Video File: CA-01-V-017-S11, 22:00-23:00, The Chechen Archive by the Society of Threatened Peoples.

Chechen fighters on innocent Russian civilians are violations as well and reveal the desperation that Chechen fighters took to try and stop Russian aggression.

The Fatal Strike on Dzhokhar Dudayev

“I need a little war, an enemy against whom to send them [my men] into battle. I have a program not to separate from Russia but to enter it and destroy it from within.”⁸⁴

—Dzhokhar Dudayev in an interview with a journalist.

When Bill Clinton visited Moscow for WWII Victory Day in May 1995, he met with a delegation of political leaders. President of the Ingush Republic, Ruslan Aushev, told Clinton that Chechnya was ‘a case of Russian nationalism gone too far—an example of national zeal’ that “could slip over to fascism.”⁸⁵ Aushev reminded Clinton that the Chechen and Ingush people suffered and were oppressed under U.S.S.R. leader Joseph Stalin, and thus, “We need to listen to them [Chechens].”⁸⁶ Aushev blamed Yeltsin’s ‘war party’ advisors who “did not understand the situation and misadvised him.”⁸⁷ Clinton’s meeting with the Russian opposition showed that Clinton wanted to gauge a temperature check of Yeltsin’s war from his critics. At the same time, it also is further evidence that the Clinton Administration prioritized Yeltsin over the war, as it believed there was not much that could be done outside of suggesting to Yeltsin to stop the

⁸⁴ “Chechnya: A Russian Nightmare,” A BBC Documentary, 1995, Video File: CA-01-V-017-S11, 37:00-40:00, The Chechen Archive by the Society of Threatened Peoples.

⁸⁵ “Memorandum on Conversation: Meeting with Russian Political Leaders,” Spaso House, Moscow, 11 May 1995, U.S. National Security Council, National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/20275-national-security-archive-doc-28-memorandum>.

⁸⁶ “Memorandum on Conversation: Meeting with Russian Political Leaders,” National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/20275-national-security-archive-doc-28-memorandum>.

⁸⁷ “Memorandum on Conversation: Meeting with Russian Political Leaders,” National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/20275-national-security-archive-doc-28-memorandum>.

humanitarian crisis, asking Yeltsin to allow humanitarian aid to enter Chechnya, and advocating for diplomatic tools with the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).

The dialogue on the war shifted rapidly when Shamil Basayev, the Chechen military commander, led his second attack on June 13 to 15, 1995, in Russia, by holding approximately 1,750 people hostage in Budyonnovsk hospital. It is reported that at least one hundred Russian civilians died. Then, on January 9 to 18, 1996, Chechen commander Salman Raduev carried out another attack by holding hostage another hospital in Kizlyar, Dagestan, Russia. During the attack, twenty-six hostages and more than 200 combatants died. Akhmed Zakaev recalls that Dzhokhar Dudayev told Salman Raduev over the phone during the Kizlyar attack: “Prepare to die with dignity.”⁸⁸ In Zakaev’s memoir, he claimed that “it became clear that not even Budyonnovsk could bring about a stable, long-lasting peace. If Budyonnovsk was not a strategic success, the occupation of the hospital in Kizlyar brought us nothing but discredit.”⁸⁹ Dudayev also began to describe the war in a more risk-taking manner publicly. In an interview with a BBC journalist in 1995, Dudayev gave an ominous outlook on the war and insight into his political objectives:

Everything is fine in our country [laughs] everything is fine. Yes, we’ve got occupiers, but that’s temporary. [...] The Russians are all sick schizophrenics; they have a mania for world domination. My plans are to build a powerful state, a strong one capable of opposing all evil and violence, however menacing it might look. [...] What would I do if the Russians suddenly pulled out? I’ve got 300,000 men aged 17-30 [that are] homeless, jobless, embittered, and with nothing to do. All they can do is fight. I need a little war, an enemy against whom to send them into battle. I have a program not to separate from Russia but to enter it and destroy it from within.⁹⁰

⁸⁸ Zakaev, 62.

⁸⁹ Zakaev, 59-60.

⁹⁰ “Chechnya: A Russian Nightmare,” A BBC Documentary, 1995, Video File: CA-01-V-017-S11, 37:00-40:00, The Chechen Archive by the Society for Threatened Peoples.

Dudayev's nonchalant description of the war on international television demonstrates that he wanted to display confidence that his regime would ultimately win against Yeltsin. The characterization of Russian society as 'sick schizophrenics' with a 'mania for world domination' was rooted in the Chechen experience of Russian oppression during the Soviet period, along with Russian colonialism in the nineteenth century. Dudayev also saw his actions as morally just, as he perceived that his goal was to remove 'all evil and violence' from Chechnya. The Dudayev national security threat to Yeltsin was also displayed clearly in this interview, as he suggested—on the record—that if Russia were to back out of the war, he would plan a war to enter Russia and destroy it. Despite emitting confidence in a television interview, Dudayev expressed anger and uncertainty to his military command in February 1996. According to Zakaev, Dudayev asked his staff, "What are you expecting from me? [...] If you are expecting me to provide you with food supplies or ammunition, do not waste your time [...] wherever you look you will see the enemy you have to fight!"⁹¹ However, Yeltsin's military stopped Dudayev in his tracks with a lethal military strike. On April 21, 1996, a missile killed Dudayev after he finished a phone call with a Russian politician.⁹² The Chechen authorities determined that Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev would be the second president of Chechnya on April 23, 1996.

⁹¹ Zakaev, 64-65.

⁹² The day Dudayev was killed, Yeltsin had a summit with Clinton in the Kremlin. At a press meeting after the summit, Clinton said—much discussed in existing scholarship—that "I would remind you that we once had a civil war in our country [...] over the proposition that Abraham Lincoln gave his life for, that no state had a right of withdrawal from our union" (Hughes, 129); Steven Pifer: "It was 1995 or 1996, probably 1995. Clinton gave a press conference in Moscow and sort of was comparing the American civil war with Lincoln to Yeltsin and Chechnya. I wasn't there, but Chip Blacker (Coit D. Blacker) told me that when Clinton came off the stage, and it would have been Tony Lake and Chip there, and Clinton says, 'probably shouldn't have made that Lincoln comparison, right?' It happens" (William Ledesma, Oral History of Steven Karl Pifer, 11 March 2025).

In a video interview by a journalist with the heads of the Chechen military leadership at an unmarked location outside of Grozny, Chechen president Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev criticized the political West's support of Yeltsin. Yandarbiyev said, "Show specific pressure on Russia. Well, what did not happen? As we see based on the fact that this summit [with Yeltsin] became some kind of political show in the name of Russian president Yeltsin...what should be done?"⁹³ Yandarbiyev affirmed that the war was about sovereignty and the Russian presence in Chechnya. He gave a condition that independence could only be achieved by withdrawing Russian forces. Yandarbiyev expressed, "Our war against Russia, if some territory is subject to attack by Chechens in Russian territories, then that problem must be solved only by withdrawing Russian armed forces. We declared that we would fight against Russia wherever it is present."⁹⁴ Thus, even though Dudayev was killed by Yeltsin's military, the resolve of Chechen leadership to achieve independence was not deterred, if not holding more motivation to resist Russian aggression.

⁹³ "Foreign journalist's interview with Chechen leaders, 1996," Video Files: CA-03-V-022-S01 .1 & .2, 7:00-9:00, The Chechen Archive by the Society of Threatened Peoples.

⁹⁴ "Foreign journalist's interview with Chechen leaders, 1996," Video Files: CA-03-V-022-S01 .1 & .2, 12:00-14:00, The Chechen Archive by the Society of Threatened Peoples.



Figure Seven⁹⁵

From left to right: First Deputy Chairman of the ChRI State Defense Council Aslan Maskhadov, Chechen President Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev, Press Secretary Movlady Udugov, Foreign and Cultural Minister Akhmed Zakaev, and Chechen Military Commander Shamil Basayev. Behind them on the wall is the Independent Chechen-Ingushetia flag.

Yeltsin's Presidential Election in 1996, The Khasavyurt Accords, and The Peace Treaty

*"I don't see this man ever leaving the Kremlin of his own free will [...] he was not just the president of Russia, he owned the place. He was the Tsar."*⁹⁶

—Akhmed Zakaev during the Khasavyurt Accord negotiations, as recalled in his memoir.

As Yeltsin's election approached in the summer of 1996, Yeltsin's Chairman of the Human Rights Commission and member of the Presidential Council Sergei Kovalev resigned in

⁹⁵ "Foreign journalist's interview with Chechen leaders, 1996," Video Files: CA-03-V-022-S01.1 & .2, The Chechen Archive by the Society of Threatened Peoples.

⁹⁶ Zakaev, 100.

a public letter to Yeltsin on January 24, 1996. Beyond discussing how Yeltsin's reform movement failed, Sergei Kovalev expressed grave concern on Yeltsin's handling of the Chechen war. He asked Yeltsin: "Didn't you and those fools who pushed you into the Chechen war understand that bloodshed would lead to intolerance, revenge, deceit, and violence? And that this malignant tumor would devour the good things you have done for Russia?"⁹⁷ To place Yeltsin in the history of Russia, Kovalev wrote, "Your policies have compromised the very word [democracy], and if democracy is fated to someday exist in Russia (and I believe it will), it will exist not because of you, but in spite of you."⁹⁸ Kovalev remarked, "It's sad for me that you have lost your soul, that you are unable to evolve from a Communist Party secretary into a human being. You could have done so. [...] I don't think you'll regret my departure. I know I won't."⁹⁹ A political talking point in the 1996 Russian presidential election was the war in Chechnya and how Yeltsin handled it. Yeltsin knew he needed to act quickly to salvage a political victory as his presidential re-election was approaching in July of 1996.

On May 27, 1996, Yeltsin invited a Chechen delegation to the Kremlin to negotiate an end to the war under the OSCE administrator, Tim Guldemann. Akhmed Zakaev's memoir has the most detailed account of Yeltsin in this negotiation and provides a colorful narrative of

⁹⁷ "Sergei Kovalev Resignation Letter to Boris Yeltsin 1996," 24 January 1996, originally published in *Izvestia*, *New York Review of Books*, trans. Catherine A. Fitzpatrick, National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/27561-document-3a-sergei-kovalev-resignation-letter-boris-yeltsin-1996-translation>.

⁹⁸ "Sergei Kovalev Resignation Letter to Boris Yeltsin 1996," National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/27561-document-3a-sergei-kovalev-resignation-letter-boris-yeltsin-1996-translation>.

⁹⁹ "Sergei Kovalev Resignation Letter to Boris Yeltsin 1996," National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/27561-document-3a-sergei-kovalev-resignation-letter-boris-yeltsin-1996-translation>.

Yeltsin's negotiation style with the Chechen delegation.¹⁰⁰ Upon arrival at the meeting room with Yeltsin on May 27th, the Russian press was present. Chechen delegation member Yandarbiyev requested that Yeltsin remove the press for a private negotiation, as agreed upon prior. According to Zakaev, Yeltsin vehemently responded, 'No! There never was such an agreement. I have no intention of discussing anything with you in private. You are not my equals. Sit down!'¹⁰¹ Guldumann reaffirmed the prior agreement to have a private negotiation. In response, Zakaev wrote that Yeltsin verbally insulted Guldumann and slapped down the table, saying "No one will leave this room. Lock the doors."¹⁰² During the second round of negotiations that day, Zakaev wrote that Russian advisor Vladimir Mikhailov told Yeltsin if they sign the document they would technically be recognizing the independence of Chechnya. According to Zakaev, Yeltsin hit Mikhailov on the head and responded, "Shut up! I know what I'm doing [...] We shall change the title [of Chechnya] in our Constitution as well."¹⁰³ Yeltsin signed a ceasefire with the Chechen delegation that day.¹⁰⁴ However, Zakaev remarked that "the real value for us" was that the negotiations were "conducted at summit level."¹⁰⁵ After sitting face-to-face with Yandarbiyev in negotiations, Yeltsin immediately flew to Grozny and told a group of Russian soldiers, "The war is over. Victory is ours. We have defeated the rebellion of the Dudayev regime."¹⁰⁶ But, peace was still not fully achieved, nor was a defeat of the

¹⁰⁰ While downplaying the extensive use of terror by Chechen fighters throughout the war, Zakaev's memoir remains valuable as it is the only existing detailed account of the peace negotiations.

¹⁰¹ Zakaev, 97.

¹⁰² Zakaev, 97.

¹⁰³ Zakaev, 100.

¹⁰⁴ Zakaev reflected that this was "typical" Yeltsin taking an "axe" to complex political problems and that the "war would resume" once the Russian presidential election was over (Zakaev, 101).

¹⁰⁵ Zakaev, 101.

¹⁰⁶ Hughes, 87; According to Zakaev, Yeltsin flew to Grozny after the negotiations without notifying the Chechen delegation and he forced the Chechen delegation to stay at a country

remainder of Dudayev's government and its supporters. Yeltsin signed a ceasefire agreement on May 27, 1996, which was ineffective because the war continued.¹⁰⁷

Nonetheless, Yeltsin won the 1996 presidential election on July 3, 1996, and was sworn in for a second five-year term as President of the Russian Federation on August 9, 1996.¹⁰⁸ However, his swearing-in ceremony was clouded with the continuation of war in Chechnya. From August 6 to 20, 1996, the Chechen fighters conducted Operation Zero Option which resulted in Chechens retaking Grozny from Russian control. This operation likely forced Yeltsin's hand to quickly seek further negotiations with the Chechens. On August 31, 1996, Russian Secretary for National Security Alexander Lebed and Chechen Republic of Ichkeria's third president Aslan Mashkadov signed the Khasavyurt Accords, which called for an immediate ceasefire, deferral of Chechnya's status of independence, withdrawal of Russian troops, and further negotiations between the two parties.¹⁰⁹ Tim Guldemann, who was present at the negotiations, stated that despite the fact that it "led to a politically unstable situation in Chechnya after the total withdrawal of Russian military forces," it "made the maximum of what was

residence for the night at Barvikha, Russia. As Zakaev was traveling to the country residence, he told Chechen president Yandarbiyev, 'it is 100 per cent certain that, either tonight or tomorrow morning, Yeltsin will fly to Grozny while we are still here;' "The first news bulletins the next morning informed us that Yeltsin was in Chechnya. He gave a speech at Grozny Airport in front of some Russian military unit [...] announced that he had decided to run for a second term as president" (Zakaev, 101).

¹⁰⁷ "Agreement on a Ceasefire, the Cessation of Military Activities, and on Measures for a Settlement of the Armed Conflict on the Territory of the Chechen Republic." Moscow, 27 May 1996, <https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/default/files/document/files/2024/05/ru960527agreement20on20a20ceasefire.pdf>.

¹⁰⁸ "53.55% Boris Nikolaevich Yeltsin, 40.55% Gennady Andreevich Zyuganov. Against all candidates 4.90%" ("Reportage, Elections center at the time of presidential elections in the Russian Federation, 1996," Video File: CA-03-V-024-S02.1, The Chechen Archive by the Society of Threatened Peoples).

¹⁰⁹ Yeltsin removed Alexander Lebed from his role on October 17, 1996. Lebed ran in the 1996 presidential election, and lost.

realistically possible. It left open certain questions, but it would be wrong to say that the agreement would have lasted if it had been better drafted.”¹¹⁰ Even if it was a maximum of what was realistically possible, it must be recognized that much of what could have been possible in 1997 was up to the prerogative of Yeltsin. He limited—either out of a lack of respect for the Chechen leadership or a lack of time dedicated to the issue of finding a peace solution—his peace options that favor the Chechen people to the minimum.¹¹¹ The Peace Treaty concluded the first war and reaffirmed the Khasavyurt Accords on May 12, 1997. The one-page five-bullet point “Peace Treaty and Principles of Interrelation Between the Russian Federation and the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria”—known as the Russo-Chechen Peace Treaty—was signed by Yeltsin and Aslan Mashkadov.¹¹² Political sociologist Leon Aron wrote that one of Yeltsin’s greatest accomplishments was a “momentous precedent:” the exit from Chechnya was “emblematic of the promise of its [Russia’s] democratic future.”¹¹³ Unfortunately, this

¹¹⁰ Liz Fuller, “Chechnya: Khasavyurt Accords Failed To Preclude A Second War,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 30 August 2006, <https://www.rferl.org/a/1070939.html>.

¹¹¹ Minimum would be a ceasefire and removal of Russian troops. Yeltsin could have provided political and/or military support for the governing regime in Chechnya to maintain rule of law in the region, but he did not do so. The region was left unchecked, which led to rampant organized crime post-war and eventually the Second Chechen War. It was not cooperation that resulted from the treaty, but rather only stopping the war.

¹¹² “The esteemed parties to the agreement, desiring to end their centuries-long antagonism and striving to establish firm, equal and mutually beneficial relations, hereby agree: 1. To reject forever the use of force or threat of force in resolving all matters of dispute. 2. To develop their relations on generally recognised principles and norms of international law. In doing so, the sides shall interact on the basis of specific concrete agreements. 3. This treaty shall serve as the basis for concluding further agreements and accords on the full range of relations. 4. This treaty is written on two copies and both have equal legal power. 5. This treaty is active from the day of signing” (“Peace Treaty and Principles of Interrelation between the Russian Federation and the Chechen Republic Ichkeria,” Moscow, 12 May 1997, <https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/default/files/document/files/2024/05/ru970512peacetreatyrussiachechenichkeria.pdf>).

¹¹³ Aron, 707-708; Aron also cited Sergei Kovalev, who commented on the exit of Chechnya, where Kovalev said the war was “democracy at work [...] the Chechen crisis was the first serious

assessment did not become a reality. The Peace Treaty took Chechnya down a worse path with no true settlement and left unsettled the question of Chechnya's independence. The re-ignition of war by Yeltsin in reaction to Chechen militants invading Dagestan and the apartment bombings in 1999 which were attributed to Chechens, and Putin's subsequent orchestration of the war, shows that Yeltsin's actions from 1994-1997, and later in 1999, did not realize a lasting peace settlement. This cannot be considered a victory for Yeltsin, Russia, or Chechnya.

Conclusion

*"[The First Chechen War was] the most botched war in the history of Russia."*¹¹⁴

—Russian President Boris Yeltsin in 1996.

Historiography on the war often portrays the conflict as a tragic exception to Yeltsin's otherwise successful efforts to prevent the widely predicted disintegration of Russia and the loss of its territorial integrity.¹¹⁵ But framing the war in this regard—as an outlier at a time of territorial stability—is a miscalculation of Russia's political and territorial trajectory due to the war. The war marked a flashpoint that undermined the stability Yeltsin was credited with maintaining. He launched the war unilaterally and bypassed diplomatic avenues despite internal dissent within the Russian government, raising doubts about the necessity for war. While some might argue that violence was inevitable, this framing dismisses alternative paths that were still available for Yeltsin. During the war, Russian military planning and the terror attacks by Chechen fighters did not respect the human dignity of many innocent lives, weakening the credibility of Russia. When Yeltsin thought he was ready to engage in negotiations for peace in

battle for democracy in Russia. It would be going too far to say that our newborn, weak, sickly, uncertain civil society won this battle. But at least it did not lose" (Aron, 707-708).

¹¹⁴ Colton, 291.

¹¹⁵ Aron, 708.

1996-1997, he approached the table looking mostly for political gains rather than genuine reconciliation. Zakaev's memoir highlights that Yeltsin was even perhaps unfair in his negotiation style. Far from being an exception, the war revealed contradictions of Yeltsin's post-Soviet project.

Yeltsin's war in Chechnya so powerfully restored authoritarian impulses within Russia that it upends positive assessments of Yeltsin's putatively peaceful post-Soviet transition. Leon Aron wrote that "Yeltsin was confronted with the same seemingly indissoluble link between authoritarianism and national integrity" as previous rulers of the regions of Russia.¹¹⁶ Herein lies a takeaway of post-Soviet Russia seen in Chechnya: the politics of post-empire created a dangerous aspiration of preserving empire and territorial integrity. Thus, Yeltsin's Russia cannot necessarily be considered post-imperial, as Yeltsin's reasoning for First Chechen War suggested otherwise.

¹¹⁶ Aron, 708.



Figure Eight¹¹⁷

Ruslan Khasbulatov in Chechnya being interviewed by a journalist in September 1994.

¹¹⁷ “The peacemaking group of Khasbulatov before the first war, September 1994,” Video Files: CA-03-V-092-S01, 1-5, The Chechen Archive by the Society of Threatened Peoples.



Figure Nine¹¹⁸

“CLINTON, KOHL, MAJOR, AND MITTERAND, DON’T SUPPORT THE GENOCIDE IN CHECHNYA. DON’T COME TO MOSCOW 9 MAY [WWII Victory Day Anniversary].”

¹¹⁸ Video File: CA 01-V-128-S06, The Chechen Archive by the Society for Threatened Peoples.



Figure Ten¹¹⁹

Monks hold a protest sign that reads “GENOCIDE CONTINUES IN CHECHNYA.”

¹¹⁹ CA 01-V-128-S06, The Chechen Archive by the Society for Threatened Peoples.



Figure Eleven¹²⁰

Shamil Basayev in an interview on August 15, 1996: “We are finishing off Russian soldiers and officers today. They are surrendering to us in crowds and in captivity. And the Russians are trying in every possible way to arrange a ceasefire to stop the panic in their ranks.”

¹²⁰ “Interview, Shamil Basaev gives an interview, 15 August 1996,” CA-01-V-010-S03, The Chechen Archive by the Society of Threatened Peoples.



Figure Twelve¹²¹

Posters of Dzhokhar Dudayev at a rally.

¹²¹ "Chechnya: A Russian Nightmare," A BBC Documentary, 1995, CA-01-V-017-S11, The Chechen Archive by the Society for Threatened Peoples.

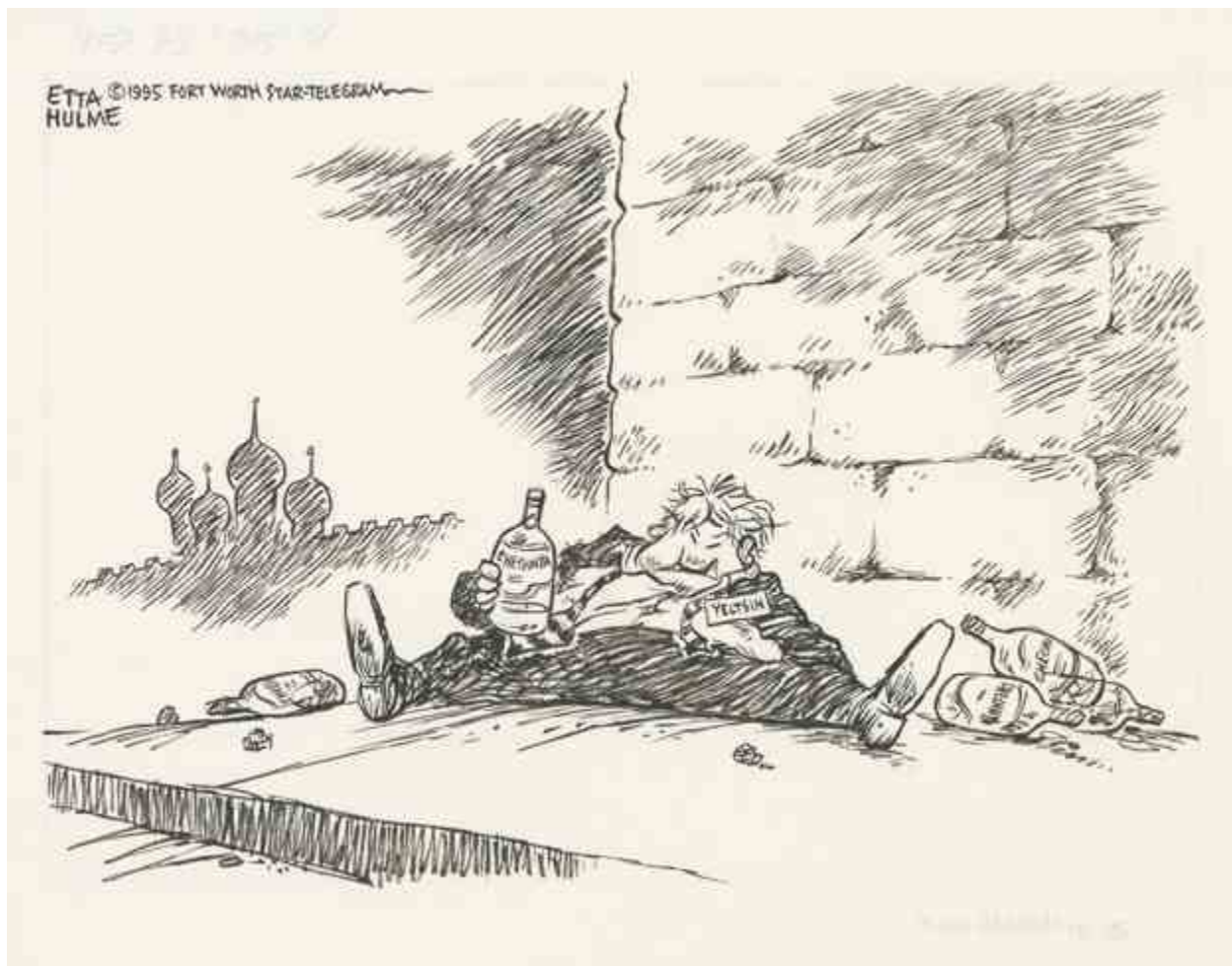


Figure Thirteen¹²²

“Yeltsin drunk on Chechnya” by Etta Hulme.

¹²² Etta Hulme, “Yeltsin drunk on Chechnya,” Etta Hulme Papers, University of Texas at Arlington Libraries, 1995.

Chapter Three: Yeltsin's "Forced" NATO-Russia Founding Act

Introduction

*“Our position has not changed. It remains a mistake for NATO to move eastward. But I need to take steps to alleviate the negative consequences of this for Russia. I am prepared to enter into an agreement with NATO not because I want to but because it is a forced step. There is no other solution for today.”*¹

—Boris Yeltsin on March 21, 1997, to Bill Clinton, leading up to the NATO-Russia Founding Act on May 27, 1997.

New declassifications among NATO members reveal insights into negotiations leading up to the NATO-Russia Founding Act of 1997. The documents highlight facets of Yeltsin’s strategy, the post-Cold War relationship between NATO and Russia, and the U.S. role in NATO expansion.² This chapter focuses on aspects of Yeltsin’s grand strategy, as documented by his meetings with NATO members and U.S. intelligence and assessments.³ The documents accentuate the development of Yeltsin’s perspective on two critical positions in the negotiations: his position on NATO expanding into Eastern Europe and Russia’s potential membership in NATO. On NATO expansion into Eastern Europe, minus inconsistent exceptions in Yeltsin’s statements, his official strategic interest was that Eastern European countries should not be

¹ Memorandum of Conversation, Clinton-Yeltsin Summit, Helsinki, Finland, “Subject: Morning Meeting with Russian President Yeltsin: NATO-Russia, START, ABM/TMD,” 21 March 1997, The White House, William J. Clinton Presidential Library, National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/32237-document-14-memorandum-conversation-clinton-yeltsin-summit-helsinki-finland-subject>.

² This is the closest historians can get to primary source documents on these matters, as potential and unreleased Russian Government documents are not publicly accessible.

³ “Grand strategy should delineate a country’s fundamental national interests, offer an assessment of the principal threats to those interests, and present a plan to use all instruments of national power to ward off those threats and advance those interests in the long term” (Christopher Hemmer, *American Pendulum: Recurring Debates in U.S. Grand Strategy* (Cornell University Press, 2015), 3).

allowed into the Alliance.⁴ On the topic of Russia's potential membership into the Atlantic Alliance, Yeltsin was open to the idea of Russia joining NATO from 1991-1994, but, from 1994-1997, Yeltsin increasingly had to reluctantly bend to the political will of the Russian anti-Westerners.⁵ Yeltsin never publicly articulated joining NATO as a formal Russian policy from 1991-1999.⁶

When comparing grand strategies, the Clinton Administration advocated for the security of Europe by respecting sovereign and independent choices of Eastern European countries under international law, in contrast to the Yeltsin government, which sought to regain its sphere of influence in former Soviet regions and keep the existing geographical distance between NATO and Russia's borders. Despite this divergence in positions, it was not seen as an existential problem in the U.S.-Russian diplomatic relationship mostly due to Clinton's statecraft in building a political friendship with Yeltsin.⁷

The negotiations demonstrated that Yeltsin's position of influence was weak on matters regarding NATO. Additionally, he abandoned his original Western integration platform by giving up on Russian NATO membership and voicing the Russian anti-Western platform.

⁴ Steven Pifer: "What I do remember is that Yeltsin had gone to Warsaw and had told the Poles, 'Yes, you're free to join NATO if you want.' And then Yeltsin tried to walk that statement back. The Poles, of course, were like, 'Okay, we're going.' I think it was always clear to us that Yeltsin was not happy about NATO enlargement" (William Ledesma, Oral History Interview of Steven Pifer, 11 March 2025).

⁵ This is largely because he wanted Russia to obtain a veto right over future NATO membership applications. His official position became that of no Russian membership in NATO on December 16, 1994, recorded during his meeting with the U.S. Vice President Al Gore.

⁶ Colton, 269.

⁷ Steven Pifer: "One of the things I think about Clinton and Yeltsin that made that relationship work is that Yeltsin was not happy about enlargement, but Clinton was extremely open with him and basically told Yeltsin 12 to 18 months in advance what would happen [...] While Yeltsin may not have been happy with the message, I think Yeltsin appreciated that Clinton was trying to help Yeltsin think through how he would manage the issue" (William Ledesma, Oral History Interview of Steven Karl Pifer, 11 March 2025).

Yeltsin legitimized the Russian anti-Westerners and set—on a presidential level—the post-Cold War negative status quo to oppose NATO expansion. This was glaringly evident when Yeltsin told Clinton in a meeting two years after the Founding Act was signed: “Just give Europe to Russia. The U.S. is not in Europe. Europe should be the business of Europeans. Russia is half European and half Asian. [...] I will take Europe and provide them security. Well, not I. Russia will.”⁸

There already is a plethora of commentary that criticizes NATO expansion in the 1990s, haphazardly faulting expansion to be the leading reason for the deterioration of Russia’s relationship with the political West. However, the existence of such an argument does not make those criticisms wholly true. Rather, Yeltsin’s decision to adopt the Russian anti-Western platform and to engage in a negative dialogue with NATO proved to be detrimental to Yeltsin’s original integrationist platform with the political West and Russia’s relationship with NATO post-Cold War.⁹ He casted NATO and its expansion in a negative light, throwing away an opportunity to fully embrace NATO’s post-Cold War mission that envisioned a partnership with a proactive and cooperative Russia. Despite claims that the political West may have discouraged Yeltsin with NATO membership, the political West instead kept that option on the table during meetings with Yeltsin.¹⁰ It was rather Yeltsin who pushed forward that Russian membership in

⁸ “Memorandum of Conversation - President Boris Yeltsin of Russia,” *Clinton Digital Library*, accessed March 1, 2025, <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/101582>, [November 19, 1999]; Note that this statement by Yeltsin is made after the Visegrad-3 countries joined NATO in 1999 and Vladimir Putin was in his inner circle.

⁹ Please note the distinction between diplomatic cooperation and positive/negative dialogue. Yeltsin engaged in a negative dialogue with NATO, though he cooperated with Bill Clinton and NATO expansion; he felt he was “forced” to cooperate.

¹⁰ Internally, there are U.S. declassifications of advisors who do not think Russia should be in NATO, such as John Kornblum, but it was not the official position of the Clinton Administration when meeting with Yeltsin.

NATO was undesirable in the negotiations of the Founding Act. Yeltsin aside, the Founding Act was still a long-term success for NATO. The Act affirmed respect for the rule and ethics of international law, made clear to Russia NATO's post-Cold War mission, and cooperated with the primary Russian request for NATO expansion without nuclear armament in the territories of new NATO members.

Reframing the Historical Narratives on the Act and NATO Expansion

*“What happened is that Russia, Europe and America have passed the stage of romanticism in post-totalitarian diplomacy when both sides embraced each other so tightly that national security interests were left aside.”*¹¹

—Vyacheslav Vasilyevich Kostikov, Press Secretary for President Yeltsin, on NATO expansion in 1994.

Scholarship has already critiqued NATO's expansion in the 1990s for various reasons.¹²

In an oral history interview with former NSC Director Steven Pifer, he said that “I think we

¹¹ Kampfner, 199.

¹² Historian M.E. Sarotte noted that “overall,” NATO and U.S. strategy on the NATO-Russia Founding Act was “no real compromises” with Russia (Sarotte, *Not One Inch*, 167). Bill Burns, a former diplomat in the Embassy Moscow in the 1990s and then later Director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), wrote that expansion was “premature at best, and needlessly provocative at worst” (Burns, 110). Former U.S. Ambassador to Russia Michael McFaul interpreted this moment as a “strain” in U.S.-Russia relations that were “inconsistent with the idea of a strategic partnership [between NATO and Russia]” (Michael McFaul, *From Cold War to Hot Peace: An American Ambassador in Putin's Russia* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018), 60-61). Historian Richard Sakwa, a critic of the United States on NATO, recollected that “the opportunity for genuine reconciliation was destroyed and the peace was lost” at the signing of the Act and the subsequent rounds of expansion closer to Russia's borders (Richard Sakwa, *The Lost Peace: How the West Failed to Prevent a Second Cold War* (Yale University Press, 2023), 75). Historian Vladimir Brovkin wrote that “the Western Powers were happy to see [that] [...] NATO remained and saw its mission in expanding its role and size even at the time when Russia was weak, and could not pose a military threat to anyone [in NATO]. [...] a great historical opportunity for reconciliation between post-communist Russia and the West was lost” (Vladimir

underestimated antipathy in Moscow towards NATO, and we overestimated our ability to address Russian concerns.”¹³ Explaining the outcome of the Act, Stephan Kieninger concluded in his upcoming book that it was a “*modus vivendi*” document that maintained relations between NATO and Russia as an “ambivalent affair.”¹⁴ Yet, as historian Jim Goldgeier noted, “Yeltsin had received as much as he could have [from NATO], given the realities of Russian weakness.”¹⁵ But there are hardly any critiques on Yeltsin, outside of the reference that his strategy was at times confused in his understanding of the planned time frame for NATO expansion or that Yeltsin limited his power due to his previous domestic failures.¹⁶ Scholarship has to recognize that, just like NATO and Clinton made a choice of many options to expand NATO, Yeltsin’s choice was not to embrace expansion and not plan to integrate Russia into the NATO-led security order in Europe. Although Yeltsin did not have a choice to set in motion NATO

Brovkin, *From Vladimir Lenin to Vladimir Putin: Russia in search of its identity: 1913-2023* (Routledge, 2023), 251-252).

¹³ William Ledesma, Oral History Interview of Steven Karl Pifer, 11 March 2025.

¹⁴ “NATO and Russia settled for an interim security system, something between collective defense and collective security—a system in which confrontation and war between NATO and Russia could not be excluded. In 1997, no one knew whether it would lead to a stable peace in Europe or to the return of tensions and new confrontations. [...] The competing aims remained in place. NATO sought Russia’s approval to enlargement while Russia tried to use the Founding Act to slow down enlargement and make its military dimension as meaningless as possible” (Kieninger, Forthcoming).

¹⁵ James Goldgeier, *Not Whether But When: The U.S. Decision to Enlarge NATO* (Brookings Institution Press, 1999), 116; “He did not get a legal commitment from his counterparts, but he did get ‘an enduring political commitment [of all NATO members] undertaken at the highest level’” (Goldgeier, 116).

¹⁶ On limitations of bargaining power: Andrew Felkay wrote, Russia’s loss of influence in the 1990s derived from the “military debacle in Chechnya, its [Russia’s] failing economy, and ongoing political strife between the legislature and the president greatly diminished Russia’s role in world affairs, especially in the rapidly growing globalization of international trade.” This “manifested itself by its inability to prevent NATO’s expansion (Andrew Felkay, *Yeltsin’s Russia and the West* (Praeger, 2002), 161-162).

expansion, he missed an opportunity during the Founding Act negotiations to solidify a positive and long-lasting relationship with NATO's post-Cold War mission.

There are also aspects of Yeltsin's strategy that merit greater scholarly nuance. For instance, political sociologist Leon Aron wrote that Yeltsin "demurred" by not "stoking nationalist paranoia handed to him on a silver platter" and chose to "accommodate [with the political West] rather than reprise the Cold War."¹⁷ Rather, Yeltsin chose to oppose the expansion of NATO—despite his weak bargaining position—due to his increasing fears of a strengthened Europe that approached Russia's borders. Thus, he actually did take the silver platter of anti-Western paranoia to meetings with the political West. It is somewhat true that, according to Leon Aron, "the cumulative effect" of Yeltsin's foreign policy was a "Russia less aggressive, less belligerent, less threatening to neighboring countries and to the world," but the policy was certainly not accommodation.¹⁸ Accommodation means a willing agreement in a position of superior authority—not forced in a moment of unequal negotiation weakness. NATO expansion was outside of Yeltsin's control, but expansion was never Yeltsin's interest and objective. The interest was always to inhibit NATO expansion eastward for Yeltsin in critical moments. The outcome of Yeltsin's failed policy to push for no expansion into Eastern Europe could be better named acquiescence at best and complaining at worst.

Yeltsin also had the option to make reform for Russia in his goal for peaceful integration with the political West by encouraging NATO expansion into Eastern Europe.¹⁹ Perhaps his

¹⁷ Aron, 701.

¹⁸ Aron, 702; Aron's statement about the Russian threat needs a qualifier with Chechnya, however.

¹⁹ This belief is briefly summarized in a meeting with German Chancellor Helmut Kohl, when Yeltsin told Kohl that "Russia was ready for this. It had always felt it was a part of Europe and wanted to participate in all European institutions ("The Chancellor's [Helmut Kohl's] Meeting with Russian President Yeltsin on Wednesday, 16 December 1992, in Moscow," December 21,

decision to not support NATO expansion was fueled by a belief that NATO would never dare to let Russia into the club of the Alliance. Perhaps this was due to his fear of political repercussions that would be exacted by Russian anti-Westerners.²⁰ It could have been political suicide. Or, maybe Yeltsin held a lack of confidence or lack of ideas on how to sell NATO to Russia effectively at that time. It could have been that Yeltsin understood that Russia's loss of great power capabilities and shattered economy made it impossible for him to envision Russia in NATO. Or maybe it was more simple, as Yeltsin said that the Russian public still believes "NATO is something evil."²¹ Perhaps, however, it was all of the above. But this answer cannot be definite if there are still Russian documents yet to be declassified. Regardless of which reason held the most weight for Yeltsin (and the political West declassifications reveal these all were suggested by Yeltsin), 1991-1997 is now a relic of lost opportunity for Russia—and more so than any other negotiating party to the Founding Act. The current primary source record suggests that this was impossible for Yeltsin to recognize. This is evident in his expression of relief to Clinton's remark that "it has been a good day" on the day of the signing of the Act, as Yeltsin declared, "I can say that my soul is at rest."²²

Yeltsin could not have prevented NATO expansion in the 1990s, but—in line with his original platform to integrate Russia into the West—he could have positively changed Russia's

1992, Wilson Center Digital Archive, BArch, B 136/59736, 289-296, Contributed, transcribed, and translated by Stephan Kieninger, <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/300194>).

²⁰ Even Yegor Gaidar said, "You can have the Baltics in NATO and Zhirinovsky [Russian anti-Western presidential candidate in 1996] in the Kremlin, or you can have the Baltics out of NATO and Yeltsin in the Kremlin" (Kampfner, 200).

²¹ Memcon Clinton and Yeltsin, 27 May 1997, *Clinton Digital Library*, accessed April 2, 2025, <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/101492>.

²² "Memorandum of Conversation - President Boris Yeltsin of Russia," *Clinton Digital Library*, accessed March 1, 2025, <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/101484> [27 May 1997]; Sarotte, 272.

plans with NATO on a substantial and lasting level. Rather than switching between cooperation and confrontation, Yeltsin had the opportunity to give Russia a stable, long-term relationship with NATO. This could have reduced mutual suspicion at an invaluable moment in history and created more room for constructive involvement in European security. Yeltsin's failure in negotiations with NATO does not subtract away from NATO's strategic success in the 1990s. Instead, the negotiations represented a potential victory for Yeltsin. The result of Yeltsin's refusal to endorse NATO expansion into Eastern Europe, unbeknownst to himself and the political West at that time, unfortunately, set the status quo of Russia's post-Cold War negative stance on NATO. Yeltsin legitimized the very anti-Western political force he fought against. The impact that 1994 to 1997 holds in the legacy of European international relations is not merely in words that are inscribed within the Act (the law), but also, and likely more lasting, the dialogue that was created by NATO members, Eastern European countries, and Russia about what matters—and what does not—regarding NATO enlargement and European security (the norms).

Historical scholarship on the topic of NATO expansion and the critical moment of the signing of the “Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security between the Russian Federation and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization,” on May 27, 1997, in Paris, needs to consider that Yeltsin's strategy on NATO was a decision based upon an option of at least two possibilities—endorsement and non-endorsement—rather than non-endorsement being the only option. Additionally, the entire course of the history of NATO-Russian relations, starting from the announcement of NATO expansion in 1994 onward, is not the sole fault of NATO and the U.S. Nor is it fair to say it was entirely Yeltsin's. As an anonymous Russian said

in Svetlana Alexievich's book, "Of course, Yeltsin is also responsible," for the trajectory of Russia, "but so are we."²³

The Chessboard of NATO-Russia Relations Post-Cold War

*"During an unsettled period at home [in Russia], with the dust still settling on the recent cabinet reshuffle and Chechnya a source of real worry, the temptation [for Yeltsin] to strike a popular, nationalist chord on foreign policy was undoubtedly strong."*²⁴

—U.S. Ambassador to Russia Thomas R. Pickering, to U.S. Secretary of State Warren Christopher on December 6, 1994.

For Boris Yeltsin, the topic (or, for him, the 'problem') of NATO expansion was a defining trait of his two-term presidency. While president, Yeltsin consistently inserted himself into the NATO dialogue. There were multiple motivations for doing so. First, the loss of great power capabilities after the fall of the Soviet Union left Russian power in Eastern Europe weak, creating political and national security threats—real and imagined—about NATO. Second, Yeltsin's government consistently sought international legitimacy with NATO to demonstrate to the Russian public that he was engaged with the political West. Third, Yeltsin held a vigorous belief that one of his destinies as President of Russia was to gift the "twenty-first century" a cooperative and peaceful relationship between Russia and the political West that would eschew Cold War hostilities.²⁵ It is because of this belief that NATO expansion into Eastern Europe

²³ Alexievich, 287.

²⁴ Ambassador Pickering Cable to Secretary of State: "Russia and NATO," 6 December 1994, U.S. Department of State, National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/27164-doc-10-ambassador-pickering-cable-secretary-state-russia-and-nato>.

²⁵ "Subject: Morning Meeting with Russian President Yeltsin: NATO-Russia, START, ABM/TMD," National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/32237-document-14-memorandum-conversation-clinton-yeltsin-summit-helsinki-finland-subject>.

“offended” Yeltsin.²⁶ Fourth, Yeltsin was hoping that a massive foreign policy success on NATO matters would boost his dismal approval ratings.²⁷

One interesting aspect about the dialogue between NATO members, Eastern Europeans, and Russia during this period is that they made the same baseline commitments to peace. Additionally, they all believed that the end of the Cold War signaled a chance to act swiftly to push forward their ideas of what a free, secure, and prosperous Europe should look like. The disagreement was that these ideas of European security “infrastructures”—the word that Strobe Talbott came to despise because of its ambiguous utility for Russians in the negotiations—were vastly different.²⁸ And the timeline of how the agreed-upon security system would expand and function was hotly contested. By the end of 1994, NATO members decided that NATO would be the collective system of choice for expansion and announced the official ‘open door policy’ for new members to join. The objectives of the negotiating parties that Yeltsin had to engage with from 1994 were largely pro-NATO enlargement for the Visegrad-3 in Eastern Europe.²⁹ In regard to the question of Russian membership, the Clinton Administration at times floated the idea to Yeltsin that Russia too could someday join the Atlantic Alliance.³⁰

²⁶ McFaul, *From Cold War to Hot Peace*, 60-61.

²⁷ In 1992, Yeltsin’s approval rating was around ten percent. In 1996 before his re-election, his approval rating was six to eight percent; Deseret News, “Yeltsin Approval Rating Falls to 10%,” 27 March 1992; Harvard Kennedy School, “Assessing Russia's Democratic Presidential Election,” 30 November 2016; Yitzhak M. Brudny, “In Pursuit of the Russian Presidency: Why and How Yeltsin Won the 1996 Presidential Election,” *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 30, no. 3 (1997): 255.

²⁸ Kieninger, Forthcoming.

²⁹ The Eastern European countries writ large wanted to be members of NATO as soon as possible, not merely being members in NATO’s Partnership for Peace program, and advocated that Russia not be allowed to have a veto on independent decisions of what type of security they seek. The Clinton Administration and European leaders supported this plan in principle.

³⁰ “Gore Debrief on One-on-One w/ Yeltsin,” Notes on Vice President Gore’s Meeting with President Yeltsin, Moscow, December 16, 1994, U.S. Department of State, National Security

It is noteworthy that Yeltsin sent NATO Headquarters a telegram on December 20, 1991, asking that Russia be considered to join the Alliance, to which there was not an official response in return. Historian Vladimir Kara-Murza considered this no-response interaction a “deafening silence” when Russia made its “first step,” calling into question the viability of NATO diplomacy with Russia post-Cold War.³¹ However, there should not be over-dramatization about this interaction. A December 27, 1991, statement regarding the NACC meeting by the Russian Foreign Ministry read as follows: “Today we are not raising a question of Russia’s membership in NATO, however [we] are prepared to regard it as a long-term political aim.”³² The foreign ministry explicitly said that Yeltsin was not raising the question of NATO membership for Russia in 1991, and only that it was—in a non-specified regard—a long-term aim. Alexander Vershbow, who was Acting U.S. Ambassador to NATO during this event, reflected that “We also didn’t see Yeltsin as quite as gung-ho in the weeks after that [telegram]. So people [in NATO] didn’t feel it necessitated a formal response, but maybe we should have done so.”³³

Regardless, there were still signs of diplomacy. Specifically, Yeltsin said to Clinton over the phone in December 1993 that he did not intent to “interfere” in the decisions of Eastern European countries and that he wanted to “cooperate with NATO in a way that would not be at the expense of Russia [likely in reference to the Partnership for Peace plan] and also a plan of

Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/32227-document-4-gore-debrief-one-one-w-yeltsin-notes-vice-president-gores-meeting>.

³¹ Vladimir Kara-Murza, “Robert G. Wesson Lecture 2024: A Discussion with Vladimir Kara-Murza,” Stanford University, 2024, 20:22, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W3GcLz3Vk_A.

³² Statement Issued by The Foreign Ministry of Russia on the Outcome of the NACC Meeting, Document POLADS(91)87, 27 December 1991, NATO Archive at NATO Headquarters.

³³ William Ledesma, Oral History Interview of Alexander Russell “Sandy” Vershbow, 19 February 2025.

action for Russia to join NATO.”³⁴ On the surface, this statement reflected a willingness to cooperate and integrate with the political West. However, declassified documents such as the one above also suggest that Yeltsin’s openness to NATO was tied to an expectation that NATO expansion would not be at the expense of Russia (i.e. he viewed NATO post-Cold War as the Cold War NATO). Yeltsin viewed Eastern European accession as a threat. He believed that NATO should not be the security system of choice for Eastern Europe.³⁵ His opinion was one of fear: that NATO expansion would result in the infrastructure of NATO—loosely defined as nuclear weapons and nuclear capabilities, military interoperability, and ballistic missiles—moving closer to Russia’s borders. Yeltsin saw expansion into Eastern Europe not as securing a peaceful future, but rather, as a “cold peace” that armed Europe for the possibility of a future war.³⁶ Thus, Yeltsin operated on the naïve assumption that future presidents of Russia,

³⁴ Memorandum of Telephone Conversation: “Telcon with President Boris Yeltsin of the Russian Federation,” 22 December 1993, William J. Clinton Presidential Library, National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/30738-document-14-memorandum-telephone-conversation-telcon-president-boris-yeltsin-russian>.

³⁵ This view was not because of NATO’s Article 5, which declares that an “Attack on one is an attack on all” (The North Atlantic Treaty (NATO Constitution), https://www.nato.int/cps/cz/natohq/official_texts_17120.htm); The current source record suggests Yeltsin had no intention to start a war that would trigger a NATO response, especially because of his desire to integrate Russia into the non-NATO aspects of the political West; Among other sources, this is pithily seen in a declassified phone conversation between Yeltsin and Clinton, where Yeltsin said “They [Eastern European countries] talk about threats. Russia is not a threat to anyone [in Europe]” (Memorandum of Telephone Conversation between Clinton and Yeltsin, 5 July 1994, The White House, National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/32616-doc-01-memorandum-telephone-conversation-between-clinton-and-yeltsin>).

³⁶ Talbott, *The Russia Hand*, 136; This is corroborated by Yeltsin, as agreeing to help denuclearize Ukraine’s warheads aimed at the United States in the negotiations of the Budapest Memorandum and the Trilateral Statement, whereby Yeltsin, Clinton, U.K. Prime Minister John Major, and Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma disarmed Ukraine of nuclear weapons in exchange for the now broken ‘assurance’ to respect the territorial integrity of Ukraine. For a detailed account of the negotiations on the Budapest Memorandum and the Trilateral Statement, see William Ledesma, Oral History Interview of Steven Karl Pifer, 11 March 2025 (Appendix Two); For primary sources, see National Security Archive folder, “The Budapest Memorandum

specifically his hand-picked successor Vladimir Putin, would not wage a war in Europe. Nuances to the argument that he was a Westernizer with NATO do not recognize the weight of Yeltsin's lack of training in diplomatic statecraft, and in general, his tendency to suggest cryptic statements to NATO members.³⁷ Given his personal limitations, Yeltsin's principles when it mattered most, rather than brief hiccups in words and exceptions, was his belief in foreign policy.³⁸ Arguments that state Yeltsin was pro-NATO also do not give Yeltsin the benefit of the doubt that he tirelessly sought to cooperate with the political West on NATO principally because Yeltsin understood that, in the long run, NATO would not be pressing pause on expansion just to appease Russian interests.³⁹

The remarkable nature of the negotiations on the NATO-Russia Founding Act is that Yeltsin and his staff, at every step, tried their best to bargain chips on the table that were not NATO's objectives of the Act, as they attempted to have NATO commit to provisions it could not. NATO's immovable objective in the Act—in writing—was to create a non-binding mechanism for Russia to be informed and consulted on NATO decisions while developing the capabilities for NATO and Russia to conduct joint military trainings, exercises, and operations.

1994 After 30 Years: Non-Proliferation Success Overshadowed by NATO Blowup Then, Russian War on Ukraine Now,” <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/nato-75-russia-programs/2024-12-05/budapest-memorandum-1994-after-30-years-non>.

³⁷ There is also the limiting factor of his surgeries and depleting health into his second term, or even at times, notoriously being under the influence of alcohol at diplomatic meetings.

³⁸ Notably, Yeltsin received a coronary artery bypass surgery of the heart on November 5, 1996. Viktor Chernomyrdin temporarily conducted presidential duties until Yeltsin returned in early 1997.

³⁹ There is a bleak historical interpretation that if Yeltsin had been in power during a period when Russia did have the economic structure and military readiness to assert a war on European soil with the objective of stopping NATO enlargement, he would have done so. However, the current source record does not fully substantiate that claim, outside of vague statements from government officials such as Russian Minister of Defense Igor Rodinov that “we would have to take countermeasures” to NATO expansion into Eastern Europe and that Yeltsin told Clinton he wanted to be the security guarantor of Europe in 1999 (Felkay, 163-164).

In lieu of this, Yeltsin's strategy towards the negotiations was to create an Act that secured an exterior Russian legal veto right on NATO membership applications, in perpetuity.⁴⁰ If that was not possible, he resorted to probing for assurances of their Western counterparts by word. When this option was exhausted, Yeltsin tried to receive an assurance that NATO would not expand specifically into the Baltics. After this proved to not budge his NATO counterparts, he attempted to have NATO assure Russia that the vague and ever-changing definition of NATO "infrastructure" would not be placed in the territory of new NATO members.

What was not in the writing of the Act was that the political West was more concerned about the timing rather than the substance. Specifically, Bill Clinton pithily stated, "We're asking them [Russia] to eat NATO expansion with a smile" by signing the Act.⁴¹ Thus, it makes sense why Yeltsin and his staff eagerly sought to negotiate items that were not on the options menu for the Act, because they recognized that politically, signing the Act would be a nod to accepting NATO expansion into Eastern Europe, which was against Yeltsin's strategic interest.

A key change in Yeltsin's NATO strategy also lies in the shakeup of Yeltsin's foreign ministry. After the continued rise of the Russian anti-Westerners in parliament, the pressures he faced in governance, and the First Chechen War, Yeltsin sacked foreign minister and reform party member Andrei Kozyrev and replaced him in 1996 with Yevgeny Primakov, the former Director of the SVR.⁴² Primakov, in many ways, was a central figure who fueled and worsened Yeltsin's fears that NATO expansion could not be trusted as a harmless action. Andrei A.

⁴⁰ "Subject: Morning Meeting with Russian President Yeltsin: NATO-Russia, START, ABM/TMD," National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/32237-document-14-memorandum-conversation-clinton-yeltsin-summit-helsinki-finland-subject>.

⁴¹ Kieninger, Forthcoming.

⁴² With NATO enlargement, Primakov was more aggressive than Yeltsin. He also already strongly voiced against NATO's Partnership for Peace plan for Eastern European countries.

Kovalev himself noted that Primakov “poisoned the attitude of the Kremlin, parliament, and the previously neutral public toward NATO. From then on [in post-Cold War diplomacy], the position Russia adopted toward NATO’s enlargement was irrational and illogical.”⁴³ Primakov served as foreign minister until September 1998, when he became Prime Minister of Russia, until he was succeeded in the post of Prime Minister by Sergei Stepashin, and later that year, by Vladimir Putin, in 1999.

Thus, what did Yeltsin do in the negotiations leading up to the NATO-Russia Founding Act that harmed the future of NATO-Russia relations, despite the reception that the signing of the Act was a positive direction for NATO-Russian relations at that time? During the negotiations, Yeltsin was unproductive in selling strategy towards the Russian anti-Westerners. Instead of being more proactive in informing the Russian public of NATO’s reasons for expansion, Yeltsin was already weak politically, resorting to a negative dialogue on NATO expansion. Obviously, because Yeltsin believed—and was emboldened by Primakov—that expansion into Eastern Europe disavowed Russian interests and was a mistake for NATO. Yeltsin became increasingly tormented by his fear of NATO expansion, resulting in a highly reactive negotiation style that legitimized real anti-NATO sentiments in the Russian foreign policy establishment. This also gave credit to more conspiratorial beliefs about NATO’s reasons for expanding into Eastern Europe. For all of Clinton’s “marveling” at Yeltsin’s courage to cooperate with NATO in the face of the “teeth of ferocious opposition from Russian authoritarians back home” and that “while Ol’ Boris may be dying” he still has “oxygen getting into his brain,” Yeltsin and Primakov nevertheless created negative status quo on NATO

⁴³ Andrei A. Kovalev, 123.

expansion for post-Soviet Russia.⁴⁴ And this must be recognized. Although the NATO-Russia Founding Act gave comfort for NATO members to expand the Alliance, Yeltsin's lasting impact on Russia's negotiation strategy and perception of NATO in the post-Cold War environment is profound and evident in the newly declassified sources of the negotiations from 1994 to 1997. As Dennis Ross wrote to Strobe Talbott, "At the end of the day, the platform Yeltsin has for explaining the package [of the Act and NATO expansion] will also be as important as the package itself."⁴⁵ To that end, Yeltsin's strategy in the negotiations on NATO expansion ushered in a post-Cold War stance of Russian unwillingness to advocate for NATO expansion into former Soviet regions, such as Ukraine. The first round of NATO expansion under Clinton in 1999 (The Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland) may have never happened if Yeltsin had not won a second term, after all (a possible military challenge by presidential candidate Zyuganov).⁴⁶ But Yeltsin was—in comparison to former Russian leaders—largely pro-integration regarding Eastern European countries with Western Europe, that is, until matters concerning NATO.

Developing a Deal for Europe that Managed Yeltsin

*"I shall frankly say that against the background of our promising joint efforts, one completely fails to understand [...] further evolution of NATO should not be decided without due account to the opinion and interests of Russia."*⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Taylor Branch, *The Clinton Tapes* (Simon & Schuster, 2009), 436-437; Sarotte, *Not One Inch*, 270.

⁴⁵ Unclassified Dennis Ross Memorandum to Strobe Talbott, 10 February 1997, U.S. Department of State, National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/32235-document-12-dennis-ross-memorandum-strobe-talbott>.

⁴⁶ Goldgeier, 4-5.

⁴⁷ Official informal No. 248 "Boris-Bill Letter," 30 November 1994, U.S. Department of State, National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/16385-document-13-official-informal-no-248-boris-bill>.

—Yeltsin’s Letter to Clinton, 30 November 1994.

The plan for NATO expansion and the document that became the NATO-Russia Founding Act, was, “despite needing allied support,” centered around “key decisions” which were “made in Washington,” according to scholar Jim Goldgeier.⁴⁸ He notes that “It was America that drove the alliance throughout this process.”⁴⁹ In fact, the Clinton Administration ghost wrote the Founding Act for NATO Secretary General Javier Solana.⁵⁰ Although not every single decision was the influence of the U.S.’s seat at the table in NATO—as historian Susan Colbourn’s research uncovers—it would be impossible to analyze the strategic thinking of NATO enlargement without looking at the decisions of the U.S. national security apparatus in its unipolar moment.⁵¹ Over the course of 1993-1999, Clinton’s grand strategy in Europe was to “work for the best, while expanding NATO to prepare for the worst.”⁵² Translating from intellectual theory to practical politics, Clinton pursued a deal for Europe that managed an

⁴⁸ Goldgeier, 6; Additionally, this language is seen in Strobe Talbott’s memorandum that “It’s a recognition of the reality we face, which is this: All periods of history are, by definition, transitional, but some are more transitional than others—and the current one is particularly so. An old order has ended, but the new one has not yet taken shape. Our task is to do everything we can to shape the future in a way that conforms to our interests and values” (Strobe Talbott Memorandum to Warren Christopher, 5 December 1994, U.S. Department of State, National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/32628-doc-13-strobe-talbott-memo-warren-christopher>).

⁴⁹ Goldgeier, 4-5.

⁵⁰ Note that the NATO Secretary Generals of the 1990s were the following people: Manfred Wörner (1998-1994), [Acting] Sergio Balanzino (1994-1994), Willy Claes (1994-1995), [Acting] Sergio Balanzino (1995-1995), Javier Solana (1995-1999), George Robertson (1999-2003); Steven Pifer: “So we took the draft that we’d been working on with the Russians and sent it to Solana. Solana that morning puts our draft down as his document. I still remember the reporting message. Somebody from the British delegation came up to one of our Americans at NATO and said, ‘The next time you ghostwrite a document for Solana, you got to remember to replace the S’s with C’s’” (William Ledesma, Oral History of Steven Karl Pifer, 11 March 2025).

⁵¹ Susan Colbourn, “NATO as a Political Alliance: Continuities and Legacies in the Enlargement Debates of the 1990s,” in *Evaluating NATO Enlargement: From Cold War Victory to the Russia-Ukraine War*, ed. James Goldgeier and Joshua Shiffrinson (Palgrave Macmillan, 2023).

⁵² William J. Clinton, “I tried to Put Russia on Another Path,” *The Atlantic*, 7 April 2022.

increasingly ill Yeltsin and shut out the ideas of the Russian anti-Westerners in the NATO-Russia Founding Act and the rollout of expansion.

It is worth recognizing that Eastern European presidents—such as Lech Wałęsa and Václav Havel—and select European diplomats—such as Germany’s Volker Rühe—provided the gas and ignition for the American engine of expansion.⁵³ NATO Secretary General Manfred Wörner recognized the resolve of Eastern Europeans in advocating for expansion, as he reported to Clinton that Eastern European countries in the North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC) are “increasingly interested” in NATO because of “anxiety” and “Russian instability and fears of their own domestic instability.”⁵⁴ Wörner remarked, however, that “except for Ukraine and the Baltic states,” “most” do not feel militarily threatened by Russia.⁵⁵ Instead, Wörner noticed a worry among Eastern Europeans about a deeply rooted trend of Russian interference in European affairs. This trend existed before and during the Cold War. He noted Eastern European countries “fear that conservative forces in their own countries could obtain Russian support and destabilize

⁵³ In a declassified conversation between Poland’s Lech Wałęsa and Germany’s Helmut Kohl, Wałęsa said that “One must not cave in in one’s relations with the Russians. Rather, one had to act very decisively as the Russians would otherwise perceive one’s position as a sign of weakness and would be demanding ever more. If one did not act now, Russia’s opposition would even grow at a later point in time.” In agreement, Kohl said “one must not ask the Russians for their permission [on NATO]. However, at the same time, one had to avoid surprises for the Russians so that they could save face. Any kind of veto right for Russia was not acceptable. However, one had to help Russia in order to avoid a spread of artificial feeling of insecurity and anxieties” (“The Chancellor’s [Helmut Kohl’s] Meeting with Polish President Wałęsa in Copenhagen on 11 March 1995,” March 31, 1995, Wilson Center Digital Archive, BArch, B 136/59748, 195-197, Contributed, transcribed, and translated by Stephan Kieninger, <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/300226>).

⁵⁴ Cable from Secretary of State to U.S. Mission NATO, “Subject: The Secretary’s Meeting with NATO SYG Manfred Woerner, March 3, 1993,” U.S. Department of State, William J. Clinton Presidential Library, National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/32224-document-1-cable-secretary-state-us-mission-nato-subject-secretarys-meeting-nato-syg>.

⁵⁵ “Subject: The Secretary’s Meeting with NATO SYG Manfred Woerner, March 3, 1993,” National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/32224-document-1-cable-secretary-state-us-mission-nato-subject-secretarys-meeting-nato-syg>.

their fledgling democracies.”⁵⁶ It is only by filling the “security vacuum” in Eastern Europe that Europe as a continent can “stave off the return of authoritarian forces [domestically].”⁵⁷ As Lech Wałęsa noted separately to German Chancellor Kohl in March 1995, Poland’s joining NATO is “a purely political decision,” not a war-prepping decision against Russia.⁵⁸

A core principle in the approach to Yeltsin was that he did not have a right to dictate the security choices made by sovereign states under international law. NATO and the Clinton Administration sought to reaffirm this principle in the final product of the NATO-Russia Founding Act.⁵⁹ Therefore, the Clinton Administration saw itself as the unipolar force capable of exacting lasting change on the European continent through NATO enlargement and did not want Yeltsin interfering with the objective of a “whole and free Europe.”⁶⁰ Instead of intentionally drawing new dividing lines in Europe, the Clinton Administration and NATO believed that a process of self-selection with the Partnership for Peace—and the open door NATO membership

⁵⁶ “Subject: The Secretary’s Meeting with NATO SYG Manfred Woerner, March 3, 1993,” National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/32224-document-1-cable-secretary-state-us-mission-nato-subject-secretarys-meeting-nato-syg>.

⁵⁷ “Subject: The Secretary’s Meeting with NATO SYG Manfred Woerner, March 3, 1993,” National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/32224-document-1-cable-secretary-state-us-mission-nato-subject-secretarys-meeting-nato-syg>.

⁵⁸ The Chancellor’s [Helmut Kohl’s] Meeting with Polish President Wałęsa in Copenhagen on 11 March 1995,” March 31, 1995, Wilson Center Digital Archive, BArch, B 136/59748, 195-197, Contributed, transcribed, and translated by Stephan Kieninger, <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/300226>.

⁵⁹ “The U.S. was certainly not ready to grant a weakened and chaotic Russia veto power over issues of European security, something that it has not been willing to grant even to its allies; and even more so since Russia did not recognise the need for an enduring American political and military presence in Europe. Second, America was committed to maintaining the larger Euro-Atlantic system, and if this meant sacrificing a better relationship with Russia, then ‘the former has to rank incomparably higher to America’” (Sakwa, *The Lost Peace*, 75).

⁶⁰ George H.W. Bush, “A whole Europe, A free Europe,” 31 May 1989, <https://voicesofdemocracy.umd.edu/george-h-w-bush-a-whole-europe-a-free-europe-31-may-1989-video/>.

policy—could achieve security without division.⁶¹ Clinton’s National Security Advisor Anthony Lake wrote in an October 1994 that “we should not consign them [Ukraine and the Baltics] to a gray zone or a Russian sphere of influence” but that the process for them “must be developed in parallel with long-term strategy vis-a-vis Russia that intensified partnership with NATO and other institutions.”⁶² Lake recommended that the “Insurance policy/strategic hedge” on an authoritative return of Russia should be “Kept in the background only, rarely articulated. On the contrary, the possibility of membership in the longer term for a democratic Russia should not be ruled out explicitly, as the President [Clinton] and Yeltsin agreed.”⁶³ It is vital to note here that, according to this NSC document, Yeltsin was well aware that NATO members were debating to expand as an “insurance policy” if things turned sour in Russia, and that the NSC understood in October 1994 that Yeltsin did not rule out Russian membership in NATO, just a few months before Yeltsin denied this possibility to Al Gore in December 1994.

⁶¹ John Podesta/Todd Stern to the President, “NSC Memos for Meeting with Secretary Christopher,” Attached: Anthony Lake to the President: “The NATO Summit and Europe’s East,” 19 October 1993, The White House, William J. Clinton Presidential Library, National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/32225-document-2-john-podestatodd-stern-president-nsc-memos-meeting-secretary-christopher>.

⁶² Anthony Lake to the Secretary of State, Secretary of Defense, UN Ambassador, and Joint Chiefs Chairman, “NSC Staff Paper on NATO Expansion,” 14 October 1994, U.S. National Security Council, William J. Clinton Presidential Library, National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/32226-document-3-anthony-lake-secretary-state-secretary-defense-un-ambassador-and-joint>.

⁶³ “NSC Staff Paper on NATO Expansion,” National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/32226-document-3-anthony-lake-secretary-state-secretary-defense-un-ambassador-and-joint>.

The NATO-Russia ‘Joint Space Station’ Metaphor in December 1994

*“Russian foreign policy inevitably has to be of an independent and assertive nature [...] if Russian democrats fail to achieve it, they will be swept away by a wave of aggressive nationalism, which is now exploiting the need for national and state self-assertion.”*⁶⁴

—Russian Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev.

At the start of 1994, Yeltsin’s staff was increasingly becoming more full of Russian anti-Westerners, and NATO members were becoming aware of this reality in the Kremlin. Early in the negotiation process on December 16, 1994, when the Clinton Administration was sounding Yeltsin’s position on NATO, the U.S. team noted that Yeltsin was on “best behavior,” displaying “ferociousness,” but not like “when he’s drunk” in his hospital room.⁶⁵ Vice President Al Gore reported in the document that the 1994 expansion announcement by NATO caused a “rhetorical, chemical reaction” in Yeltsin—which, when combined with Yeltsin’s misreading of the language of the document for the North Atlantic Council plans in 1995—“caused an explosion.” In the hospital room, Gore assured Yeltsin and Viktor Chernomyrdin that

What Clinton told you in September was that eventually NATO will expand. But the process will be gradual and open, and we will consult carefully with you. The process will be conducted in parallel with a deepening of the US-Russia partnership and your partnership with NATO.⁶⁶

As Gore was talking, he created a NATO-Russia relationship metaphor that Yeltsin enjoyed to reference. Gore likened NATO-Russia relations to joint space stations, where a NATO station

⁶⁴ Kampfner, 199.

⁶⁵ This meeting occurred just 5 days after the war in Chechnya began.

⁶⁶ “Gore Debrief on One-on-One w/ Yeltsin,” Notes on Vice President Gore’s Meeting with President Yeltsin, Moscow, December 16, 1994, U.S. Department of State, National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/32227-document-4-gore-debrief-one-one-w-yeltsin-notes-vice-president-gores-meeting>.

and a Russian station dock together. Gore moved both of his hands to gesture two space stations docking, as NATO and Russia joined together in an act of successful diplomacy. Yeltsin agreed. Gore, capturing Yeltsin's agreement on NATO expansion, emphasized "Yes. We need a process of three things: our bilateral partnership; Russia's relationship with NATO; and NATO expansion. It must be gradual."⁶⁷ Yeltsin agreed. But right after, Yeltsin slyly created his own version of the metaphor, a version that he did not ever want to happen. The meeting document notes that Yeltsin moved his hands to indicate one space station moving forward (NATO) and the other moving away (Russia). "But not like this," said Yeltsin.⁶⁸ This second type of joint space station metaphor captures Yeltsin's conspiracy-driven fear of expansion, in that, when NATO expands, Russia as a country would disappear in the process. Gore, clarifying, said, "I think you have been given bad information from some people other than us. We have no intention of doing that," and related to Yeltsin, "We understand you have parliamentary elections in mid-1995, and it would be hard for you if we moved forward then."⁶⁹ For that reason, Gore

⁶⁷ "Gore Debrief on One-on-One w/ Yeltsin," National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/32227-document-4-gore-debrief-one-one-w-yeltsin-notes-vice-president-gores-meeting>; Alexander Russell "Sandy" Vershbow commented on this metaphor and said: "I think what bothered me was that the 'docking' metaphor reflected a three-track approach. We were convinced that best to treat NATO and Russia as the two-tracks. U.S.-Russia [bilateral] is implicit in NATO-Russia. [...] the main concern that I had was that it was just conceptually inconsistent with the two-track approach that was reflected in that famous two-page paper and other papers at the time" (William Ledesma, Oral History Interview of Alexander Russell "Sandy" Vershbow, 19 February 2025).

⁶⁸ "Gore Debrief on One-on-One w/ Yeltsin," National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/32227-document-4-gore-debrief-one-one-w-yeltsin-notes-vice-president-gores-meeting>.

⁶⁹ "Gore Debrief on One-on-One w/ Yeltsin," National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/32227-document-4-gore-debrief-one-one-w-yeltsin-notes-vice-president-gores-meeting>.

shook hands with Yeltsin in the hospital room promising that “NATO will not expand in 1995.”⁷⁰

The meeting document notes that Yeltsin was a “little reluctant” after the handshake, as he thought he could have “sought more.”⁷¹ Yeltsin then asked Gore: “If you do this (expand NATO), what is Russia’s relationship to NATO?”⁷² Gore tactically replied, “Well, on one extreme, conceptually we have not ruled out that Russia could be a part of NATO.”⁷³ Yeltsin adamantly insisted, “No, no, that doesn’t make sense;” the meeting notes suggested that Yeltsin meant that it was improbable because Russia is a “very big” country and NATO is composed of “very small” countries.⁷⁴ This is an important shift from his December 1991 telegram and the October 1994 NSC document, as Yeltsin now told the U.S. delegation that he does not see Russia in NATO. Gore, likely shocked by Yeltsin’s comment, said, “I’ll take your word that it’s not probable, but [...] we should seek to find the very best relationship between Russia and NATO. Our goal is an undivided Europe, and we must reach it.”⁷⁵ Yeltsin diplomatically pushed

⁷⁰ “Gore Debrief on One-on-One w/ Yeltsin,” National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/32227-document-4-gore-debrief-one-one-w-yeltsin-notes-vice-president-gores-meeting>.

⁷¹ “Gore Debrief on One-on-One w/ Yeltsin,” National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/32227-document-4-gore-debrief-one-one-w-yeltsin-notes-vice-president-gores-meeting>.

⁷² “Gore Debrief on One-on-One w/ Yeltsin,” National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/32227-document-4-gore-debrief-one-one-w-yeltsin-notes-vice-president-gores-meeting>.

⁷³ “Gore Debrief on One-on-One w/ Yeltsin,” National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/32227-document-4-gore-debrief-one-one-w-yeltsin-notes-vice-president-gores-meeting>.

⁷⁴ “Gore Debrief on One-on-One w/ Yeltsin,” National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/32227-document-4-gore-debrief-one-one-w-yeltsin-notes-vice-president-gores-meeting>.

⁷⁵ “Gore Debrief on One-on-One w/ Yeltsin,” National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/32227-document-4-gore-debrief-one-one-w-yeltsin-notes-vice-president-gores-meeting>.

back, seeking more information. He said, “Agreed, but we may not reach our goal. Europe may break down into blocs. What [then] will Russia’s relationship with NATO and Russia’s relationship with the U.S. [be]?”⁷⁶ Gore replied, “Our friendship is very important. No matter what happens, we will be interested in our partnership.”⁷⁷ Yeltsin, satisfied, said, “If you meant that, what you said is very important” and “Great, I think we can consider this behind us.”⁷⁸ The words that mattered to Yeltsin in this statement were likely Gore saying no matter what happens. Therefore, another component of Yeltsin’s thinking was a worry about Russia becoming isolated from Europe through NATO expansion.⁷⁹

Just as this vital meeting concluded, the American engine of expansion planned how to exactly go about the next upcoming meeting between U.S. Secretary of State Warren Christopher and Foreign Minister Kozyrev. On December 22, 1994, National Security Advisor Anthony Lake received an email from Alexander “Sandy” Vershbow, Nicholas Burns, Richard Schifter, and Daniel Fried. They typed that the goals of the Christopher-Kozyrev meeting were to “Reassure

⁷⁶ “Gore Debrief on One-on-One w/ Yeltsin,” National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/32227-document-4-gore-debrief-one-one-w-yeltsin-notes-vice-president-gores-meeting>.

⁷⁷ “Gore Debrief on One-on-One w/ Yeltsin,” National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/32227-document-4-gore-debrief-one-one-w-yeltsin-notes-vice-president-gores-meeting>.

⁷⁸ “Gore Debrief on One-on-One w/ Yeltsin,” National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/32227-document-4-gore-debrief-one-one-w-yeltsin-notes-vice-president-gores-meeting>.

⁷⁹ In another U.S. document to Bill Clinton on December 21st, reflecting on the December 16th meeting, it concluded that Yeltsin was “especially angry” with his misreading on NATO expansion from the NAC communique because “it appeared to him to contradict the assurances you [Clinton] had given him during your September summit meeting.” The result of the miscommunication was Foreign Minister Kozyrev’s “refusal to sign” the Partnership for Peace document and Yeltsin’s “hardline speech in Budapest” (Deputy National Security Adviser Samuel Berger to the President, “Meeting with the Vice President on Russia and NATO Expansion,” 21 December 1994, The White House, William J. Clinton Presidential Library, National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/32228-document-5-deputy-national-security-adviser-samuel-berger-president-meeting-vice>).

Russians about the timing of expansion decisions (no expansion in 1995, sensitivity to Russian elections in 1995-96).⁸⁰ Continuing, they recommended to reject Russia's ability to have a decision about NATO expansion and that the NATO-Russian relationship "must evolve in step with the expansion process."⁸¹ They concluded that their objective by the end of 1995 was "Russian understanding if not acceptance of a package combining NATO expansion and parallel Russia-NATO relationship."⁸² These points on strategy derive from the fact that the Clinton Administration believed they were losing time, and Yeltsin was contributing to the lost time. A document from Anthony Lake to Clinton in July 1995 on a forecast of the Kremlin in 1996 read

Opposition to NATO enlargement appears to be hardening across the political spectrum among the Russian political elite. Key Yeltsin advisors and members of the Duma argue that NATO enlargement and NATO-Russia cooperation are incompatible and are attacking [Foreign Minister] Kozyrev for acquiescing in the West's agenda.

Worse, they had intelligence that Yeltsin had "reportedly approved" a "set of theses" that "lay out a strategy for delaying and possibly derailing NATO enlargement, including sowing divisions within the Alliance and appealing to opponents in public and parliaments."⁸³ There

⁸⁰ Memorandum for Anthony Lake and Samuel R. Berger. From: Alexander Vershbow, Nicholas Burns, Richard Schifter and Daniel Fried, "European Security Architecture, NATO Expansion and Russia," 22 December 1994, The White House, William J. Clinton Presidential Library, National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/32228-document-5-deputy-national-security-adviser-samuel-berger-president-meeting-vice>.

⁸¹ "European Security Architecture, NATO Expansion and Russia," National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/32228-document-5-deputy-national-security-adviser-samuel-berger-president-meeting-vice>.

⁸² "European Security Architecture, NATO Expansion and Russia," National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/32228-document-5-deputy-national-security-adviser-samuel-berger-president-meeting-vice>.

⁸³ Memorandum for the President from Anthony Lake, "European Security/NATO Enlargement Progress Report," 17 July 1995, The White House, William J. Clinton Presidential Library, National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/32230-document-7-memorandum-president-anthony-lake-european-securitynato-enlargement>.

were already Russian politicians concerned with Yeltsin not being strong enough as well:

“National security advisor Ryurikov has reportedly set up a Kremlin committee to take charge of the issue from the foreign ministry” regarding Kozyrev.⁸⁴ Ultimately, the anti-Westerners were successful in pressuring Yeltsin to switch Kozyrev with Primakov in 1996.

The July 1995 document also assessed that “Russian opposition to NATO enlargement is unlikely to yield in the near or medium term to some kind of grudging endorsement; Russia’s opposition is deep and profound.”⁸⁵ Concluding from these points, it argued that the U.S. policy on expansion is the “best hope” for the period ahead in order to avoid the “unpalatable choice” that would come about from Russia “Derail[ing] our policy, given its conviction that any eastward expansion of NATO is at root antithetical to Russia’s long-term interests.”⁸⁶ These predictions show that the Clinton Administration realized the troublesome reality that Yeltsin was adopting the anti-Western position on NATO and likely realized the U.S. bargaining power

⁸⁴ In a separate newspaper from Monitor regarding an *Izvestia*, it writes about “The Real Reason Why Yeltsin Sacked Ryurikov” on April 9, 1997, who led the push to remove Kozyrev. Within the newspaper, it notes that “Yeltsin will forgive his aides anything except moves that endanger his own power.”

⁸⁵ “European Security/NATO Enlargement Progress Report,” National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/32230-document-7-memorandum-president-anthony-lake-european-securitynato-enlargement>.

⁸⁶ “European Security/NATO Enlargement Progress Report,” National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/32230-document-7-memorandum-president-anthony-lake-european-securitynato-enlargement>; The document also reflects that “A key question is whether the Russians have learned lessons from earlier Soviet campaigns [...] strident campaigns only resulted in self-isolation until Moscow came around to accept the reality.” And, importantly, the document also demonstrates that the Clinton Administration understood Yeltsin’s core problem with the Russian anti-Westerners: “We need to intensify our dialogue with the Russian elite, to challenge their outdated view of NATO, to convince them that our ‘parallel’ strategy is designed to include, not isolate Russia and to apprise them of the probable costs to the bilateral relationship of any overt attempt to sabotage our policy. We also should launch an outreach program to the interested Russian public.”

to change Yeltsin's position was limited due to Yeltsin's own political weakness on foreign policy.

This negative Russian view of NATO was confirmed in a meeting with NATO Secretary General Javier Solana and the Yeltsin delegation in March 1996. Solana wrote to Chancellor Kohl that the Yeltsin delegation took a firm stance against enlargement. He noted that Yeltsin and Primakov "repeated the idea that the West could not dictate to Russia"—and referencing Clinton's remark to Talbott—"that they would not 'swallow' NATO's enlargement."⁸⁷ Solana was shocked that "there were no suggestions on possible conditions or alternatives on this issue" and Primakov was "clear" in his warning to Solana that if enlargement occurred, "Russia would be obliged to take the necessary measures to compensate for it and to react to the new geostrategic situation that would ensue."⁸⁸ Solana lamented that Yeltsin's delegation still perceived "the Alliance as a hostile bloc whose enlargement would constitute a serious danger to Russia's security," despite the fact that Solana wanted Russia to play a positive, peaceful, and constructive role in a new European security order.⁸⁹ Solana concluded that "serious progress on this issue will not be forthcoming until after the Presidential elections [for Yeltsin in July 1996]."⁹⁰

After Yeltsin's re-election, however, Yeltsin did not substantially have more affinity for NATO enlargement. A July 29, 1996, memorandum by the Assistant Secretary of State for

⁸⁷ NATO Secretary General Javier Solana Madariaga Letter to Helmut Kohl, SG/96/431, 29 March 1996, NATO Archive at NATO Headquarters.

⁸⁸ NATO Secretary General Javier Solana Madariaga Letter to Helmut Kohl, SG/96/431, 29 March 1996, NATO Archive at NATO Headquarters.

⁸⁹ NATO Secretary General Javier Solana Madariaga Letter to Helmut Kohl, SG/96/431, 29 March 1996, NATO Archive at NATO Headquarters.

⁹⁰ NATO Secretary General Javier Solana Madariaga Letter to Helmut Kohl, SG/96/431, 29 March 1996, NATO Archive at NATO Headquarters.

European and Canadian Affairs John Kornblum advised based upon U.S. intelligence that Yeltsin has “areas of exploration” that are against NATO’s objectives. He listed three primary goals of Yeltsin:

- (a) prevent the movement of NATO “infrastructure” (especially nuclear weapons) onto the territory of new allies
- (b) draw red lines around certain countries (e.g., the Baltics and Ukraine) to prevent their ever being considered for NATO membership; and
- (c) establish some sort of binding mechanism for Russia to influence NATO and European decision-making.⁹¹

Kornblum reasoned, contrary to Bill Clinton’s strategy, that it was in the interest of “both Russia and the West” that the agenda of the Act “not be defined as Russia’s price for allowing NATO expansion to go forward.”⁹² A pessimist of Russia’s integration into the political West, Kornblum said that Russia “cannot (and probably should not ever want to) endorse formally NATO enlargement, whatever concessions they may claim to have extracted.”⁹³ Yet, he said that “the image of Russia holding expansion hostage is unacceptable.”⁹⁴ Therefore, the goal of the Clinton Administration was to maintain NATO’s definition in the negotiations:

We want the most cooperative possible security relationship with Russia; we want Russia to be integrated into a new sort of European security community; we want

⁹¹ John Kornblum Memorandum, “NATO-Russia: A Framework for the Next Phase,” 29 July 1996, U.S. Department of State, National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/32232-document-9-john-kornblum-memorandum-nato-russia-framework-next-phase>.

⁹² John Kornblum Memorandum, “NATO-Russia: A Framework for the Next Phase,” National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/32232-document-9-john-kornblum-memorandum-nato-russia-framework-next-phase>.

⁹³ John Kornblum Memorandum, “NATO-Russia: A Framework for the Next Phase,” National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/32232-document-9-john-kornblum-memorandum-nato-russia-framework-next-phase>.

⁹⁴ John Kornblum Memorandum, “NATO-Russia: A Framework for the Next Phase,” National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/32232-document-9-john-kornblum-memorandum-nato-russia-framework-next-phase>.

Russia's voice to be heard in European decision-making councils; NATO expansion and other institutional developments are designed to further this goal.⁹⁵

This definition that Kornblum advised on was so applicable that it was copied and pasted almost word-for-word in the official briefing document that Strobe Talbott presented to Clinton before meeting Yeltsin to discuss NATO expansion and relations. Within this briefing document, Strobe Talbott addresses the dialogue of Yeltsin's team directly. For instance, he quoted from a meeting script where Primakov stated that

The two processes—the development of NATO-Russia relations and the expansion of NATO—have to run in parallel; they have to unfold together. We cannot have one confined to talk while the other takes the form of concrete steps. This is imperative.

In response, Talbott wrote that “they cannot slow down enlargement by slowing down the ‘dialogue.’ In fact, we may be able to keep them moving along the dialogue track by making clear to them that they’ll be left in the dust if they drag their feet.”⁹⁶ It was clear that key figures in the Clinton Administration, such as Talbott, were growing impatient with Yeltsin creating a negative dialogue on NATO, and that the elephant in the Kremlin full of anti-Westerners will have to adjust or be left to the dust. Clinton himself expressed calm concern to Yeltsin regarding Yeltsin's choice of words on NATO, writing in a letter that “I want you to know my personal

⁹⁵ John Kornblum Memorandum, “NATO-Russia: A Framework for the Next Phase,” National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/32232-document-9-john-kornblum-memorandum-nato-russia-framework-next-phase>.

⁹⁶ Strobe Talbott Draft Memorandum, “NATO-Russia: A Framework for the Next Phase,” 23 August 1996, U.S. Department of State, National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/32233-document-10-strobe-talbott-draft-memorandum-nato-russia-framework-next-phase>.

views on these issues [of NATO expansion] with the aim of promoting a more productive dialogue than the one we have had during the past few days.”⁹⁷

This view was also brought up in a vivid memorandum from Strobe Talbott in 1995 when he wrote an intense response to why he despised the joint space station metaphor that Al Gore suggested to Yeltsin. As historian M.E. Sarotte notes, it is “worth quoting at length.”⁹⁸ Strobe Talbott wrote, “It’s Russia that must move toward us, toward our way of doing things.”⁹⁹ Invigorated with American exceptionalism, he continued that

This may be an obnoxious confirmation of our doctrine of ‘exceptionalism.’ [...] Well, tough. That’s us; that’s the U.S. We are exceptional. [...] We and the Soviet Union didn’t meet each other halfway, and we and Russia aren’t going to do so either [...] Russia is either coming our way, or it’s not, in which case it’s going to founder, as the USSR did.¹⁰⁰

Further impassioned, Talbott suggested that the docking metaphor should be replaced with the idea that the U.S. is a “lighthouse” that gives Russia a path toward

Democratic elections, free press, pluralism, open markets, civil society, rule of law, independent judiciary, checks and balances, respect for minority rights, civilian control of the military. [...] make sure that the rickety, leaky, oversized, cannon-laden Good Ship Russia, with its stinking bilge, its erratic, autocratic captain, and its semi-mutinous crew...has a clearly visible point on the horizon to steer by.¹⁰¹

Strobe Talbott’s view that the U.S. should be the savior to Russia—and that Russia should happily accept the U.S. as its savior from autocracy—is undoubtedly tainted with hubris. These

⁹⁷ Untitled memo from Strobe Talbott to Warren Christopher, March 24, 1995, DS-OIPS, in Sarotte, “How to Enlarge NATO: The Debate inside the Clinton Administration, 1993-1995,” 36-37; Sarotte, *Not One Inch*, 226.

⁹⁸ Untitled memo from Strobe Talbott to Warren Christopher, March 24, 1995, DS-OIPS.

⁹⁹ Untitled memo from Strobe Talbott to Warren Christopher, March 24, 1995, DS-OIPS.

¹⁰⁰ Untitled memo from Strobe Talbott to Warren Christopher, March 24, 1995, DS-OIPS.

¹⁰¹ Untitled memo from Strobe Talbott to Warren Christopher, March 24, 1995, DS-OIPS.

excerpts clearly show the confidence and objectives that Talbott held in curating the NATO-Russia policy. It is unsure how Yeltsin would have reacted to such commentary—however condescending the words may be—as he saw himself as a democratic leader eschewing the Soviet past of Russia. In the context of NATO expansion, Yeltsin likely would not have been fond of such a statement as he was against expansion.

In the former briefing document to Clinton in 1996, Strobe Talbott examined that Russia wanted a “special role as a major power,” and the U.S. response should be that “We absolutely can’t and won’t... 1) let Russia into the NATO decision-making process; 2) subordinate NATO to any other organization.”¹⁰² Talbott also cited Primakov’s statement that “The Europeans won’t have it” if Russia tried to join NATO.¹⁰³ In response, Talbott wrote that Primakov is trying to probe the U.S. to admit Russia can never join, so the anti-Westerners can have a field day politically:

Never say never about anyone. No PFP state, including Russia, is precluded from someday entering NATO. If Russia knocks on the door, we should not throw a bolt of some kind and shout through the peep-hole, ‘Go away! You’ll never get in!’ Rather, our reply should be, ‘Take a number and a seat in the garden.’¹⁰⁴

This quote, of course, should come with a qualifier. It is ironic in the context of the no-response to Yeltsin’s petition in 1991 to NATO Headquarters, when Yeltsin did knock on the door of NATO at a time when he was not yet enveloped in a political cacophony with the anti-

¹⁰² Strobe Talbott Draft Memorandum, “NATO-Russia: A Framework for the Next Phase,” National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/32233-document-10-strobe-talbott-draft-memorandum-nato-russia-framework-next-phase>.

¹⁰³ Strobe Talbott Draft Memorandum, “NATO-Russia: A Framework for the Next Phase,” National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/32233-document-10-strobe-talbott-draft-memorandum-nato-russia-framework-next-phase>.

¹⁰⁴ Note from Sarotte: “But he [Talbott] added in italics [in a separate untitled note], *‘that said, Russia, if it did knock, would have to understand that it would not be entering anytime soon—and others would be passing it on the threshold’*” (Sarotte, *Not One Inch*, 259).

Westerners and invested in the Chechen War. One can only wonder what the course of history could have been in the 1990s in NATO-Russian relations if Talbott's idea was the public NATO response to Yeltsin in 1991.¹⁰⁵ Nonetheless, there are other important moments in Talbott's 1996 brief for Clinton. He was also frustrated with Primakov's remark that "There is one thing that will not change here—one thing that constitutes a real red line for us: if the infrastructure of NATO moves toward Russia, that will be unacceptable."¹⁰⁶ Talbott wrote that "the Russians have yet fully to define what they mean by infrastructure, but at least for openers, the term is troublesomely comprehensive [...] it's probably a showstopper, since it would render the new members operationally non-members."¹⁰⁷ Talbott also advised Clinton on his personal annoyance with Russian Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Georgiy Mamedov's comment that

We recognize that there can't be anything on the record saying that Ukraine can never be in NATO. I understand that theoretically, no one is banned. Internally, however, we would see Ukraine in NATO as a grave threat to our national security [...] NATO expansion could lead to a change in our own nuclear posture.

Talbott responded that "we should slam back hard" and that Clinton should tell Yeltsin:

Fine; we have no desire or intention to negotiate with you on what is rightly the subject only of negotiations between the Alliance and other sovereign states. Just don't think that your refusal to discuss the issue constitutes some sort of veto over the Baltics and Ukrainians having the right to enter the process—and don't let your refusal appear to be pressure on them.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁵ In 1991, George H.W. Bush was President of the United States, and Strobe Talbott had no Executive Branch role at that time.

¹⁰⁶ Strobe Talbott Draft Memorandum, "NATO-Russia: A Framework for the Next Phase," National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/32233-document-10-strobe-talbott-draft-memorandum-nato-russia-framework-next-phase>.

¹⁰⁷ Strobe Talbott Draft Memorandum, "NATO-Russia: A Framework for the Next Phase," National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/32233-document-10-strobe-talbott-draft-memorandum-nato-russia-framework-next-phase>.

¹⁰⁸ Strobe Talbott Draft Memorandum, "NATO-Russia: A Framework for the Next Phase," National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/32233-document-10-strobe-talbott-draft-memorandum-nato-russia-framework-next-phase>.

This slew of advice from Talbott demonstrates that Primakov and Mamedov's anti-Western influence on Yeltsin was legitimized and perceived by the Clinton Administration as a reason to move forward on enlargement, if not move faster.¹⁰⁹ Additionally, the case can be made that the Yeltsin team's negative dialogue also limited Russia's chances of bolstering a positive relationship with NATO after new Eastern European countries joined the Alliance, without a fundamental reset in Russia's approach to NATO.

Talbott also had to fend off critics of Clintonian strategy in the U.S. who sympathized with Yeltsin. George F. Kennan, a U.S. establishment diplomat during the Cold War and architect of the Cold War strategy of containment, witnessed these events unfold and criticized the Clinton Administration in a *New York Times* op-ed. Kennan wrote that Clinton was making "the most fateful error of American policy in the entire post-Cold War era" when the era had only begun, arguing that it "would inflame the nationalistic, anti-Western, and militaristic tendencies in Russian opinion" and "have an adverse effect on the development of Russian democracy."¹¹⁰ In a draft letter to Kennan, Talbott wanted to respond that

It would be the height of injustice and irony if these [Eastern European] countries were, in effect, to be punished—to be denied their aspirations—for the next fifty years because they had been, very much against the will of their people, part of the Warsaw Pact for the past fifty. That would be the ultimate in double jeopardy.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ Strobe Talbott was also Bill Clinton's roommate while both were Rhodes Scholars at Oxford.

¹¹⁰ George F. Kennan, "A Fateful Error," *The New York Times*, 5 February 1997.

¹¹¹ Draft Letter from Strobe Talbott to George Kennan, 9 February 1997, U.S. State Department, National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/32234-document-11-draft-letter-strobe-talbott-george-kennan>.

However, this statement needs slight correction, as Yeltsin—on the metaphorical game show of NATO jeopardy—was not playing “Double Jeopardy!” but rather “Final Jeopardy!” For Yeltsin, it was not the mere next 50 years but a permanent halt of NATO expansion into former Soviet regions that was a dream that would solve his deepest fears as diplomat-in-chief. NATO simply did not want to adhere to this request, as the norms of international law of sovereignty were once again being brought into question and tested in the final terms of the negotiations. The Clinton Administration stood firmly against Yeltsin’s strategy and negative dialogue and affirmed the open door policy of NATO.¹¹² Yeltsin was seeking to disavow, disrupt, and delay these norms on NATO. It must be made clear that Yeltsin made this decision not in response to U.S. rejection of Russian membership in NATO, but rather U.S. realism that Russia would not be first in line to join NATO. In effect, his end goal was contributing to another type of cold peace—and scholarship has not yet recognized this aspect of Yeltsin’s vision—a Europe where states without respected and recognized sovereign rights become sitting ducks for the taking if a neo-imperialist such as Vladimir Putin becomes President of Russia.

¹¹² In a 1994 memorandum, Strobe Talbott pressed for “extending to Russia full membership in P4P, and holding out to Russia the prospect for eventual membership in NATO, on the same basis as for other states emerging from Communism. Otherwise—that is, if we adopt a discriminatory or exclusionary approach to NATO/P4P—we’ll inadvertently vindicate xenophobic forces in Russia, and by the same token, discredit integrationist ones” (Strobe Talbott Memorandum to Warren Christopher, 5 December 1994, U.S. Department of State, National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/32628-doc-13-strobe-talbott-memo-warren-christopher>).

The Moment of Truth

*“Yeltsin points out [...] it seems that NATO was creeping up closer to Russia’s borders. The West was about to relapse into the thinking of military blocs prior to 1990. This was not acceptable [to Yeltsin].”*¹¹³

—Notes on May 9, 1995, Phone Call Conversation between German Chancellor Helmut Kohl and Yeltsin.

For Yeltsin, signing the NATO-Russia Founding Act would be a “forced step,” and expansion a “mistake” to which he had to mend the “negative consequences” for Russia.¹¹⁴ This was Yeltsin’s moment of truth and a revelation that his strategy with NATO was to try to stop NATO from approaching Russia’s borders with the limited bargaining power he had. This was revealed at a meeting with Clinton in Helsinki, Finland, before finalizing the terms of the Act.

At the beginning of the meeting, Clinton opened by reiterating the shared values between the U.S. and Russia: “Together we’ve made a great deal of progress, first of all, in dealing with the consequences of the Cold War” and that they are maintaining “our common goal of a secure and undivided Europe.”¹¹⁵ Yeltsin agreed, as he said, “It is important so that in the future we will not look back and say we returned to the Cold War days. Sliding backward is simply not

¹¹³ “The Chancellor’s [Helmut Kohl’s] Conversation with Russian President Yeltsin on 9 May 1995 in Moscow,” May 11, 1995, Wilson Center Digital Archive, BArch, B 136/59748, 204-207, Contributed, transcribed, and translated by Stephan Kieninger, <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/300227>.

¹¹⁴ “Subject: Morning Meeting with Russian President Yeltsin: NATO-Russia, START, ABM/TMD,” National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/32237-document-14-memorandum-conversation-clinton-yeltsin-summit-helsinki-finland-subject>.

¹¹⁵ “Subject: Morning Meeting with Russian President Yeltsin: NATO-Russia, START, ABM/TMD,” National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/32237-document-14-memorandum-conversation-clinton-yeltsin-summit-helsinki-finland-subject>.

acceptable.”¹¹⁶ Continuing, Yeltsin reflected, “In truth, we were both voted into office for a second term, until the year 2000. Neither of us will have a third term. We want to move into the twenty-first century with stability and tranquility.”¹¹⁷ Shortly after this, Yeltsin gave his NATO veto request to Clinton: “Decisions by NATO are not to be taken without taking into account the concerns or opinions of Russia.”¹¹⁸ Concerned about an armed Europe, Yeltsin said that “nuclear and conventional arms cannot move eastward into new members to the borders of Russia, thus creating a new *cordon sanitaire* aimed at Russia.”¹¹⁹ Trying to bargain for more, Yeltsin asserted that “But one thing is very important: enlargement should also not embrace the former Soviet republics. I cannot sign any agreement without such language. Especially Ukraine.”¹²⁰ He also said that “we closely followed [NATO Secretary General] Solana’s activities in Central Asia. They were not to our liking. He was pursuing an anti-Russian course.”¹²¹ Additionally, Yeltsin remarked in a way that did not recognize the inherent nature of the politics of empire after the fall of the Soviet Union. He told Clinton that:

We [Russia] have no territorial or hegemonic claims on them or any other country. [...] We have various plans with countries of the former Soviet Union

¹¹⁶ “Subject: Morning Meeting with Russian President Yeltsin: NATO-Russia, START, ABM/TMD,” National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/32237-document-14-memorandum-conversation-clinton-yeltsin-summit-helsinki-finland-subject>.

¹¹⁷ “Subject: Morning Meeting with Russian President Yeltsin: NATO-Russia, START, ABM/TMD,” National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/32237-document-14-memorandum-conversation-clinton-yeltsin-summit-helsinki-finland-subject>.

¹¹⁸ “Subject: Morning Meeting with Russian President Yeltsin: NATO-Russia, START, ABM/TMD,” National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/32237-document-14-memorandum-conversation-clinton-yeltsin-summit-helsinki-finland-subject>.

¹¹⁹ A refusal to cooperate with another entity, typically because it views the other as unacceptable.

¹²⁰ “Subject: Morning Meeting with Russian President Yeltsin: NATO-Russia, START, ABM/TMD,” National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/32237-document-14-memorandum-conversation-clinton-yeltsin-summit-helsinki-finland-subject>.

¹²¹ “Subject: Morning Meeting with Russian President Yeltsin: NATO-Russia, START, ABM/TMD,” National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/32237-document-14-memorandum-conversation-clinton-yeltsin-summit-helsinki-finland-subject>.

based on trust. [...] I propose that in the statement, we could accept the fact that Russia has no claims on other countries. In fact, regarding the countries of the former Soviet Union, let us have a verbal, gentlemen's agreement—we would not write it down in the statement—that no former Soviet republics would enter NATO. This gentlemen's agreement would not be made public.¹²²

Trying to strike an agreement on former Soviet republics illegally with Clinton—who cannot negotiate on behalf of NATO—was a last resort to pry a deal at the last minute. It was also an admission of the deep weakness of the Russian position in the negotiations on NATO. Clinton shut down the idea of a gentleman's agreement, responding to Yeltsin firmly:

If we were to agree that no members of the former Soviet Union could enter NATO, it would be a bad thing for our attempt to build a new NATO, but it would also be a bad thing for your attempt to build a new Russia. I am not naïve. [...] Consider what a terrible message it would be if we were to make the kind of supposedly secret deal you're suggesting. First of all, there are no secrets in this world. Second, the message would be, 'We're still organized against Russia—but there's a line across which we won't go.' In other words, instead of creating a new NATO that helps move toward an integrated, undivided Europe, we'd have a larger NATO waiting for Russia to do something bad. Here's why it is bad for Russia, what you are proposing. Russia would be saying, 'We have still got an empire, but it just can't reach as far West.'¹²³

Further explaining to Yeltsin why this strategy would not work, Clinton said it would ignite “fear” in the Baltics and that it would “undermine” NATO's Partnership for Peace and “terrify smaller countries” that are partners with Russia.¹²⁴ Yeltsin tried to convince Clinton again, in an elaborate explanation of Duma politics. Yeltsin explained that the Duma would likely put a

¹²² “Subject: Morning Meeting with Russian President Yeltsin: NATO-Russia, START, ABM/TMD,” National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/32237-document-14-memorandum-conversation-clinton-yeltsin-summit-helsinki-finland-subject>.

¹²³ “Subject: Morning Meeting with Russian President Yeltsin: NATO-Russia, START, ABM/TMD,” National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/32237-document-14-memorandum-conversation-clinton-yeltsin-summit-helsinki-finland-subject>.

¹²⁴ “Subject: Morning Meeting with Russian President Yeltsin: NATO-Russia, START, ABM/TMD,” National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/32237-document-14-memorandum-conversation-clinton-yeltsin-summit-helsinki-finland-subject>.

condition that if NATO welcomed one of the former Soviet republics it would consider the Act void. He said that it

Will happen if today you do not tell me one-on-one—without even our closest aides present—that you won't take new republics in the near future; I need to hear that. I understand that maybe in ten years or something, the situation might change, but not now. Maybe there will be a later evolution. But I need assurances from you that it will not happen in the *nearest* future.¹²⁵

Yeltsin's emphasis on 'not now, but maybe later,' should be considered a 'not now, and hopefully not later,' as other U.S. sources suggest his internal plans were to delay NATO expansion for as long as possible. Pushing Yeltsin back again, Clinton said, "If I went into a closet with you and told you that, the Congress would find out and pass a resolution invalidating the NATO-Russia charter. I'd rather frankly that the Duma pass a resolution conditioning its adherence on this point."¹²⁶ Clinton reiterated to Yeltsin that "It would violate the whole spirit of NATO."¹²⁷ Yeltsin, again, persisted in a moment of fragility and desperation. "Okay, then let us agree—one-on-one—that the former Soviet republics will not be in the first waves. Bill, please understand me, I am flying back to Russia with a very heavy burden on my shoulders. It will be difficult for me to go home and not seem to have accepted NATO enlargement [on conditions favorable to Yeltsin]. Very difficult."¹²⁸ Clinton had enough of Yeltsin's begging, and

¹²⁵ "Subject: Morning Meeting with Russian President Yeltsin: NATO-Russia, START, ABM/TMD," National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/32237-document-14-memorandum-conversation-clinton-yeltsin-summit-helsinki-finland-subject>.

¹²⁶ "Subject: Morning Meeting with Russian President Yeltsin: NATO-Russia, START, ABM/TMD," National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/32237-document-14-memorandum-conversation-clinton-yeltsin-summit-helsinki-finland-subject>.

¹²⁷ "Subject: Morning Meeting with Russian President Yeltsin: NATO-Russia, START, ABM/TMD," National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/32237-document-14-memorandum-conversation-clinton-yeltsin-summit-helsinki-finland-subject>.

¹²⁸ "Subject: Morning Meeting with Russian President Yeltsin: NATO-Russia, START, ABM/TMD," National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/32237-document-14-memorandum-conversation-clinton-yeltsin-summit-helsinki-finland-subject>.

responded, “Look, you’re forcing an issue that doesn’t need to drive a wedge between us [...] your suggestion is not the way to do it. I don’t want to do anything that makes it seem like the old Russia and the old NATO.”¹²⁹

Ultimately, Yeltsin’s strategy of engaging in a negative dialogue on expansion failed. The NATO-Russia Founding Act was finalized, with none of the strategic provisions on stopping NATO enlargement included. Rather, Yeltsin had to concede this strategy. Expansion aside, Yeltsin still did receive concessions, though these concessions could be argued to also be in the interests of the U.S. and other NATO members. For instance, the Act provided that NATO and Russia were to commit to cooperation “to prevent any possibility of returning to a Europe of division and confrontation, or the isolation of any state” and that NATO has “no intention, no plan and no reason to deploy nuclear weapons on the territory of new members, nor any need to change any aspect of NATO’s nuclear posture or nuclear policy—and do not foresee any future need to do so.”¹³⁰ Thus, the nuclear portion of NATO infrastructure was not to be placed into the lands of new NATO members post-1997.¹³¹ A year after the signing of the Act, Clinton was elated and thanked Yeltsin for his cooperation on NATO in a phone call in 1998, while Yeltsin conceded in response.¹³² NATO moved forward to expand after the signing of the Act and

¹²⁹ “Subject: Morning Meeting with Russian President Yeltsin: NATO-Russia, START, ABM/TMD,” National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/32237-document-14-memorandum-conversation-clinton-yeltsin-summit-helsinki-finland-subject>.

¹³⁰ NATO-Russia Founding Act of 1997, https://www.nato.int/cps/su/natohq/official_texts_25468.htm.

¹³¹ Alexander Russell “Sandy” Vershbow crafted this sentence in the NATO-Russia Founding Act; According to historian Andrew Felkay, the Act was “criticized” in the political West “for making too many concessions to Russia” because new members would be “second class” with “no nuclear weapons on their territory and no NATO troop build-ups” (Felkay, 165-166).

¹³² Clinton: “Boris, we are working with the stuff of history here. I am convinced that 20 years from now, when the Russian economy is booming, people will look back and say we were right; we did the right things. I just hope you get all the credit you deserve while you’re still around, because you have done a terrific job of leading your country during one of the two or three most

developed its organizational purpose post-Cold War. While NATO expansion was driven by U.S. strategy and Eastern European countries seeking NATO security, Yeltsin's inconsistent strategy and negative dialogue on NATO also contributed to Russia's approach to the Alliance. His rhetorical shifts complicated the ability to establish lasting norms for Russia-NATO cooperation. Though Yeltsin's leverage was limited, his choices still mattered in how he framed Russia's post-Cold War stance on NATO.¹³³

Conclusion

*"There's a lot of people out there who say, 'I told you so' [on NATO expansion]. But I do think that it was worth trying to cement this kind of partnership with Russia. At the same time, we had to be true to our own values and principles when it came to the fate of Central and East European countries, the fate of democracy in Europe, which would have no chance if Russia were to be granted a dominion over most of Europe."*¹³⁴

—Alexander Russell "Sandy" Vershbow in an oral history interview, 2025.

important moments in Russian history." Yeltsin: "You and I have an excellent relationship, Bill—more than just a friendship. It's what I would call co-leadership. We've had the fundamental convictions, the courage, and the stamina to abandon old stereotypes. [...] You know, Bill, people keep saying that we're losing confidence in each other, that our partnership is running aground. Let's make sure they know we're doing fine. With the policy you've pursued toward Russia these past five years, you really can't lose" (Memorandum of Conversation: [Conversation with] President Boris Yeltsin of Russia, Birmingham, England, May 17, 1998, The White House, William J. Clinton Presidential Library, National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/16838-document-12-memorandum-conversation>).

¹³³ Steven Pifer: "But looking back on the 1990s, I think NATO enlargement worked [...] So had NATO not enlarged, I still think because Putin is something of a neo-imperialist, that he would be trying to basically recover parts of the Russian Empire that were lost when the Soviet Union collapsed. And he would be doing it without having to face an enlarged NATO. You'd have a lot of countries—the Poles would be going batshit crazy right now" (William Ledesma, Oral History Interview of Steven Karl Pifer, 11 March 2025).

¹³⁴ William Ledesma, Oral History Interview of Alexander Russell "Sandy" Vershbow, 19 February 2025.

In seeking to strike a no-expansion deal with NATO in former Soviet regions, or secure a secret gentleman's agreement with Clinton, Yeltsin impaired both his short-term negotiating power and long-term strategy with Russia's integration into the political West. This research adds to post-Cold War NATO-Russia studies by revealing how the outcomes of negotiations between sovereign countries, both interior and exterior of the collective defense organization, were the results of not just the hegemonic negotiating power. In this case, NATO and the U.S. were the hegemonic parties to the non-binding (political rather than legal) agreement in 1997. Undoubtedly, their choices on expansion largely determined the outcomes and language of the Act. However, contrary to claims of present scholarship, they were not the sole factor. Yeltsin shaped the trajectory and Russian foreign policy stance on relations with NATO and European Security post-Soviet. His stance set a negative status quo dialogue on NATO post-Cold War, despite his weak bargaining power. His increasingly anti-NATO (and eventually anti-Western) rhetoric and reactive negotiation style to retain a sphere of influence in Europe—such as suggesting to section off former Soviet regions and exclude them from the possibility of joining NATO—came to legitimize a defining factor of NATO-Russian relations. So too his team's comments to wish to ban Ukraine from NATO membership. From Clinton's meetings with Yeltsin, the writing was on the wall of post-Cold War Russian strategy. But this does not mean deterioration was inevitable with NATO. This research also reveals that Yeltsin lost in long-term strategy by resorting to methods that disengaged with traditional principles of international law that respect the rights of sovereign states in his plan to integrate Russia into the political West. By engaging with NATO at a critical moment with the negative anti-Western language on NATO, he set the standard.

The declassifications also demonstrate that Yeltsin had competing interests with the anti-Westerners by 1996-1997. Because of this, Yeltsin hoped that a foreign policy victory in the Act that projected Russian power would save him from the claws of the anti-Westerners at home. In the end, Yeltsin became a vassal for the anti-Westerners, legitimizing the anti-Western policy platform on NATO. The inflated presidential power Yeltsin held was made easy for exploitation by the Russian opposition when Yeltsin's own reform movement was depleted due to economic conditions, along with the war in Chechnya. Though NATO caused a political defeat for the Russian anti-Westerners in the Act, it was not a wholesale defeat for Russia on the verbiage of the document. But it was—by Yeltsin's doing—the beginning of the end for Russia's opportunities to change their approach to NATO. As Strobe Talbott wrote, "One of the great questions of our time: is Russia on the road to eventual full integration with the West? Or is Russian imperialism just in remission?"¹³⁵ At a minimum, Yeltsin felt personally convinced that, by at least bending to the ideas of the Russian anti-Westerners regarding NATO, he had a better chance of staying in power. At a maximum, Yeltsin became convinced of the anti-Western platform on matters related to NATO because the information and advice he was receiving increasingly came from Russian anti-Westerners. Whether it was the minimum or the maximum, it can only be determined following potential Russian government declassifications in the future.

¹³⁵ Strobe Talbott Memorandum to Warren Christopher, 5 December 1994, U.S. Department of State, National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/32628-doc-13-strobe-talbott-memo-warren-christopher>.

Conclusion: Yeltsin's Belief that "Russia will Never Retrace its Steps"

*“My life’s work is done. Russia will never retrace its steps; it will keep moving into the future.”*¹

—President of Russia Boris Yeltsin.

The political history of Yeltsin’s presidency from July 10, 1991, to December 31, 1999, was filled with contradictory moments, but ultimately, it proved to be consequential for Russia. Although there are contradictions in the persona and politics of Yeltsin, it is important for future research on the Russian 1990s to ensure that the Yeltsin presidency is treated as decisions he made, rather than his inevitable path.² Yeltsin did know what he was doing in these critical moments. Although Yeltsin may have risen to challenges in crises *per se*, as previous scholars claim, this does not give credence to the solutions he chose.³ Yeltsin’s solutions in times of crises tended to focus on personal power and political legitimacy. He also exhibited much overconfidence in acting in an escalatory manner. He believed that by doing so, he could govern Russia effectively and protect Russia’s potential democratic future. However, the consistent reliance on this solution resulted in Yeltsin breaking free from his political platform, ruining the credibility of the Russian reform (‘democrat’) movement. As his terms progressed, he at times resembled the aspects of a stereotypical Russian tsar—as much as the political West wanted to

¹ Boris Yeltsin, “Statement by Boris Yeltsin,” President of Russia, 31 December 1999, <http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24080>.

² This is to oppose what political scientist Peter Rutland once remarked: “Yeltsin is a pivotal historical figure who knows not what he does” (Rutland, “The Boris Yeltsin of History,” *Demokratizatsiya* 6, no. 4 (1998): 701). Rather, he does know what he does; he just may have made the wrong decisions.

³ Wayne Merry’s March 1994 ‘The Long Telegram of the 1990s’ telegram declared that “Despite his occasional bouts of depression and isolation (traits shared by Lincoln, Churchill, and others), Yeltsin has shown again and again an ability to rise to the challenge in a crisis. (Unfortunately, it often takes a crisis to get him off the dime),” (Wayne Merry Dissent Channel Cable from American Embassy Moscow to Secretary of State, “Whose Russia is it Anyway? Toward a Policy of Benign Respect,” National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/32704-document-1-wayne-merry-dissent-channel-cable-american-embassy-moscow>.).

view him as an “imperfect democrat.”⁴ Yeltsin’s continued reliance on personal power also isolated him politically, exposing him to the Russian anti-Westerners. This vulnerability to the anti-Westerners deterred (and eventually ceased) his original goals of integrating Russia with the political West. This trend is seen in the negotiations leading up to the NATO-Russia Founding Act, as Yeltsin decided to not be interested in Russia’s integration with NATO alongside the Eastern European countries. Rather, he did not believe it was in Russia’s interest for NATO to expand in Europe and by 1996-1997, so too had he given up on Russia’s potential membership in NATO.

Although Yeltsin may have considered himself to be a genuine reformer—and the political West publicly followed this narrative at the time—the net effect of Yeltsin’s rule by 1999 was a Democracy In Name Only (DINO)—hailed by the West, but hollow within—ripe for an authoritarian restoration. Unfortunately, Yeltsin did not fulfill his life’s work of developing democracy in Russia and integrating Russia into the political West. On this count, new declassifications show that the political West had indicators that this would occur, but they chose to continue to back Yeltsin’s personal power as electoral alternatives seemed more bleak. Thus, there should be no narrative of Yeltsin ‘the democrat’ vs. Putin ‘the tyrant.’ Putin is still ‘the tyrant,’ but this does not make Yeltsin ‘the democrat.’ The Yeltsin-Putin narrative is much more connected. The beginnings of Putin’s Russia—both in the type of Russia Putin inherited and how he got the opportunity to inherit it—was Yeltsin’s own doing.

⁴ “Imperfect democrat” is Steven Pifer’s suggestion of an archetype for Yeltsin (William Ledesma, Oral History Interview of Steven Karl Pifer, 11 March 2025).

Epilogue: Yeltsin's Choice in Putin: "I am also sure that he is a democrat"

*“To the deification of those in power!”*¹

—Presidential advisor and architect of “sovereign democracy” Vladislav Surkov, toasting to Vladimir Putin during his first inauguration as President of Russia in 2000.

“Everything is bad, but Putin is perfect,” wrote the U.S. Embassy Moscow in a declassified 2001 cable regarding a report on Russian public opinion of Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin. In answering the question of “How Deep is Their Love?” for Putin, Embassy Moscow concluded that Putin “remains King” as a “Colossus in a Land of Midgets,” who has “successfully” created “his own cult of personality” in Russia. The document concluded that “this could go on for a long time.”² Indeed it has—a quarter of a century. But how did we get to Generation Putin?

On November 19, 1999, Clinton met with President Boris Yeltsin in Istanbul, Turkey.³ On the topic of Putin in the meeting, Clinton asked Yeltsin, “Who will win the election [in 2000]?” Yeltsin responded:

¹ William Ledesma, “Vladislav Surkov: The (In)visible Hand of Russian Politics and Culture,” *The UC Undergraduate Journal of Slavic and East/Central European Studies* 16 (2023-2024): 7-8. <https://www.international.ucla.edu/media/files/Ledesma.Final-paper-formatted-uu-ij4.pdf>.

² “Russians Still Rallying Around Putin—But How Deep is Their Love?,” U.S. Embassy Moscow Cable, 29 January 2001, U.S. Department of State, National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/31784-document-10-cable-us-embassy-moscow-secretary-state-russians-still-rallying-around>.

³ When Clinton brought up the matter of Chechnya to Yeltsin, Yeltsin oddly confessed to Clinton that “Let me tell you if this [conflict] were in Russia and there were but one camp, I would throw them all out and put the [Chechen] bandits in an electric chair.” Yeltsin spoke about the security of Europe. He sought to strike a security bargain with Clinton for all of Europe. Yeltsin said that “I will take Europe and provide them security. Well, not I. Russia will. [...] Bill, I’m serious. Give Europe to Europe itself. Europe never felt as close to Russia as it does now.” This awkward and unsettling interaction between Clinton and Yeltsin demonstrated not only Yeltsin’s comfortable nature in giving Clinton such suggestions about the security of Europe but also Yeltsin’s sense of entitlement to these suggestions (“Memorandum of Conversation - President Boris Yeltsin of Russia,” *Clinton Digital Library*, accessed March 1, 2025, <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/101582> [19 November 1999]).

Putin, of course. [...] He's a democrat, and he knows the West [...] He's tough. He has an internal ramrod. [...] I will do everything possible for him to win—legally, of course. And he will win.⁴

It is notable that Yeltsin considered Putin to be a democrat by his standards. Yeltsin also believed, in an unclarified regard, that Putin knows the West. By November 19, 1999, Yeltsin had already made up his mind on Putin as President of Russia and he sought to follow through with this plan.

Unexpectedly, Yeltsin shocked Russians and the world on the last day of the twentieth century. On December 31, 1999, through a TV set, Yeltsin spoke to the Russian people as he officially resigned as President of Russia on “the last day of the departing century” and selected Putin.⁵ Yeltsin then phoned Bill Clinton for the last time in the Kremlin. Yeltsin affirmed in the phone call that the early selection strategy of Putin to be an Acting President was to ensure Putin won the presidential election. Yeltsin told Clinton, “I want to support Putin 100 percent, and now I've given him three months, three months according to the constitution, to work as president, and people will get used to him for these three months.”⁶ Assuring Clinton that all would be well with Putin, Yeltsin evaluated, “I am also sure that he is a democrat,” and Putin's potential presidency “will be done without breaking away from democracy.”⁷ Alexander Vershbow

⁴ “Memorandum of Conversation - President Boris Yeltsin of Russia,” *Clinton Digital Library*, accessed March 1, 2025, <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/101582>. [19 November 1999].

⁵ Boris Yeltsin, “Statement by Boris Yeltsin,” President of Russia, 31 December 1999, <http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24080>.

⁶ “Memorandum of Telephone Conversation: Telcon with Russian President Boris Yeltsin,” December 31, 1999, The White House, William J. Clinton Presidential Library, National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/20594-national-security-archive-doc-08-memorandum>.

⁷ “Memorandum of Telephone Conversation: Telcon with Russian President Boris Yeltsin,” National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/20594-national-security-archive-doc-08-memorandum>.

suggested that Yeltsin's choice in Putin "was mainly to get immunity for himself and his family members on possible anti-corruption cases."⁸ Seeking personal power turned to seeking personal safety.

In the last two weeks of the campaign trail for Putin's election for president in 2000, the U.S. Embassy in Moscow summed up Putin's rise to power in a simple question-and-answer format: "Q - Why Putin? A - Chechnya."⁹ An anonymous source argued that "Putin was the right man at the right time."¹⁰ The Embassy typed that his approval rating was 74% and that "It wasn't until the bombings in Moscow and other cities that Putin had the opportunity to show leadership."¹¹ The document's analysis continued that 'Who Putin is' was "not the most important question to voters" as they see in Putin a "hope for the future, a future guided by a strong hand" to "make Russia strong again."¹² Putin also "declined to participate" in debates and mass advertising.¹³ Outside of Chechnya, Putin ran on a platform with the goal of addressing the

⁸ William Ledesma, Oral History Interview of Alexander Russell "Sandy" Vershbow, 19 February 2025.

⁹ Cable from U.S. Embassy Moscow to Secretary of State, "Pollsters on Putin's Popularity, Election," March 20, 2000, Sensitive But Unclassified, 7 pp., U.S. Department of State, National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/31776-document-2-cable-us-embassy-moscow-secretary-state-pollsters-putins-popularity>.

¹⁰ "Pollsters on Putin's Popularity, Election," National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/31776-document-2-cable-us-embassy-moscow-secretary-state-pollsters-putins-popularity>.

¹¹ "Pollsters on Putin's Popularity, Election," National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/31776-document-2-cable-us-embassy-moscow-secretary-state-pollsters-putins-popularity>.

¹² "Pollsters on Putin's Popularity, Election," National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/31776-document-2-cable-us-embassy-moscow-secretary-state-pollsters-putins-popularity>.

¹³ Cable from U.S. Embassy Moscow to Secretary of State, "Russia's Presidential Election -- Balancing Intrigue and Fear During the Campaign's Last Two Weeks," March 10, 2000, Confidential, 6 pp., U.S. Department of State, National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/31775-document-1-cable-us-embassy-moscow-secretary-state-russias-presidential-election>; Cable from U.S. Embassy Moscow to Secretary of State, "Putin's Economic Agenda: A Review of His Pre-Election Statements," March 23, 2000,

following: i) poverty in Russia, ii) oligarchs who tried to combine the state with their business “will no longer exist as a class,” and iii) the “principle of equality before the law, together with the need to battle crime and corruption.”¹⁴

Putin’s campaign style proved successful in 2000 upon his election, and the U.S. Embassy in Moscow noted that “This completed the first ever democratic transfer of presidential power in this country.”¹⁵ Embassy Moscow said that many believed “a Putin presidency would usher in an era of stability and predictability which, nevertheless, would not affect their lives significantly.”¹⁶ The embassy quoted local Russian leaders who “did not think that Putin would back away from the basic norms of democracy.”¹⁷ In the end, however, Russians were satisfied with Putin’s persona and his ability to connect with everyday Russians and be “just like us.”¹⁸ The embassy highlighted that “Putin’s ‘trust’ ratings are especially noteworthy” because they

Sensitive But Unclassified, 8 pp., U.S. Department of State, National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/31778-document-4-cable-us-embassy-moscow-secretary-state-putins-economic-agenda-review-his>.

¹⁴ Cable from U.S. Embassy Moscow to Secretary of State, “Round-up of Election Monitor Experiences (Part One) – Siberia/Far East,” April 13, 2000, Confidential, 11 pp., U.S. Department of State, National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/31782-document-8-cable-us-embassy-moscow-secretary-state-round-election-monitor>.

¹⁵ Cable from U.S. Embassy Moscow to Secretary of State, “Russian Presidential Elections – Reasonably Free and Fair,” March 28, 2000, Sensitive But Unclassified, 7 pp., U.S. Department of State, National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/31781-document-7-cable-us-embassy-moscow-secretary-state-russian-presidential-elections>.

¹⁶ “Russian Presidential Elections – Reasonably Free and Fair,” National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/31781-document-7-cable-us-embassy-moscow-secretary-state-russian-presidential-elections>.

¹⁷ “Round-up of Election Monitor Experiences (Part One) – Siberia/Far East,” National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/31782-document-8-cable-us-embassy-moscow-secretary-state-round-election-monitor>.

¹⁸ “Russians Still Rallying Around Putin–But How Deep is Their Love?,” National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/31784-document-10-cable-us-embassy-moscow-secretary-state-russians-still-rallying-around>.

were in “stark contrast” to Yeltsin’s ratings.¹⁹ This is because Russians in 2000—after a tumultuous decade—placed “a high premium on political stability and economic security. On that count, Putin and Co. are ready to deliver.”²⁰

The election of Putin buttressed fundamental changes in Russian governance and society. What Russians hoped for in 2000, and what Putin eventually sought in his five terms as president, however, were likely different things. Putin’s electoral popularity was grounded on the basis that he would cure Russia of the ills of the 1990s. Yeltsin introduced a fundamentally different president with different visions for Russia. Thus, the theory suggested by scholar Eugene Husky has much merit considering these declassifications: Putin was seen in 2000 (and is still seen) by Russians as the only “viable antidote” against the forces that would make Russians experience another decade like the 1990s.²¹ Yeltsin was the one who made it possible for Putin. The tragic irony of Yeltsin is that the democratic possibilities of Russia were abandoned in part because of him.

¹⁹ “Russians Still Rallying Around Putin—But How Deep is Their Love?,” National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/31784-document-10-cable-us-embassy-moscow-secretary-state-russians-still-rallying-around>.

²⁰ “Russians Still Rallying Around Putin—But How Deep is Their Love?,” National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/31784-document-10-cable-us-embassy-moscow-secretary-state-russians-still-rallying-around>.

²¹ Eugene Huskey, “Explaining Putin’s Staying Power: The Yeltsin Era as Legitimizing Bogeyman,” *Nationalities Papers* 50, no. 3 (2022): 616.



Figure Fourteen²²

“Development In Russia After The Soviet Union;” Gorbachev, Yeltsin, and Putin.

²² Wilfred Hildonen, “Development in Russia After The Soviet Union,” Fineartamerica, uploaded 12 September 2024, <https://fineartamerica.com/featured/development-in-russia-after-the-soviet-union-wilfred-hildonen.html>.

Appendix One

Alexander Russell “Sandy” Vershbow Oral History Interview



Figure Fifteen¹

Born July 3, 1952, in Boston, Massachusetts. Graduated from Yale University with a B.A. in Russian and East European Studies (1974) and an M.A. from Columbia University in International Relations and Certificate of the Russian Institute (1976). A Career in Foreign Service: Political-Military Officer at the U.S. State Department Bureau of Politico-Military Affairs (1977-1979), Delegation to SALT II Negotiations, Consular Officer and political officer at the U.S. Embassy Moscow (1979-1981), Deputy Director for Multilateral and Security

¹ NATO, Portrait of the Deputy NATO Secretary General Alexander Vershbow, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/photos_85012.htm.

Affairs, U.S. State Department Office of Soviet Union Affairs (1981-1985), Deputy Political Counselor, U.S. Embassy London (1985-1988), Director of the U.S. State Department's Office of Soviet Union Affairs (1988-1991), U.S. Deputy Permanent Representative to NATO and Chargé d'affaires [Acting] of the U.S. Mission (1991-1993), Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for European and Canadian Affairs at the U.S. Department of State (1993-1994), Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for Europe Affairs at the U.S. National Security Council (1994-1997), Delegation to START Negotiations, Delegation to the Helsinki Summit in 1997, Negotiated the NATO-Russia Founding Act of 1997, U.S. Ambassador to NATO (1997-2001), U.S. Ambassador to Russia (2001-2005), U.S. Ambassador to South Korea (2005-2008), Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs at the U.S. Department of Defense (2009-2012), and Deputy Secretary General of NATO (2012-2016).

This oral history interview was conducted, transcribed, and edited by William Ledesma on February 19, 2025, for his undergraduate honors thesis in the Department of History at Vanderbilt University, "Boris Yeltsin's Russia: Constitutional Conflicts, NATO, and the Dawn of Putin."

Ledesma: Let's begin by learning more about your early career and what drew you to the U.S. Foreign Service. So my first question is: Why did you want to join the U.S. Foreign Service early in your career after studying at Yale and Columbia?

Vershbow: I actually got interested in Russia and the Russian language when I was in high school. My school, now called Buckingham Browne and Nichols—then it was just called

Browne and Nichols in Cambridge, Massachusetts—was one of the few private secondary schools that offered Russian, along with other languages that nobody studies anymore, like German and Latin. And I went to the Soviet Union as part of a student group between my junior and senior years of high school, which led me to put Russian studies as my likely major [on my college applications]. And I actually went through with that. So, one thing followed another. When I was finishing my master's degree at Columbia, I didn't know all that much about the [U.S.] Foreign Service or what the opportunities were, but I decided I was more interested in government service than going into the business world or journalism, for that matter. And I took the [U.S. Foreign Service] exam, and the rest is history. I was fortunate enough to have taken some courses on Russian history, Russian politics, arms control, and defense issues at Columbia. When I got into the Foreign Service through the normal examination process, I managed to wangle my first assignment working in the Politico-Military Affairs Bureau at the State Department. And that led me to work on the INF dual-track decision and the SALT II negotiations. So I was pretty lucky for a freshman Foreign Service Officer to do some very interesting geopolitically challenging issues during my first assignment. I went to Moscow after that as a consular officer, which is standard practice in the Foreign Service. And that was from 1977 to 1979. The second assignment was from 1979 to 1981 in Moscow. That kind of cemented my interest in being part of the 'Russian mafia' within the [U.S.] Foreign Service.² And the work on the INF dual-track decision also got me deeply involved in NATO issues at an early age. And those [NATO and Russia] have been the two main pillars of my career ever since.

² 'Russian Mafia' is a colloquial term for people in the U.S. Foreign Service who work on matters related to Russia.

Ledesma: Were there any important lessons or values that you learned before you became a diplomat that you would say guided your judgment throughout your career?

Vershbow: There were a lot of influences in those days, but I think I would say it helped me understand better the contradictions in the Soviet Union for dealing with Russia. The fact that we shouldn't treat the Russian people as automatons, as creatures of the system, but they were people 'with their own'—in other words—they were generally well-educated people with their own appreciation of their own history, also no illusions about their own history. I think that the opportunity to get to know at least some genuine Russians, university students, and junior diplomats, was a bit of an eye-opener. It made me understand that some of the cliches used about the Soviet Union as an 'Upper Volta with missiles,' had a certain truth to it. Sophisticated, well-educated country, but totally backward and inefficient, and they knew that their system was heading towards disintegration if they didn't do something about it.

I was director of the Soviet Affairs Office in the State Department from 1988 to 1991. I got to understand that, in those days, there were Russians who were trying to take advantage of the opening from Gorbachev to reform the country, to transform it. I think that stuck with me even as I passed through all these horrible crises, the invasion of Ukraine [in 2014], when I was at NATO, and the full-scale invasion [of Ukraine in 2022], that there still might be a better Russia in the future. But at least for the foreseeable future, Vladimir Putin isn't going to let that happen if he can stop it. And now he has additional help from Donald Trump, it seems.

Ledesma: When we talk about Russia post-Cold War, what was the experience like when it did transition into Russia instead of the Soviet Union?

Vershbow: In the early 1980s, I was lucky enough to be assigned to the U.S. Embassy in London at the time when Gorbachev had risen to power after the instantaneous deaths of Andropov and Chernenko. And so the U.K. was a center of attention in particular because Thatcher was—at least—styled herself as the first person to fully recognize Gorbachev’s potential to be a very different kind of leader. So that was an exciting period. I did a lot of public speaking on a panel with a young Russian diplomat from the Russian embassy talking about *perestroika* and *glasnost* and how they really are seeking to become a part of the West. That led to me being assigned as the Director of Soviet Affairs at the State Department from 1988 to 1991. So Gorbachev struggled to change the system, even as it was unraveling and corruption was breaking out all over. But he was a genuine, sincere reformer, and there were many other people that we worked with who really gave off the appearance of being genuine reformers. That was quite a fascinating period when we saw the Lithuanians exit the Soviet Union a year before the whole Soviet Union disintegrated. And we were kind of flying by the seat of our pants. We knew that it was only going to succeed if the Russian people were kept on board. I think Gorbachev and Yeltsin did, but not well enough to forestall the return of the dark forces from the security services who had been the losers in the *coup* against Gorbachev [in 1991], which was literally the day in between my leaving Washington and going to Brussels to be the Deputy Chief of Mission at NATO. The *coup* plotters turned out to be the winners 10 years later, even though we still hoped that Yeltsin was the continuation of Gorbachev’s reforms. But it was not to be.

Ledesma: You then moved on to the National Security Council (NSC) in the 1990s. You led a six-person team about Europe, the EU, NATO, and OSCE. What was it like being on that team? And what were the National Security Council policies toward Russia while you were there?

Vershbow: I was the Senior Director for Europe, which was defined in those days as Western Europe and [Southern Europe]—but the former Yugoslavia was a part of my portfolio [as well]. There was a separate directorate for Russia, Ukraine, and Eurasia. Nick Burns was the senior director at the beginning of my time, and Steve Pifer for most of my time over at the NSC. So, I still had NATO and the former Yugoslavia. Steve had Russia, Ukraine, and the other former Soviet Republics. Dan Fried had Central and Eastern Europe including the Baltic States, so it's complicated. But we were all good friends, and we literally shared a balcony in the old executive office building where we could conspire during lunchtime. We were all secondees from the State Department. The NSC was smaller in those days and they didn't have any independent source of funding to pay salaries. So they tried to get people from other agencies for two or three-year tours. The State Department, I think, set a three-year limit, so you couldn't plan on staying longer than the full three-year term. But in any case, we had worked together in different roles in previous years. And we had people that we were working for: Tony Lake, Sandy Berger, the State Department, Strobe Talbott, and some of the people working on Holbrooke's team. So, it was a very collegial group. There was a little bit of a competition, particularly in the formative days of NATO enlargement policy, where there was a more zealous approach to NATO enlargement coming out of the NSC: Tony Lake in particular, me, Steve Pifer, and Dan Fried. But the bureaucratic competition was fairly civilized in those days. And we had the wind at our backs because Clinton was absolutely determined to go forward with NATO enlargement. Based on this timeline that we had worked out, this famous moving toward NATO expansion memo, pushing forward but not too fast to kind of keep the Russians on board, maintain this two-track approach of a NATO-Russia partnership and an expanding NATO Alliance, which seemed like it was working out pretty well for many years, up until the Bucharest NATO Summit in 2008. I

was in different roles by that time [U.S. Ambassador to South Korea]. But I think it was a mistake to push the open door for Ukraine and Georgia prematurely at Bucharest and without a compensating strategy for keeping the Russians on board the way we had successfully done in 1997.

Ledesma: That's a very interesting point. To go into the later 1990s, you were at NATO from 1997 to 2001 as U.S. Ambassador to NATO. A lot of the scholarship talks about NATO as an organization finding its purpose post-Cold War during this period. But is there more to the picture of NATO in the late 1990s?

Vershbow: Yes, that was a continuing process. And going back actually to the George H.W. Bush administration, when the administration began to debate the pros and cons of NATO enlargement. It only kind of went into—I wouldn't say hyperdrive—but a more accelerated approach after Clinton came into office, but also because the geopolitical situation was evolving fast. And what might have been sufficient earlier—Partnership for Peace (P4P) and some sort of very evolutionary approach to membership—was increasingly a political non-starter for some [NATO] Allies and the candidates [for NATO membership] themselves.

Ledesma: Did you share the same sentiments as others at the time that Russia did not pose a threat in the 1990s and that you saw it as a peaceful and cooperative partner? I will also go back to an email that you sent to Anthony Lake on July 15, 1994, titled "NATO expansion," where you said, "At the end of the day, Russia is not going to qualify for NATO membership."³ Was

³ Email from Alexander R. Vershbow to W. Anthony Lake, "NATO Expansion," 15 July 1994, 12:11pm, DS-OIPS; Sarotte, *Not One Inch*, 191.

that a view that you held consistently throughout the 1990s? And what did Russian membership in NATO mean to you at that time?

Vershbow: First of all, the basic question. Yes, I did share the sentiment held by other officials that Russia did not pose—I would put some kind of qualifier there—a serious threat or significant threat, but it obviously had a residual military capability despite the unilateral disarmament that took place on both sides (which allowed us to, I think, go not only far, but maybe too far, in terms of NATO unilateral disarmament). I think we didn't see Russia posing as a significant threat in the 1990s. Russia still had the potential, as we were often warned by some of the Russian leaders, that there were more unhealthy forces still uncomfortable with Russia becoming an ally of the West rather than maintaining a superpower rivalry for the future. And that's why we [said Russia was not a threat], in our little short two-to-three page strategy piece, which would repeatedly update as these different events unfolded. We did kind of treat the residual Russian threat as something that needed to be met with some kind of prudent hedge against the breakdown of the cooperative, and hopefully, less military competition, that would characterize the overall relationship. But this was, I think, genuinely seen as, intellectually, we didn't want to pretend that Russians were literally no longer a threat and never would be again. But at the same time, we didn't want to convey to Yeltsin the sense that we were doubtful of his prospects. I think that's why we were able to square the circle on some of these military issues in the negotiation of the Founding Act—the “three no's,” the substantial combat forces (SCF) commitment—in which we were responsive enough to the Russian concerns. We were able to move forward and Yeltsin seemed, most of the time, happy about it, because he was a genuine reformer like Gorbachev, maybe not as intellectually refined, of course he had his drinking problems, but he was sincere about Russia being part of the West, but I think he already knew in

his waning years as even before I was Ambassador, Putin was already in place, that there were still competing [political] forces that he had to manage. He wasn't as much of a boss as he needed to be. And Putin and the other *siloviki* (силовики)⁴ took advantage of that.

Ledesma: When we talk about NATO expansion into Eastern Europe in the 1990s, importantly, you were an advocate for Eastern European members (having full Article 5 and then being committed to interoperability), specifically, the Visegrad expansion group throughout the entire decade. You later wrote that the Clinton administration pretty much followed your plan almost exactly that you authored at that time [when the Visegrad countries joined in 1999]. And for the Founding Act [in 1997], which you also assisted in making in its final form, how would you describe the Clinton Administration's approach? Was it, as Clinton said, "We're asking them [Russia] to eat NATO expansion with a smile by signing the act?" Or would you say that's not necessarily how you would phrase it?

Vershbow: Yes. I saw you quoting that irreverent description of our brilliant strategic game plan, but certainly myself and the people who formed the NSC team, "the Troika," which helped shepherd this policy [on the Founding Act] forward. Particularly, I was involved as 'the guy who'd served at NATO and knew NATO know-how,' you could solve thorny conceptual and political problems through clever phraseology that has a deliberate element of ambiguity but can address the most acute security needs of both sides. So, I was quite convinced that this could truly be a transformational process. When we designed the NATO-Russia Founding Act and the Permanent Joint Council, and the provisions going into those various documents, I, for one, and I think a lot of the people across the government—at both DoD and State—were sincere that this

⁴ A Russian political term often translated as the "men of power," people who work for a state security organization and are authorized to use force against citizens or others.

was an opportunity to irreversibly transform the NATO-Russia relationship. There were skeptics who felt that we had to make sure that we weren't limiting ourselves militarily to such a degree that it would make it harder to carry out a collective defense mission if things went bad, and if there was a conventional attack. And that there were ways to maintain sufficient capability and deterrence credibility while continuing to scale down on both sides of the military confrontation. Looking back, there were a lot of success stories. I'll just point to the fact that we had Russians both helping with the Contact Group that helped broker the Dayton Accords. Then we managed to get Russian troops under a U.S. command, under a very clever command and control system. But to have Russian troops basically as part of a NATO operation was quite an achievement. Even after Kosovo, where there was obviously a lot more rancor over the action without UN Security Council authorization, which I think sowed the seeds of increasing suspicions later on. But even with that, we were able to get the Russians to join KFOR (Kosovo Force) just as they had joined IFOR (Implementation Force), later renamed as SFOR (Stabilization Force). Some of the things that we did together on nonproliferation, on even discussions of missile defense cooperation were, I think, meaningful ways that we were trying to put some substance into this NATO-Russia partnership. Maybe we didn't do enough. Maybe there was a little too much caution, too much prudent hedging that characterized the overall strategy. But I think the Russians missed a lot of opportunities too, but there were a lot of opportunities missed during that period. I think it was going pretty well until George W. Bush got too over-eager on Ukraine and Georgia, but that's another story. We'll get to that.

Ledesma: When you were at NATO Headquarters discussing the specific clauses that ended up going into the Founding Act, you wrote on a napkin that "The member States of NATO reiterate that they have no intention, no plan, and no reason to deploy nuclear weapons on the territory of

new members, nor any need to change any aspect of NATO's nuclear posture or nuclear policy—and do not foresee any future need to do so.” When you were writing this with your colleagues, what were the intentions and the thoughts that were being discussed? Was it a moment where you had this epiphany and started writing it down all at once, or was it a conversation between everyone who was at the table?

Vershbow: I didn't literally plunk it down, but it was the result of the fact that during this period when we were shuttling back and forth between different places, we sometimes went to Moscow, sometimes we met them in a third country, I think in Helsinki once. But as we were going through that, repeated complaints surfaced from the Russians regarding both security concerns and also the PR/political concerns about NATO having forces with the capacity to reinforce and carry out a collective defense mission. It was a way of signaling mistrust, which critics could interpret as duplicity or hypocrisy on the part of NATO. But at the same time, we had the people from the joint staff and some of the folks at the Office of the Secretary of Defense, and even some of the old NATO hands at the State Department, who were very concerned about doing anything that would be seen as compromising NATO's ability to carry out its collective defense mission in an extreme situation. And then the same applied to what we do about the NATO nuclear sharing program. Can we somehow grandfather in what's already there without any changes or reductions in capabilities, but assure the Russians that the footprint of NATO nukes isn't going to change at all after enlargement? Always with the hedge at the beginning of the sentence “in the current and foreseeable security environment...”

Having already served at NATO as the Deputy for Mission, I negotiated a lot of communiques and papers that became NATO policy papers. I was toying with some of these ideas in my head. And during this lunch where [NATO Secretary General Javier] Solana was appealing to Strobe

Talbott to come up with something that could be sold to both the Russians and to the U.S. interagency. And so I scribbled a first version of this, which was remarkably similar to the final version, which I scribbled on the paper napkin. Talbott read it, and he handed the napkin to John Kornblum, who scowled because he's always a little resentful that the NSC had any role in diplomacy. But they fireproofed the text—I think Ambassador [to NATO] Robert E. Hunter came into the room at some point—to make sure there weren't some flaws or loopholes in the language. When they all gave their consent, Talbott showed it to Solana, who loved it, and it was run through the NATO policy mill. A few weeks later, it was seemingly out of nowhere that a one-paragraph press statement was released by NATO headquarters, which is as you read it. And the sentence did hold. We were still wrestling with that during the first invasion of Ukraine when NATO was moving to introduce some additional forces. Part of these advanced forward presence battle groups that were decided initially in, I think it was 2016. And the Russians said, but what about this: What about that there won't be substantial combat forces?

It was complex, this is also a negotiating record in the CFE negotiations, as well as in NATO-Russia's conversations, where we eventually convinced the Russians that the troops that we were deploying as part of the enhanced forward presence were not large enough to represent substantial combat forces. It's a little more complicated than that, but the text proved to have staying power. Even today, some people say that the Founding Act is still in effect because of this interpretation, which actually grew out of Russian positions on new member countries in the CFE negotiations (a maximum of one brigade per country). We were a little over that limit in Poland, but the Russians stopped arguing that it was a violation. But now, of course, [with the full-scale invasion of Ukraine], everything's a violation.

Ledesma: My next question is about the “flying squad” and your experience on it to try to ignite diplomacy with the Yeltsin delegation. Do you have any specific stories about the flying squad that you would like to share in your meetings with the Russians? And then additionally, what lessons in diplomacy did you learn from the flying squad?

Vershbow: Yes, there are probably plenty more colorful anecdotes about it in Strobe’s and Albright’s writings, and I’m not sure whether Madeleine Albright spoke much about it. But it was Strobe Talbott, who was the architect of the “flying squad” and this highly paced shuttle diplomacy that we developed, and it’s touching base with major allies in between sessions with Russians or in between sessions with Solana, it worked very effectively as an efficient and rapid process for getting agreement on compromise formulations for a lot of the key parts of the Founding Act. So, it led to personal bonding.

One of the most memorable events for me was a dinner that Foreign Minister [Yevgeny] Primakov hosted in his apartment just for Albright, Talbott, me, and maybe one or two other people. It led to some really candid discussions on what the Russians were desperately seeking on these issues, like the “three no’s” and the SCF [substantial combat forces] to kind of blunt the criticisms that they knew they would be getting from some of the harder liners in Moscow if they agreed to that. And I think that sort of personal touch made a big difference.

The high point of my own personal role was when we were nearing the end of the negotiation and Solana had several unresolved issues with the Russians, and there were still some different views in Washington. I was sent on a secret mission to hide out in the embassy to serve as a go-between with Primakov and Solana, who were staying across town in a hotel but pretending that I wasn’t there. We even had a car accident with the Ambassador’s Cadillac, trying to sneak over

through the back door of the foreign ministry, but we were not discovered. Some allies picked up the rumors that I was in town. I was picked for this role because, as chairman of interagency meetings, I had a lot of experience in bridging disagreements between DoD and State. And so, again, Solana appreciated the help, high-level kibitzing.

Ledesma: If you don't mind sharing, do you know what you and Primakov discussed at that time?

Vershbow: We mainly discussed the final wording of the provisions on substantial combat forces (SCF). Some of the discussion was about Yeltsin's difficulties in dealing with differing viewpoints in Moscow, exaggerating for effect how much Yeltsin was in a dangerous position and squeezed by the reformers on the one hand and the hardliners on the other. I think they were trying to convince us that they weren't "acting." But I think that [meeting] helped forge a personal relationship with Primakov that may have gotten us through the Kosovo crisis two years later.

Ledesma: When you wrote the very famous "sentence from hell" (SFH) in 1997 on the non-stationing of substantial combat forces (SCF), you wrote in your recent article that you suggested that "defense and deterrence could be carried out via reinforcement rather than permanent stationing," which is the reasoning for the sentence from hell. If you can explain further what made you confident that the "sentence from hell" suggestion would work as official NATO policy, which it came to be, and also if there was any more thinking behind it just that deterrence could be carried out via reinforcement.

Vershbow: It was a reflection of reality, which is: if you push the people at the Pentagon, can you, or can you not, carry out [NATO's mission], in the kind of scenarios that are likely in the

next 5, 10, 15 years, even if the Russians turn against the West? Would a reinforcement strategy have been sufficient to defend the territory of NATO at that time, without a need for permanently stationed NATO combat forces? And they [the Pentagon] couldn't give a good argument *why not*. So, that's why we were shopping around this paragraph that was written on a napkin, which we began to type up after that. We were building on the honest assessment that the skeptics were providing us, and they agreed that we had squared the circle on this one, and that you're always protected at the end of the day by the opening phrase about "in the current and foreseeable security environment." And nobody pushed at the time for a definition of what substantial combat forces meant in terms of battalions or brigades. There was a sense NATO would organize itself differently on different fronts, so there wasn't any single force size that would [qualify as a substantial combat force]. The language itself was flexible enough that it could be adopted without undue risk by NATO defense planners.

Ledesma: If you can speak about this, I would like to ask about the two metaphors that I thought were notable in the 1990s that display different perspectives on the U.S.-Russia-NATO relationship. The first one was in the "docking" metaphor with Al Gore specifically talking to Yeltsin, where he told him—as if two space stations were docking together at the same time—that we have to prioritize a multi-approach with U.S.-NATO-Russia relations: have an expansion of NATO, but it will be slow and gradual, and it will be also following the U.S.-Russian bilateral relationship. And then the competing metaphor—if it is a competing metaphor—is Talbott's "Lighthouse" metaphor, where he wrote that he disagreed with Al Gore, saying that the approach is not a "Docking" metaphor, but rather, we should be an example, a role model, a "lighthouse," for Russia that should be followed. So, what did these two metaphors mean to you, and did you

know about these two metaphors? Did you know that they were different at the time when they were brought up?

Vershbow: To be honest, I didn't have all that much involvement in conversations involving these things. What's interesting is that there was—because of the way that the State Department was organized—a channel to the Russians involving different people than people talking about the NATO issue. So I was working more on the NATO issues, particularly in the “flying squad” engagement. I was dealing much more with the NATO issues, with Solana, with allies. And while Talbott was involved on both the NATO and the Russian side, his staff support was more from the Russia team. So, I heard about some of these conversations after the fact. I wasn't entirely clear at the time what to make of them. But I think what bothered me was that the “docking” metaphor reflected a three-track approach. We were convinced that it was best to treat NATO and Russia as two-tracks. U.S.-Russia [bilateral] is implicit in NATO-Russia. In any case, these didn't go very far beyond these early conversations. But I think, again, the main concern that I had was that it was just conceptually inconsistent with the two-track approach that was reflected in that famous two-page paper and other papers at the time.

Ledesma: That's a great clarification. And so my next question is, you brought up [NATO] Allies. Just to briefly go over this. I know German Chancellor Helmut Kohl was very proactive in talking to Yeltsin throughout the 1990s. The U.K. was also very much concerned with Russia's democratic transition at that time and invested in it. So what were the Allies' perspectives? If you can, draw a map between the most engaged with Russia versus the least engaged, and the most pro-enlargement versus not pro-enlargement?

Vershbow: Yes, a little hard to remember. But I think first of all, there was broad support, broad enthusiasm on the part of the Allies for the methodical approach that the U.S. was taking. Going back to the NATO Enlargement Study, kind of ensuring a step-by-step organization of the building blocks of the wider policy involving both military measures and political, the idea of an institutionalized partnership with Russia as the companion to the slowly expanding NATO. So, the most avidly interested in being involved and giving advice, which was usually helpful advice, were the Brits, French, and Germans. The famous quad was still a go-to mechanism, but Talbott would also stop off, either himself or with Albright, in London, in Paris—it was still Bonn then—and just keep everybody informed and on board. It was not a contentious process. It was a sense that we had come up with a practical, balanced approach. And I was very keen to share in some of the glory when it was finally completed.

I remember traveling with Tony Lake on a different mission, getting the Allies' and the Russians' endorsement of Clinton's 1995 Bosnian peace initiative that ultimately led to Holbrooke and the Dayton Accords. I convinced Lake early on that it was going to be a piece of cake to sell this to the [NATO] Allies when we did our final shuttle to get their 'Okay' before the start of the actual initiative. Lake was skeptical. He didn't always trust the Allies, particularly the French, to be straight shooters. But he did acknowledge [after] that it went so smoothly that it was a piece of cake. That was a different issue, but it was part of bringing the Russians on board. Andrei Kozyrev was still the Russian foreign minister at the time. We did sort of convince the Russians that even though they weren't playing a central role with [President of Serbia and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia] Slobodan Milošević and some of the Bosnian parties, they kind of got a high visibility treatment at Dayton and in the aftermath of Dayton, which I think was also smart handling of the Russians at the time.

Ledesma: When I was watching the 2024 Stanford [Robert G. Wesson] Lecture with Michael McFaul and Vladimir Kara-Murza, Vladimir Kara-Murza talked about the absence of a reply by NATO to Yeltsin's December 20, 1991, telegram asking that Russia be considered to join NATO. Kara-Murza said that this was an item that questioned the post-Cold War relationship with NATO, with Russia taking its first step [to integration with the West and NATO]. I know you weren't the U.S. Ambassador to NATO at that moment in time, but if you knew of this, did the U.S. respond to Yeltsin in another fashion to this official letter, or was it left on read as it said in *The New York Times*?

Vershbow: Yes. Actually, I was the acting ambassador at the time [to NATO] because I was the Deputy Chief of Mission. The actual ambassador, Reginald Bartholomew, got pulled out to assume a senior Washington position when Clinton won the election. So, during the interregnum between the two administrations, I was the *Chargé d'affaires*. But it's one of my favorite anecdotes, of course. How this happened was that this was a few days after the *coup* [against Gorbachev] in Moscow. We were having a meeting for the North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC), which NATO had established earlier in 1991 as a NATO-plus forum, including the Russians, former Warsaw Pact countries, European neutrals, and the Balkan states. At the first foreign ministers level meeting of NACC—as it was called—the Soviet Union was represented by their Ambassador to Belgium, Nikolai Afanasyevsky. And at the end of the meeting, when Manfred Wörner, the Secretary General [of NATO at that time], was trying to get everybody's consent to a short press statement, Afanasyevsky raised his hand and said, "I cannot approve the paper because my country just ceased to exist." A few minutes later, [NATO Secretary General Manfred] Wörner said, "I have just received a telegram from Boris Yeltsin saying that Russia wants to be considered for membership in NATO."

I think it was a serious signal, even if it was cooked up on the fly. I think it scared some of the people who wanted to move at a very glacial, gradual pace of enlargement when the issue began to get serious consideration. But I think nobody expected that the loose ball that was thrown into the midst of this meeting was going to be answered at the time. But people didn't forget it. But, of course, we also didn't see Yeltsin quite as gung-ho in the weeks after that. So, people didn't feel it necessitated a formal response, but maybe we should have done so. Anyway, Gorbachev handed it off to Yeltsin soon thereafter. I think the echoes of Yeltsin's message were reflected in the decision after Putin had taken over in 1999 to expand the NATO-Russia partnership to sign this paper called "NATO-Russia Relations: A New Quality," signed in Rome in 2002. That was during a short period after 9/11 when Putin was actually considering the idea of seeking formal membership in NATO. I think he pulled back from that before ever proposing anything concrete because it would have meant Russia being on the same level as Albania or other countries, whereas Putin believed it was important that Russia have a special higher status.

Ledesma: Now, to clarify Russian policy. I know you worked on mostly NATO and Europe, but if possible, I'll ask some questions about your interpretations of Yeltsin, his foreign policy priorities, and the foreign ministers. So just for starters, what was Yeltsin's personality like diplomatically?

Vershbow: I didn't spend too much time in the actual meetings with him. There was informal chatting outside the conference room. He was always very jovial, and particularly when Bill Clinton was there, they really had a back-slapping relationship. I don't think Yeltsin thought he was being patronized, although some people thought there was a little element of that. But as I said earlier, I considered him at the time a sincere Westernizer in the Russian historical perspective. He did see working with NATO as an opportunity to gain some kind of greater

prestige for Russia even when it's a little bit down and out and fallen on hard times, so in some of the declassified memos and records of conversations there was an element sometimes of a play a plaintive element, with language such as 'Strobe or Bill you need to help me help me here,' even warning, things such as 'there are people who actually want to take back Crimea so you have to help us avoid the letting these people gain greater influence.' But I didn't actually attend too many meetings, and by the time I was ambassador, Yeltsin was not accessible. He was already out on retirement and not in great health.

Ledesma: How would you describe your communications with Primakov or Kozyrev? Some scholarship discusses how Primakov steps in, and suddenly there is a more nationalist undertone to Russia's foreign policy. Would you agree that you felt that there was a switch from reformer to more nationalist Russian policy from Kozyrev to Primakov, or not? And then additionally, do you think the switch was a net negative, net positive, or neutral outcome for U.S. and Russian relations?

Vershbow: Yes. It was definitely a shift and it was both Primakov's own views being much more conservative and traditionalist, also reflecting the shifting balance of power within the elites, which we only had a dim understanding of [at the time], but it's what we would pick up from other Russians who had personal relations even if they didn't get direct access. So it was definitely a shift and reflected broader changes. But at the same time, Primakov still was an obedient, loyal servant of Yeltsin, despite Yeltsin's drinking and health problems.

As I experienced in this NATO-Russia Founding Act negotiation, Primakov was a pragmatist who understood that Yeltsin wanted this to get done because he didn't want Russia to be perceived as on the outside looking in when the dust settled. So he sought a few refinements in

the text, including the stuff in the “sentence from hell,” the only additions related to defining what peacekeeping operations are (operations either under the UN or the OSCE) and maybe one or two other word changes, something to do with nuclear storage sites, something else was spelled out beyond the first draft. So he had this kind of diplomatic know-how but also understood the political imperative to get this done, and he did. Even on the Kosovo crisis, where he had the famous embarrassing situation of having to turn his plane around on the way to Washington when the bombing of Belgrade began, the timing of that could have been improved perhaps. But even after that, despite the furor that was erupting inside the Russian military, Primakov still worked with Albright, with Talbott, to get things back on track, which led to the inclusion of Russian forces in KFOR. Even after the chaos of the Pristina airport caper when the Russians sent their troops into Pristina. We put everything back in its place relatively quickly, and Primakov was helpful in that regard.

Ledesma: Do you think Yeltsin believed in Russian membership in NATO during the negotiations of the Founding Act, or did you think that he saw an alternative where Russia should be in NATO, but none of the Eastern European countries should be in NATO? Ie, it would be more of a great power organization. From your view, what was his perspective on how he envisioned NATO post-1999?

Vershbow: I think by that time, we had been discussing it already for two or three years, moving towards the year of decision in 1997 for the first invitations. I think by that time, he was accepting and maybe comfortable with the idea that Russia would be in a different category. It would be part of this Permanent Joint Council, but it was not going to be on the same membership track as lesser countries. And I think also he knew that was probably the best he was going to get. Despite his good friend, Bill Clinton, he wasn't going to get much more than that.

So I think he was realistic. As I said, he was comfortable with it because I think he saw it would give Russia a new means to influence NATO debates and be a participant in a range of European security activities, and that the Founding Act spells out a long list of projects and areas for strategic cooperation. So, I don't think he felt he was getting some kind of consolation prize. There are others who may have. And so, in the debate, we did argue that way, particularly more recently, but at least through the enlargement process, and that goes into Putin's first term. The Russians didn't like NATO enlargement, but they were not sort of hostile. And the second round of enlargement in 2004, when I was in Moscow as Ambassador [to Russia], went through remarkably smoothly. Putin was still in his pragmatic mode. Bucharest was the big turning point in that regard. Bucharest plus the aftershocks of the Orange Revolution, and the sense that the U.S. was to peel off strategically important neighbors, not letting Russia put them into its sphere of influence.

Ledesma: Because in the declassified documents, Yeltsin would say, for instance, that the NATO-Russia Founding Act was a "forced" step for Russia and that he's going to have to recuperate from the consequences of the Act. There's this narrative that he was a reformer: he wanted Russia to be integrated with the West. But then he also has this other side which is saying that he doesn't see where Russia's place is in it, and any negotiations with NATO are ultimately antagonistic to Russia's security interests. He had two sorts of narratives going on. I wanted to ask, was he kind of playing into the more conservative roles or conservative thought later in the 1990s because of the power structures changing within this cabinet, or would you say he still held on to a hope of an integrated Russia?

Vershbow: It's honestly hard to say. He was pragmatic, at least at the time, when we were negotiating. That was in 1996 and 1997. He was comfortable accepting this two-track formula,

and they were not revisiting the issue of Russian NATO membership. The issue of Ukraine came up when Talbott tried to convince Yeltsin that he didn't want to bar the door for Ukraine because that would mean that Russia is forever barred as well. Yeltsin, at that time, at least—before the end of the Founding Act negotiations—seemed to accept that it was better for Russia to be a potential candidate down the road than to deny Ukraine even the possibility, putting its own long-term prospects in doubt. Now, by the time of Kosovo in 1999, other factors in NATO's behavior may have soured him a little bit more on this partnership than back in 1997. But I didn't hear much of that. I was the ambassador to NATO at that time, so I wasn't going to Moscow too frequently. But I read the reporting cables and talked to people who had been seeing some of these people firsthand. I think that the basic idea of the two-track approach was still acceptable to the Russians at the time. We saw very little problem either with the ABM treaty withdrawal or with the second round of NATO enlargement, the “Big Bang,” the seven new members who legally entered in 2004. Putin was fairly blasé about the whole thing.

Ledesma: Now I want to talk about missing history, things that you saw firsthand that you want to make sure that scholarship does recognize, or if it has not even mentioned it at all, about the U.S. and NATO-Russia relationship or the U.S.-Russian relationship. Were there events or meetings that you think should be further discussed or studied? What would you like future scholars to dive into in this period?

Vershbow: Yes. We've covered most of what I was most directly involved in. In terms of people: Steve Pifer. He was the main Russia expert on the “flying squad,” my co-conspirator at the NSC, along with Dan Fried. And he did a lot of the Gore-Chernomyrdin meetings. So, he may have other impressions from some of the more senior Russians from that time. Of course, he was a later ambassador to Ukraine, but that's a different story.

In terms of the only other Russian person that I recall playing a strong role, because I've dealt with him in different capacities, Sergey Kislyak, who, I think he's still alive, a lot of these Russians are on their last legs, but, he kind of went into a semi-retirement, with a seat in the upper house of parliament in the Federation Council. Back in the time of the Founding Act negotiations, he was Director of the Department of Security Affairs and Disarmament at the Russian Foreign Ministry and later became Deputy Foreign Minister—a job now held by Alexander Grushko—but he also was ambassador to NATO [and Belgium] right after the signing of the Founding Act. During Kosovo, he may have some interesting impressions if he's still available. But I think that those are the names that come to mind.

Ledesma: Now, I want to ask more about reflective questions, looking back from the 1990s to today. So first, what do the 1990s and the Yeltsin presidency mean to you now, whether that be the U.S. relationship with NATO, the U.S. relationship with Russia, or just the contrast between Yeltsin and Putin because, you know, of course, you were both a diplomat and now you are witnessing everything now. What does it mean to you?

Vershbow: Even though it's pretty dark times right now in relation to the Russians, I thought that the policies and strategies that we pursued at that time were very sound in terms of managing to deal with inherently contradictory issues and requirements that somehow show the value of persistent and creative diplomacy in trying to better understand the Russians' concerns and perspectives and to find ways to bridge the gap on even the fundamental issues of principle. And I think, as I said before, it produced some fairly significant achievements, not necessarily earth-shattering, but particularly the peacekeeping in the Balkans, working together on arms control, on missile defense, which was not quite a breakthrough. It could have been quite a game changer, but I think the Russians were more interested in slowing down our programs than

integrating missile defense interceptors and radars, but it could have been quite a remarkable thing. But everything did change. While there were many different factors, as I mentioned in the chapter [“Present at the Transformation: An Insider’s Reflection on NATO Enlargement, NATO-Russia Relations, and Where We Go from Here” in *Open Door: NATO and Euro-Atlantic Security After the Cold War*] a lot of different factors, including the Iraq War, and the ABM Treaty decision, I think there was still potential for the relationship to kind of help both sides navigate through difficult issues. But the Bucharest Summit made that much, much more difficult. And as much as we tried, I think that Putin just gave up on having a strategic partnership with the West. I think Putin concluded that he could have more influence by being a spoiler and a troublemaker than by being a partner. And we’re still in that situation.

Ledesma: If you know, I was curious because I always think about this the whole time I’ve been writing my thesis, but why do you think Yeltsin chose Putin as Prime Minister in 1999?

Vershbow: I think it was mainly to get immunity for himself and his family members on possible anti-corruption cases. I think that was, at least, a significant driver. I also think he saw that the forces that were out on the streets to save Gorbachev from the *coup* in 1991 had now faded in influence, and many of the *coup* plotters had been rehabilitated in the years after 1991 or gained positions of influence. So I think Putin was in part forced to take a harder anti-Western line by some of these recidivists. But we may never know for sure which factor is more important. But I think the immunity one may have been the clincher.

Ledesma: That’s a very notable point. My next question is, if you were going to go back in time, if you could, and talk to your former self while you were at the NSC or when you were ambassador to NATO, what advice would you have given to your former self?

Vershbow: [Laughs jokingly] [I'm doing] Absolutely perfect. Yes, I think I would say we should have worked a little bit harder than we did. It's not only our fault. The Russians missed opportunities, too. But I think it's always been the case in negotiations, particularly over security issues and arms control. The Russians aren't great conceptualizers, but if you come up with good ideas or a package of proposals, the Russians can respond constructively. So I think we should have tried harder, even if the Russians were playing hard to get on some issues, we should have tried harder to come up with additional projects for NATO and Russia to do together and to actually have a test run of literal joint decision-making, which was at the end of the day, a crucial issue for the Russians, that we could never fully satisfy. We always talked about how 'you get a voice, not a veto.' They hated it. It was prudent, but they hated it. And I think if we had—I come back to missile defense—one of the last big issues I worked on at the Pentagon and for a little while as Deputy Secretary General at NATO, if we'd really worked even harder than we did—and we worked pretty hard on strategy for linking the two countries' missile defense systems—that could have been a significant game changer, one that could have held the relationship together when other crises erupted, such as Libya, which was very damaging. It was at the time that Putin was about to come back into the presidency, that also kind of was one of the nails in the coffin of U.S.-Russia cooperation and NATO-Russia cooperation, which we might have been able to avoid.

Ledesma: My next question is that scholars are now claiming that it's a mistake that the U.S. and the political West continuously supported Yeltsin's personal power as president without amplifying greater democratic forces in Russia. This is also echoed in Wayne Merry's 'long telegram of the 1990s,' just recently declassified. And so I wanted to ask you, what is your

opinion on that claim, and more broadly, the U.S. effort to try to support general democratic forces?

Vershbow: I think a lot was done on that score, both in the 1990s and during the time I was Ambassador [to Russia] when we were still trying to build a civil society in Russia and encouraging the development of NGOs without being overly intrusive in their internal affairs. It's a delicate situation. So, it reached a point where I was seen as kind of a troublemaker because I was promoting civil society and giving lots of speeches to universities and things like that, calling for a Partnership based not only on common interests but common values. That led me to lose some access to some of the top leadership as a result of that. So, I think we consciously pulled back from that in the second and third terms of Putin. Maybe we've historically always overestimated our ability to influence internal developments in Russia, in general. But I think we tried, and I think [George W.] Bush, his heart wasn't quite as much in it, but he did persist and the White House did give me and the Embassy cover to continue to promote civil society initiatives. But by the time Putin was coming back for his second term, they were increasingly neuralgic about so-called "CIA fronts" trying to impose universal values on Russia. So, I'm not sure which approach was smarter, but in the end, no strategy has been particularly effective. I think we have to wait for Putin and some of his other like-minded people like [Nikolai] Patrushev and [Sergei] Naryshkin to depart the scene.

Ledesma: My other question is going back to the "sentence from hell." Do you think that it was a success for NATO? Would you have preferred if it wasn't dubbed the "sentence from hell," or if you think its nickname was fitting for the time? Because it obviously changed the dynamics of NATO and how it approached expansion, at least until today. So what is your take on the contributions of the sentence to NATO?

Vershbow: I think it was Strobe Talbott who called it the “sentence from hell.” I think it worked out pretty well. I think it continued to show its utility later on when Russia annexed Crimea, and we were scrambling to strengthen NATO’s defense and deterrence posture with an enhanced forward presence, which has now grown from battalion to brigade level in some parts of the Eastern flank. So I think it provided a solution to a thorny problem that got us through good and bad weather. Even some of the more ambitious proposals to beef up NATO forces on the Eastern flank, which have been undertaken, including leading up to the Washington summit last year, proved to be non-controversial because we could all continue to package them as an extension of the Founding Act provision. To the point that, as I said, some people say it’s still in effect despite the change in the current strategic environment.

Ledesma: Another thing that’s often talked about is that, just in general, the narrative that NATO expansion triggered a revanchist Russia. And it’s very common in our political dialogue, and it’s often voiced now in the American context, now that the negotiations have just started off, especially on the news. So why do you think it has held such a strong place in the dialogue outside of the fact that Russia has been promoting this narrative to Americans? And how can you discuss this claim with Americans who may be trying to decipher: did NATO trigger a revanchist Russia or did it not?

Vershbow: Yes, that’s probably a debate that will never be fully resolved. I mean, clearly there are people who oppose NATO enlargement, going back to the very beginning. Luminaries such as George Kennan and Thomas Friedman. There’s a lot of people out there who say, ‘I told you so.’ But I do think that it was worth trying to cement this kind of partnership with Russia. At the same time, we had to be true to our own values and principles when it came to the fate of Central

and East European countries, the fate of democracy in Europe, which would have no chance if Russia were to be granted dominion over most of Europe.

So, I don't think it was the wrong choice, but we could have handled the issue of Ukraine and Georgia more gradually and by applying some of the lessons of the early phase of NATO enlargement to those particularly thorny cases in terms of having a Russia strategy in 1997. But now, particularly with the simplistic reading of the history by Donald Trump, everybody is going to be parroting Putin's talking points for some time to come. But I will continue to stand by the wisdom of at least trying to achieve what may be achievable someday when more civilized leaders return to power in Russia. Still, tools that should not be completely removed from our toolkit.

Ledesma: Before you received your post as U.S. Ambassador to Russia, what were your views of Putin, and did your views change, or were they vindicated upon the job?

Vershbow: By the time he was appointed by Yeltsin as a successor, there were increasingly suspicious views of Putin based on some of his early moves: bringing back the Soviet national anthem and the Kursk [nuclear submarine] sinking [in 2000]. We'd hoped that Yeltsin was telling the truth that he'd picked Putin because Putin would take good care of Yeltsin's legacy and that Putin would take good care of Russia. I think one reason I got the job of Ambassador to Russia—I was chosen by Albright and Talbott before the change of administration—but Colin Powell reaffirmed my job offer, was because Strobe Talbott said to me, "We think you're the right guy. With Putin, we need more tough love," rather than warmth and good feelings. And he thought I was a purveyor of tough love based on how I had dealt with the Russians over the years. But clearly we still believed for several years that even though Putin obviously had a

dubious background as an intelligence officer, he had bought into the pragmatic approach to working with the West, even integrating into Western institutions. And that we could, while keeping our eyes open, still do business with Putin, on strategic issues, with counterterrorism, of course, having shot to the top of the list [after 9/11].

So it was how he reacted to the events in Ukraine that caused the scales to begin to fall from my eyes, and I think to a lot of people it was clear that dominating the near abroad, the former Soviet space, was clearly the overarching priority for Putin. And that's what we saw in the violence that ensued during the Orange Revolution, which led to the election of [Ukrainian President] Yushchenko, but it also eventually led to the election of [Ukrainian President] Yanukovich. I think Putin still thought he could manage the threat that the West posed to Russia's grip on the near abroad, but the Maidan Revolution, which I would say was triggered more by Putin's interference in Ukraine. If he had let them go ahead with their EU referendum, he might not have lost control of the situation. But Putin's obsession with controlling Ukraine, controlling the near abroad, was too strong, and I think we didn't realize that would lead him to completely overturn the whole of the international order to try to defeat the West. That's where we still are.

Ledesma: I have a pretty niche question: because I did a former research project on Vladislav Surkov, who was deputy chief of staff to Putin while you were ambassador to Russia, I was very curious, were you familiar or knowledgeable about him at that time? And if so, what were your impressions of Surkov?

Vershbow: I didn't know much about him beforehand, but I was told that he was one of the most influential advisors of Yeltsin worth getting to know. I invited him over for a drink. That was the one time he came to meet with me, like in my first six months as Ambassador. Surkov was a

very mysterious guy nobody quite knew. Was he married? Did he have a family? Who were his allies? But he clearly came out of the Khodorkovsky mafia. We have good relations with Khodorkovsky. We helped him build up his civil society programs, which, of course, were seen as a provocation by Putin. But after that, Surkov met a few times with Tom Graham, who was on the NSC and would come over to see a few people who wanted to keep their contacts with the U.S. invisible. It was fairly informative for a while, as a kind of source of what Putin was really thinking. But I never got to really know him well enough to say much about his talents. Obviously he became the curator of some of the projects to reestablish dominion over Ukraine. And the Surkov leaks, which I think are considered genuine.

Ledesma: Yes. And he's the architect of the sovereign democracy program, which is not a democracy. It's convincing the Russian public that they are living in a democracy, but rather making fake political parties. That's a really interesting note about Surkov.

I also wanted to ask about you being Deputy Secretary General to NATO. I believe you were the first American as Dep-Sec. In your opinion, did having an American as Deputy at that time impact the direction of NATO that otherwise couldn't have been possible?

Vershbow: I wouldn't go that far. I mean, no one person can be so pivotal. And it's ultimately an alter ego job, to some degree with the Secretary General, filling in as running the council and meeting with visiting ministers and such. I was able to use the job perhaps just because of my experience at NATO, both as a Deputy Chief of Mission and as an Ambassador, and also as a student of Russian affairs to be a valuable extra pair of hands for both Rasmussen and Stoltenberg, who were the Secretary Generals when I was there.

Having access to the U.S. information space, diplomatic reporting, and intelligence reporting gave me an extra value—without being able to share that information—that wasn't my prerogative—but to give more informed recommendations to the Secretary General, particularly after the 2014 invasion of Crimea. I think it was a good time in history to have experienced American diplomats and Russia specialists. I did get a lot of awards and other things, honorifics from all the different Allies, particularly the eastern ones, for my handling of the alliance during that time. I was succeeded by Rose Gottemoeller, also an American, but not a NATO hand as such, but she did well, particularly advising Stoltenberg on how to deal with Trump in his first term. Now a North Macedonian woman is the Deputy Secretary General, which I found a little surprising, but she seems pretty sharp from what I read on the website.

Ledesma: When Crimea was invaded by Russia in 2014, what happened in your circle? What was the thought process? What was the scramble? What were the conversations like?

Vershbow: Well, the first few days after the invasion, many countries were in denial. The information flowed very sporadically. Lessons were learned that NATO had to do a better job in sharing intelligence. The U.S., in particular, had to do better in sharing intelligence with the Allies. So it was useful for me to have that window into the U.S. intelligence channels and reporting as well as being plugged into Savvy East European diplomats on the North Atlantic Council to figure out what's going on and how should NATO deal with it both in the short term in terms of denunciations and sanctions and all that, but also starting the methodical approach of rebuilding NATO's deterrence capabilities starting with the 2014 summit in Wales, but then with a series of summits all the way up to the one that just happened in Washington last year [in 2024].

Given my experience dealing with the Russians, I was the channel for Ambassador Grushko while he was still there, kind of reinforcing the clarity of NATO's warnings and messages and at the same time working with different Allies individually and small groups to kind of make sure that everybody's perspective was being listened to and shaped the force march that NATO had to carry out to restore deterrence and maintain the unity of the alliance in the face of Russian—both aggression and disinformation—which was already a major challenge, even back in 2014.

Ledesma: What were the throughlines and common themes in NATO strategy concerning Russia during your job as Deputy Secretary General?

Vershbow: Oh, that's a long list. It was obviously the review of our overall military strategy and deterrence and defense doctrine and force posture, which I was deeply involved in. I was, as Deputy Secretary General, responsible for promoting more intra-alliance defense cooperation. We were calling it "smart defense" in those days. I was Smart Defense Coordinator, but also even as we kind of focused on going back to basics on deterrence, there were a lot of other areas where NATO needed to up its game, such as its strategy towards its southern neighborhood, where we developed a defense capacity building initiative, developing closer political ties with the East Asian partners, as well as some of the closer Middle Eastern partners.

I was also involved in NATO-EU cooperation. I would work with my counterparts at the EU to promote closer defense collaboration, joint exercises on crisis management, and things like that. We kept the overall NATO enlargement process moving forward, putting us in a good position when Sweden and Finland had their epiphany. And we were able to, having developed close military interoperability and political cooperation with those countries, to get them into NATO very quickly.

I traveled many times to Kyiv [Ukraine]. Early on, I went to Moscow, but I mainly talked with the ambassador in Brussels. Anyway, there are dozens of other issues that I worked on. I was responsible for no single issue, except for the smart defense and some of the Ukraine issues, but kind of had to be on top of every issue that might be on the table on a given day when the Secretary General was traveling or just was overwhelmed.

Ledesma: I remember reading in a NATO source that Jen Stoltenberg talked in a public forum that Putin sent NATO a message or document before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 that all he was requesting was that all of NATO be rolled back to 1997 levels (Founding Act levels), which can be interpreted as the war was primarily a war to stop NATO expansion. What is your input and thoughts on that? Is Putin's war all about NATO and NATO expansion?

Vershbow: Well, the short answer to that is no. That's what Putin says, and he's now picking up on the fact that Donald Trump seems to be buying into that as well. NATO expansion may have been an irritant, but I think that there are many other reasons why the Russians turned against cooperation with NATO and why they invaded Ukraine. The invasion of Ukraine is about controlling Ukraine. If they were so worried about NATO expansion, they would have done something to impede Finland and Sweden from joining. And if anything, they've reduced their forces on the Western flank of Russia. So a lot of what they say about NATO enlargement is just rhetoric to try to throw other countries off the scent.

Regarding demands to roll back NATO forces to where they were in 1997, that was the subject of these draft treaties that Russia provided, one to NATO, and one to the U.S., in the last months of 2021. The two treaties would have led NATO to accept that it needed to roll back all forces deployed east of the line as of 1997, picking up on the year of the signing of the Founding Act.

And that was leaked immediately to the press. It was clearly a PR move, but it does reflect Russia's effort to distort the reasons why it decided to invade Ukraine.

Ledesma: My last question. Since you've very much worked on an expansive timeline in U.S.-Russian-NATO relations from the Soviet Union to the fall of the Soviet Union, to the expansion of NATO, and then to the Russian invasion of Crimea, you cover a really important and pivotal point in history. So, what advice do you have to say to future diplomats for advice in the Russian dialogue or the NATO dialogue? Because now, it's up for question how much the United States is going to be involved in NATO. So, I would really like to hear your thoughts, recommendations, and hopefully inspirations as well.

Vershbow: The kind of cooperation that I think we should have with Russia may not be easy when you have political leaders in Washington who basically want to be like Russia and become part of the axis of authoritarians. So, let's hope that things aren't as bad as they appear in today's headlines. But I do think that my experience over these many decades is that it's important to have a dialogue with Russia, but also to engage in dialogue with absolutely clear eyes as to the nature of the regime, the fact that both expansionism and political repression are two sides of one coin, and that Russia is what it is, and it may take generations for it to kind of return to a path of the kind we saw in the late 1980s and the 1990s in terms of seeking cooperation and integration with the West. But, that still should be held out as the long-term goal, but one that requires changes in Russian behavior and real respect for the sovereignty of neighboring countries and that with the firmness, we may be able to get back onto a path of working with the Russians. In the meantime, we shouldn't write off the next generation of Russian citizens, who will ultimately determine the fate of their country. There's not much we can do to help them these days. But cutting the budget for agencies like the State Department or USAID is kind of cutting off the

potential tools for working with the Russians and becoming a more constructive player in the international community. When I was Ambassador [to Russia], they [Russia] began the process of progressively cutting back on all cooperation with USAID, saying, ‘Russia is a big power, we don’t need help, thank you very much.’ This led to declines in maternal health and spiking AIDS and other threats just because they’re too proud to accept help. But the time may come when they’re looking to rejoin the international community, and we should be ready for that, ready for a new generation, maybe the one after next, that may be capable of a real partnership again.

Ledesma: Thank you. This has been a really amazing and insightful storytelling interview. I’ve learned a lot. And we got to talk about a lot of clarifications and also your own role in the process of the NATO-Russia Founding Act, among other things as well. So once again, I want to thank you for interviewing.

Appendix Two

Steven Karl Pifer Oral History Interview



Figure Sixteen¹

Born in 1953. Graduated from Stanford University with a B.A. in Economics (1976). A Career in Foreign Service: U.S. Department of State, 1978-2004, U.S. Embassy Warsaw (1978-1980), delegation to negotiations on intermediate-range nuclear forces in Geneva (1982-1983), U.S. Embassy Moscow (1986-1988), U.S. Embassy London (1990-1993), Special Assistant to the Ambassador-at-Large for the New Independent States - U.S. Department of State (August 1993 - December 1994), U.S. National Security Council Director for Ukraine and security issues

¹ The Brookings Institution, Portrait of Steven Pifer, <https://www.brookings.edu/people/steven-pifer/>.

(December 1994 - July 1995), U.S. National Security Council Director for Russia (July 1995 - July 1996), U.S. National Security Council Senior Director for Russia, Ukraine, and Eurasia (July 1996 - August 1997), U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine (January 1998 - October 2000), Deputy Assistant Secretary of State in the Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs, with responsibility for Russia and Ukraine (2001-2004).

This oral history interview was conducted, transcribed, and edited by William Ledesma on March 11, 2025, for his undergraduate honors thesis in the Department of History at Vanderbilt University, “Boris Yeltsin’s Russia: Constitutional Conflicts, NATO, and the Dawn of Putin.”

Ledesma: First, I’d like to discuss your early career. What drew you to the U.S. Foreign Service roughly two years after graduating from Stanford? Did you know that you wanted to work on Russian matters or European matters early on in your career?

Pifer: Early on at Stanford, I decided I would like to do public service. I was not quite sure exactly what. However, I spent my winter and spring quarters of my sophomore year at Stanford in Germany and came back thinking I’d like to do a career that involved the opportunity to live and work overseas. Stanford had a three-quarter series on arms control. The last one of which was literally a quarter-long 11-week simulation of an arms control negotiation. I got very interested in that. When I put the Venn diagram together, it pointed towards the Foreign Service. There was a guest talk, probably in my junior year, about the Foreign Service that got me interested in that. So, I took the written exam in my senior year in December, failed the oral exam, and then took it again the second time and passed. Europe was an area of interest, and

arms control was of interest as well. It was when I got to the Soviet Union—my assignment there was in the 1980s—it was not because I was fascinated by Russian literature or the Russian language but because there was a specific slot in the embassy for somebody to do arms control; an arms control watcher.

As I had previously spent probably about eight or nine months at the negotiations on intermediate-range nuclear forces in Geneva, I had spent time working for Ambassador Paul Nitze and came to the conclusion that having that experience in Moscow would be a good one.

Ledesma: Do you think early on in your career you had lessons, principles, or judgments you had that guided your decision-making in your career, and maybe inspirations you had early in your career?

Pifer: Yes, three. One was to keep in mind the objective. What's the goal? What are you trying to accomplish? That then frames what you're trying to do. And I think sometimes on projects, people lose sight of the objective, and that's when things go awry. Second, try to be honest. Actually, that's one thing I came to respect about the U.S. government. The great lengths that the U.S. Government would go to avoid telling a lie. Sometimes you see these very complicated responses [by the U.S. Government] to very complex questions. There was an effort without trying to reveal the full truth, but not having to lie. Because once you've done that, you erode confidence as a negotiating partner. And, at the end of the day, you're probably not going to have a successful negotiation unless the other side feels it got something, too. So, what are the win-win type solutions?

Ledesma: You were working in, I believe, the U.S. Embassy in London at the time when the Soviet Union collapsed. What was the change in posture for the U.S. and the U.K., in your view, on Europe and Russia after the Soviet Union fell?

Pifer: What I saw in Europe—the British were probably ahead of us in foreseeing the collapse of the Soviet Union. I remember at one point meeting the [U.K.] head of the Soviet desk, and he shared with me the conclusions of a paper they just sent across the street to Number 10,² where they were basically saying that the Soviet Union is going down and that we need to think about what our posture is. And it struck me because it seemed to be maybe four or five months ahead of where I think Washington thinking was. But the big issues that we and the British dealt with—one of the things that it was enjoyable about working at the Embassy in London—is we probably talked to the British about a wider variety of questions than anybody else. A lot of it is their experience of empire and the Commonwealth, so they have global experience. Sometimes I thought it was [a dynamic of] trying ideas out on them because we would have them politely tell us it was a bad idea before we unleashed it on the world.

It was a very cooperative relationship. I had responsibility at the time as the deputy head of the Political Section, but I also had responsibility for the former Soviet Union and Eastern and Southern Europe. The trick issue we had with the British was Yugoslavia, which was the collapse of Yugoslavia. And I think somewhat of a British frustration was that the American attitude was that ‘that’s one for Europe to manage,’ which probably reflected the fact that at the time you had Brent Scowcroft was the National Security Adviser for [U.S. President] George H.W. Bush and Larry Eagleburger, who was the Deputy Secretary of State. Both of those people

² Reference to 10 Downing Street, the official office and residence of the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom.

had served in Yugoslavia. I think they had some inkling of how messy it can be. I remember a British diplomat complaining, they said, 'the [U.K.] foreign secretary was always very unhappy when he went to Washington. As soon as he said Yugoslavia, the first thing out of the Americans' mouth was, we're sure glad that you Europeans have that under control.' So it's managing that sort of break.

I think that we and the British looked at Russia and were trying to figure out: what's Russia going to be like post-Soviet? How do you begin to approach that? But they also took a very similar approach as the United States [with Russia].

The British were talking about, right off the bat [after the collapse of the Soviet Union], that they also wanted to have a diplomatic presence in Ukraine. Also, Azerbaijan—they liked it because of the energy interest. And the Baltic States, and also, they were talking about being placed fairly quickly in four or five different of the new independent states. They were actually quite impressed by what the State Department did. I still watched it from afar in London and was impressed. U.S. Secretary of State James Baker decided in December of 1991 that we would have embassies in all of the countries. We, for reasons of history, did not consider the Baltic States part of the new independent states (the United States never recognized their incorporation into the Soviet Union), but Baker decided we would have a diplomatic presence in each of the three Baltic states and the 12 other parts of the Soviet Union.

I think that within three months, we had people on the ground. And literally in some cases in Central Asia, a U.S. Air Force plane would arrive. They would drop off a pallet of office furniture, a pallet of communications gear. They would set up where the communications would basically be in somebody's hotel room. They would be there 24/7, and literally, boxes of

dollars—\$100 bills—because credit cards would not work in these places, and checks were unheard of. I think the British were quite impressed that by the end of the spring of 1992, we had a diplomatic presence in all the capitals.

Ledesma: Going towards to the question of the U.S. approach to the former Soviet regions, there was an idea [and focus] on nuclear disarmament and figuring out nukes with the places that had nukes in the former regions. Specifically and most importantly, the Budapest Memorandum was signed on December 5, 1994 [in regards to the Soviet nuclear warheads in Ukraine]. What was your degree of involvement with the Memorandum? Additionally, how do you see the significance of the Memorandum today?

Pifer: Yes, there was a decision early on taken by the Bush Administration, which the Clinton Administration agreed with: You did not want to have multiple nuclear powers emerge from the wreckage of the Soviet Union. Russia had the largest number [of nukes] plus most of the infrastructure for maintaining [nukes] with the exception of testing. The testing infrastructure was in Semipalatinsk, which was now Kazakhstan, but most of the infrastructure for building, dismantling, and modernizing the weapons—doing anything beyond basic field maintenance—was all in Russia. Some Ukrainians now think was unfair, that Russia would be the nuclear weapon state [in an agreement]. In the case of Ukraine, in 1990, before the collapse of the Soviet Union, their parliament put out a declaration on state sovereignty which said Ukraine will be a non-nuclear weapon state. So, that wasn't an idea of the Americans' plan—it was already there [by the Ukrainians]. From 1992 until the summer of 1993, there were bilateral negotiations between Russia and Ukraine on removing the nuclear weapons in Ukraine and their disposition. On July 31, 1991, before the Soviet Union collapsed on December 26, 1991, the first Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty, START I, was signed. START I was signed with the Soviet Union,

which was no longer there. In May of 1992, the Lisbon Protocol was signed, and in that agreement, the Russians, the Ukrainians, the Belarusians, and the Kazakhstanis—those four countries which had Soviet strategic nuclear forces on their territory—agreed that the four would take on the Soviet Union’s START I obligations and, further, that Kazakhstan, Ukraine, and Belarus would be non-nuclear. So [the Budapest Memorandum] was a lot of just implementing [prior] agreements.

But what happened is, by September of 1993, it became increasingly clear that the Ukrainians and the Russians could not work out the details of the arrangement on their own. I got back from London, I believe, in August of 1993 or July of 1993, when I started working for Strobe Talbott. Talbott was the point person on this. There was a summit meeting between Ukrainian President Kravchuk and Russian President Yeltsin in early September in Massandra, Crimea. And they announced that they had settled all the nuclear issues. But the agreement fell apart within four or five days.

At that point, there’s a decision in Washington: we need to get much more involved because if not, this can go awry. And we were also very interested in getting the START I treaty in force, but the Russians, while they had ratified it, had said in their ratification document that they would not let the treaty enter into force until Ukraine and the other two states joined the nonproliferation treaty as non-nuclear weapon states. So, in the fall of 1993, we saw that there were really three issues. The Ukrainians said that they wanted to get rid of nuclear weapons, but there are three issues the Ukrainians wanted to address.

One was the START I Treaty required fairly expensive things to eliminate missiles, bombers, and missile silos. And they did not have the resources. In the end, we said, ‘We will help you pay

for that.’ We basically paid for it. A great investment of U.S. Pentagon dollars: \$600,000,000 to get rid of some 2,000 strategic nuclear weapons targeted [at the U.S.], that’s a good deal.

The second question the Ukrainians had was whether the warheads had economic value. The highly enriched uranium, you could take that, and you could blend it down to low-enriched uranium and use that for fuel rods for nuclear power plants. We helped push the idea where the Russians ultimately agreed that they would provide X amount of low-enriched uranium in the form of fuel rods in exchange for power plants for the highly enriched uranium in the 1,900 strategic nuclear warheads that the Ukrainians returned to Russia for elimination.

The last thing was: What kind of security guarantees or security assurances would Ukraine have? Although everybody talks about the Budapest Memorandum, I actually argue that the more important document was signed in January of 1994, when U.S. President Bill Clinton, Ukrainian President Leonid Kravchuk, and Russian President Boris Yeltsin signed the Trilateral Statement. The statement [in short] says, ‘here’s how we solve all these problems.’ Actually, in the statement, it basically says, ‘when Ukraine exceeds to the NPT [nonproliferation treaty] as a non-nuclear weapon state, here are the assurances Ukraine will get.’ The language is all there. But what is also there is the commitment that Ukraine will send all of the warheads back and that they will get compensation in the form of fuel rods.

There’s an initial commitment, I believe, of either \$175,000,000 or \$350,000,000 from the United States to help Ukraine implement its START I obligations to eliminate strategic systems. And then there’s an annex [to the document], which had basically things that would be done in the first 10 months to get things going. What had happened is in December 1993, there had been a meeting. Talbott led the U.S. delegation. Georgi Mamedov, a Russian Deputy Foreign

Minister, was there. They went to Kyiv. They met with the Ukrainians, and then they came back to Washington. We thought that the pieces were all in place to do this. Clinton was going to be in Moscow for an agreed summit with Yeltsin in mid-January. So we said, 'Let's try to get this together. You can have Kravchuk come to Moscow, and the three presidents can sign it.' We had the Russian and Ukrainian delegations come to Washington in early January. And that's where we had the draft trilateral statement. We had the separate draft of the annex because we originally thought the annex, they might not want to release that. And to our surprise, both the Russians and Ukrainians said, 'No, we are prepared to release that publicly.' Had we had more time, it would have been sent in a single document.

But the negotiations actually fell apart at one point because both the Russians and the Ukrainians each had a demand that the other side was not prepared to make public. The Russians were one of the first to say, 'All the nuclear warheads will be transferred by Ukraine in 28 and a half months.' It was basically by June 1st, 1996, all the warheads would be transferred to Russia. The Ukrainians said, 'Well, we can agree to that, but for political reasons, we don't want to have that put out there publicly.' The Ukrainians then said, 'Well, we want compensation not only for the highly enriched uranium in the strategic nuclear warheads, but you also took a couple thousand tactical nuclear weapons out of Ukraine, and we want some compensation for that.' And the Russians said, 'We are prepared to do that, but we can't make that public because every other post-Soviet republic from which we took tactical nuclear weapons, they'd be knocking on our door for [similar] compensation.'

Literally, the thing fell apart. In fact, the Russian, Mamedov, was going back to Moscow. He was headed to New York. And we were hit on a solution. We said, 'Okay, let's do this in a private letter.' So, Jim Timbie, who worked at the State Department on these issues, and we ended up—

Strobe sent us—over to the Ukrainian embassy we said here’s our proposal. ‘We have the trilateral statement, we have the annex, but then there’ll be this this confidential exchange of letters between Yeltsin, Kravchuk, and Clinton which will basically reflect that understanding and it won’t be public so that will respect the Russians and the Ukrainians.’ The Ukrainians said, ‘Yes, we can accept that.’ We got back to Strobe Talbott. I think he called Mamedov at the airport in New York and said, ‘You know, let me read you the letter.’ And Mamedov said, ‘Yes, we can accept that.’ So, we took that and, literally, we put out a cable to the embassies in Moscow and Kyiv, saying ‘Here’s what we’ve agreed with the Russians and the Ukrainian delegations. Here’s the trilateral statement and the annex. Here are the texts of the three letters that will be confidential.’

And then we sent the cable to Rose Gottemoeller, who ended up being the negotiator of the new START Treaty [START II] years later, she was at the National Security Council. We sent that cable over to her for final approval. She actually was able to catch President Clinton, who had just learned that his mother had died and was heading for the helicopter to fly to Andrews to go back to Little Rock. She caught him and had him ‘please Mr. President read this and approve it,’ which he did. So we were able to cable this out saying, ‘these texts have been personally approved by the president.’ Our job is to lock it in. And so that then led to the Trilateral Statement.

I ended up going out to Moscow about three or four days ahead of the trilateral meeting with an interpreter and a lawyer and a couple of other people because what we still had to do was ‘conforming’ the text. That is, before the president can sign a text that’s not only in English, but in this case, it was going to be also in Russian and Ukrainian [languages]. I had to have somebody certify that the Russian and Ukrainian texts say what the English text says.

The conforming process with the Russians was actually fairly straightforward. It took us several hours, but basically, is that the right Russian word to capture the English word? The first session with the Ukrainians was awful. It went on for hours and hours. And there were a couple of times where it looked like they were actually trying to reopen the text. And I had to say, ‘Look, guys, I have no authority to renegotiate. The text was negotiated and agreed upon in English in Washington 10 days ago. Our job is to make sure the Russian and Ukrainian versions are identical.’

I think that was reflected later on—I heard that when President Clinton stopped in Kyiv on his way into Moscow, he met privately with Kravchuk. Kravchuk was having some second thoughts. And Clinton basically persuaded him, ‘No, we’ve got to do this deal. If it comes undone now, it’s going to be bad for everybody.’ And it really wasn’t until when Kravchuk’s party arrived in Moscow and his national security advisor came to the room and basically gave the instructions to the Ukrainian side, ‘get this thing done.’ And then the problems kind of evaporated.

But it was the Trilateral Statement that was the big document. And then we made a command decision in Washington: ‘Okay, let’s let things see what happens next.’ To our great surprise in February, the Russians and the Ukrainians bilaterally agreed on a schedule for the return of warheads going from Ukraine to Russia for elimination, agreed on procedures by which the Ukrainians said that they would be assured the warheads were eliminated and not simply put back into the Russian stockpile, and then agreed on a schedule of—for Ukraine from Russia—delivery of fuel rods with low energy uranium to Ukraine. We were actually surprised.

We thought we’d be dragged into this, but it was great. Within a couple of days, both Moscow and Kyiv said, ‘Here’s the deal.’ It was identical. So we had these schedules, and we could check

it off, and both sides were doing pretty good. The initial flow began. We thought, ‘The last step, of course, is to get Ukraine to accede to the Non-Proliferation Treaty as a non-nuclear weapon state.’ And in the summer, the idea we came up with was, ‘Look, there’s this OSCE summit in Budapest in December 1994. All the principals can be there, plus it’s an opportunity to bring the New START Treaty into force. We could have President Clinton and the four presidents of the four former Soviet republics that have the signing to bring START I into force—so it looked like a great thing.’ And this was one of the secrets we did: use an event to drive things. Vice President Gore was going to be in Warsaw at the very beginning of August of 1994. Ukraine just had an election so they now had President Kuchma as president, just a few weeks before. We approached the vice president’s office and basically suggested, ‘Would you, rather than coming from Warsaw back to the U.S., could you go Warsaw to Kyiv, spend about four hours there, and then come back from there,’ which he quickly agreed to do. That was actually the first senior visitor that Kuchma had. And Gore was able to convey an invitation for Kuchma to visit the United States in the fall, but also then to suggest, ‘Hey, if you can in the fall get your Rada to ratify Ukraine’s accession to the Nonproliferation Treaty, then we can do the Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances in December.’ Nothing is ever easy. In November, the Rada approved accession to the NPT, but their language was a little bit squirrely in that it didn’t say ‘We are a non-nuclear weapons state.’ I think it had reference to ‘We, as a temporary possessor of nuclear weapons.’ And so we got our lawyer and I learned something about international law. Our lawyer basically said, ‘you know, we, the British, and the Russians are depository states for instruments of accession to the Nonproliferation Treaty.’ I said, ‘Yes.’ And he says, ‘Actually in international law, we have a certain amount of latitude to interpret documents that may not be clear and may be ambiguous [because we are depository states].’ And

he said, 'Okay, what do you want this document to say?' We said, 'We want this to say Ukraine accedes to the NPT as a non-nuclear weapon state.' And he said, 'Yes, I can certify that.' We talked to the British lawyers, they came to the same conclusion. The Russians said that the document did not have that language, in fact. The Russians actually put out a public statement. It was more in sorrow than in anger, but it basically said, 'This doesn't do it. This is not an acceptable accession. It will not be terms that we require.'

The idea that we came up with, and I think there's a lot of credit to Jim Timbie, who was very creative, but we went to the Ukrainians and said, 'Here's the deal.' The Ukrainians had said, 'We have to hand over the document approved by the [Ukrainian] Rada. And we said, 'Fine, but put it under a diplomatic note from the government of Ukraine in which it says, 'We, Ukraine, accede to the NPT as a non-nuclear weapon state.' Use the diplomatic note to clarify the ambiguity.'

The Russians agreed to accept the diplomatic note in principle. When Timbie and I got to Budapest, the problem was that we couldn't get the Ukrainians to agree with the language in the note. It was interesting. We met with the Russians, with Russian Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev. It was like 10 or 11 o'clock at night. The Russians said, 'You Americans know what we need. We're going to bed. Tomorrow when we wake up, if you have the right language, we have that signing ceremony, if you don't, we don't.'

So we went to the Ukrainians, and it was a couple of hours of back and forth. The Ukrainian Foreign Minister, Hennadiy Udovenko, was there several times in the meeting to say 'Yes,' but then would be pulled back by one member of his delegation. And I think I finally told Jim Collins, who was our ambassador-at-large, he would replace Strobe when Strobe became deputy secretary. I told Jim, 'Call a break. Why don't you take Udovenko out to get some air?' And, him, Jim Timbie, and I literally cornered this one recalcitrant member of the Ukrainian

delegation so that he couldn't get to Udovenko—and when they came in—Udovenko says it's done and when the guy, 'Well, wait,' Udovenko said 'it's done.' We finally finished that about three or four o'clock in the morning for a signing ceremony that was supposed to be at nine.

And what was funny was we were literally getting a phone call about every 45 minutes from Air Force One because it turned out that President Clinton was not all that interested in the OSCE summit, but the prospect of doing the documents that would bring the START I treaty into force attracted him. And we had some very nervous staffers on Air Force One who had told the President he was going there for this arms control portion, and we're still working on it. So it all kind of worked out. But again, it's actually the trilateral statement that was the bigger deal in terms of solving all the questions. It just took some time.

Just a couple of last comments about the Budapest Memorandum. I think the document itself, for one, basically has commitments the United States had to make to Ukraine anyway, as Ukraine is a member of the United Nations or the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

And that reflected the fact that going back to Secretary Baker in the Bush administration, Baker did not want to undertake a whole bunch of new obligations to the post-Soviet states. But he was okay with packaging these in a way that was politically valuable for the Ukrainians. What's not in the memorandum are the negotiations that took place. The negotiating record and the Ukrainians would ask us when we were working on that language: 'What will you Americans do if the Russians violate this document?' What we said was, 'We will take an interest, we will do things. We will tell you now we're not sending the U.S. military; the 82nd Airborne is not coming to your rescue, but we will do things.' And I look back on what the Biden administration did in the last three years: \$120 billion. That, to my mind, is 'the thing.' But it's the Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances, not guarantees, because guarantees to American

diplomatic ears sounds like what NATO has [with Article 5]. And in fact, in the negotiating record, when we negotiated that language for the trilateral statement, they'll find when I had to pull the Russian and Ukrainian heads together because the Russians used ga-run-tee-yah (гарантия) and the Ukrainians use hah-ran-tee-yah (гарантія). And I said, 'O.K., we need to have for the record your agreement that when you see those words in the Russian and Ukrainian texts, it is understood in the sense of the English word assurance, not guarantee.' This was a deal breaker, and they both agreed. The one thing I would say about the failure, and this was a collective failure on the American and the Ukrainian side, is that in 1993 and 1994 we didn't foresee 2014 or 2022. I think had the Ukrainians seriously thought that there might be that kind of Russian military action, they would have tried to hold on to some of the nuclear weapons. And then I think history would have been very different.

Ledesma: Would you agree at the time that you shared the same sentiments that Russia didn't pose a threat in the 1990s to former Soviet regions because it was very much a hand of cooperation at that time?

Pifer: No, the Russians were not helping in some areas. You had Transnistria, where they supported the breakaway region from Moldova, and then you had South Ossetia and Abkhazia in Georgia. So, the Russians weren't totally committed by that. But the idea that they would go to war with Ukraine [in 2014 and 2022], I don't think we seriously saw that possibility. The Ukrainians did not see that possibility.

Ledesma: So what would you say Yeltsin's personality was like diplomatically then? How much do you think he was on top of matters regarding diplomacy in Europe and the United States?

Pifer: It's hard to say. I had a sense that he was a big picture person. I'm not sure how much he got into the details. What was pretty clear was a fairly positive chemistry between Bill Clinton and Boris Yeltsin. And I saw it as two politicians. They seemed to click. Now, Clinton, from my observation—and I would say not just Clinton, but I would think Strobe Talbott, who was Clinton's principal advisor on Russia and the post-Soviet space, and Tony Lake, Samuel R. "Sandy" Berger, the senior people, I think, thought they saw there was a chance. I don't think anybody thought it was a sure thing, but there's a chance that in the next seven or eight years, we can set a relationship with Russia that would be very different from the Cold War. Even when the administration decided in the summer of 1994 that it would go ahead and proceed with NATO enlargement, although—I would not call that a textbook example of how the U.S. government should make decisions because the Secretary of Defense did not fully understand that we had moved from whether to enlarge to when to enlarge until December of 1994. Alexander "Sandy" Vershbow told me in June or July, he was at the NSC at the time, I was about ready to block a cable that was more 'when, not whether' and he said, 'No, no, that decision has been made.' And it was not understood by the Department of Defense or the Joint Chiefs of Staff, which was a failure of just how the American policy process went—but I think even then there was this idea that 'Yes, we can enlarge NATO, but we can try to do it in a way that is not threatening to Russia. And we can try to work with Russia.' It was actually "Sandy" Vershbow who coined the phrase, 'We can build a relationship between NATO and Russia that will be so cooperative that the Russians won't see a problem with enlargement because they'll see that they have an alliance with the alliance. They'll see NATO as a security partner.'

In retrospect, I think we underestimated antipathy in Moscow towards NATO, and we overestimated our ability to address Russian concerns. But I think people were open-eyed about

this. Periodically, it was called the “Troika Group,” and it was originally “Sandy” Vershbow as the senior director for Europe, Dan Fried as the senior director for Eastern Europe, then my predecessor, Chip Blacker, who was my boss, for Russia, Ukraine, Eurasia. Then, when Chip went back to Stanford, I moved up into that slot in 1996. But we would probably do every four or five months just a memo to the president saying this is how things are going on the different tracks, the NATO enlargement track, the NATO-Russia track, and then there was also a NATO-Ukraine track. Typically, I would have a short paragraph there saying, ‘the Russians are not thrilled about NATO enlargement, and this may complicate some of our other issues.’ So the President understood that there were potentially some risks here. We thought he could manage both. At the time, I thought we had a chance to do it. We felt fairly comfortable that we could manage it. One of the things I think about Clinton and Yeltsin that made that relationship work is that Yeltsin was not happy about enlargement, but Clinton was extremely open with him and basically told Yeltsin 12 to 18 months in advance what would happen.

So in 1994, he said, ‘Look, Boris, in 1995 NATO is going to do an enlargement study and that’s just going to ask why are we enlarging, and how, it’s not going to get into names of countries or dates or anything like that.’

And then in 1995, he could tell Yeltsin, ‘Look, Boris, in the first half of 1996, again, we’re going to be digesting the results of the enlargement study.’ But he said, ‘But in the fall of 1996, there’ll be some talk then about which countries come in NATO and when.’ It was not coincidental that we put that discussion after Yeltsin’s re-election campaign in the summer of 1996.

Clinton and Yeltsin met in Helsinki in March 1997. This was about two months before the meeting in Paris that established the NATO-Russia relationship and then about four months

before the meeting in Madrid that invited Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic to join.

Clinton said to Yeltsin—and we’ve given Clinton a talking point—‘Look, enlargement may not be a one-step process. There may be a further round(s) of enlargement.’ And what impressed me about Clinton was he took our bureaucratic talking point on that. He explained it exactly as Bill Clinton, talking as a politician, talking to Boris Yeltsin, as a politician. ‘Boris, this might not be the only round [of enlargement]. Now, it’s not going to happen during my term. I’m going to be gone. But, there could be another round, and it could even include the Baltic states for us. So you’ve got to position yourself and start doing it now. So if that happens, it’s not seen as a political defeat for you. That train’s coming down the tracks. Don’t tie yourself to the rails.’

While Yeltsin may not have been happy with the message, I think Yeltsin appreciated that Clinton was trying to help Yeltsin think through how he would manage the issue.

Ledesma: Would you say that, because, I saw in two documents that you are a notetaker for the phone calls between Yeltsin and Clinton, that Yeltsin was generally honest with Clinton about his thoughts about not just NATO, but also the relationship between the U.S. and Russia and what Russia’s intention were with Europe?

Pifer: In general, yes. I don’t recall an instance where we said, ‘Gosh, Yeltsin just lied to the President.’ I’d have to go back and look at the record to be sure. But yes, I think that there was a fairly honest relationship between the two. In some cases, they would duck hard questions. But at one point, President Clinton asked us what to say if Yeltsin said he wanted Russia to join NATO. And we gave him three or four points to make. We suggested saying, ‘Boris, I will be prepared to support that, provided that you are prepared to do what we would ask of any country wanting to join NATO. And it’s not just military reform and civilian leadership of the military and the security sectors, but it’s political reform. You’ve got to have an established democracy. It’s

economic reform.’ I came to a conclusion in my own mind just watching things. I think by 1996, I don’t think Yeltsin ever asked the question about joining NATO, and my conclusion was that the Russians, when they looked at NATO, it was ‘the United States and everybody else,’ and they figured, first of all, they would have to make a lot of difficult changes, which they probably weren’t sure how they would make. But if they actually did get into NATO, they would be ‘one of everybody else.’ Whereas the idea of a NATO-Russia relationship put them as ‘the equal’ of NATO, and that had some appeal to the Russian ego.

Ledesma: Wow, Interesting. In the instance where Yeltsin did send that telegram in December 1991 to NATO saying he’s open to the idea of Russian membership—but then I talked to Vershbow and he said, ‘Well, Yeltsin wasn’t entirely open to NATO membership for Russia after that instance.’ But when I look at some of the declassifications of the U.S. side and the reports on Yeltsin, it talked about him approving like a set of theses that tried to disband NATO enlargement or complicate the process of NATO enlargement. Was that possibly because of his presidential election in 1996? Or was it more of he just thought that he just didn’t want NATO to expand in general?

Pifer: What was the time frame for those?

Ledesma: That was 1995, 1994-1996. There’s a document from Anthony Lake that talks about the set of theses that Yeltsin allegedly approved to derail NATO enlargement.³ And how

³ Memorandum for the President from Anthony Lake, “European Security/NATO Enlargement Progress Report,” 17 July 1995. The White House. William J. Clinton Presidential Library. National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/32230-document-7-memorandum-president-anthony-lake-european-securitynato-enlargement>.

Kornblum in 1996 had insights that Yeltsin allegedly approved redlines for ‘no Baltics, no Ukraine’ in NATO expansion.⁴ Was this planning by Yeltsin noticeable by you at all?

Pifer: I don’t have a good recollection of that one. What I do remember is that Yeltsin had gone to Warsaw in 1993 and had told the Poles, ‘Yes, you’re free to join NATO if you want.’ And then Yeltsin tried to walk that statement back. The Poles, of course, were like, ‘Okay, we’re going.’ I think it was always clear to us that Yeltsin was not happy about NATO enlargement. And again, this may have been one of the areas where we overestimated our ability to manage that because we thought by giving a pretty full agenda of issues that NATO was prepared to talk to the Russians about. But then, I thought, important military commitments, such as NATO saying ‘no intention, no plan, no requirement to put nuclear weapons on the territory of new members.’ And then the other one, which is actually a sentence that “Sandy” Vershbow formulated that ‘in the current and foreseeable security circumstances, there will be no need for permanent stationing of substantial combat forces on the territory of new members.’ So, there was an effort by the Alliance to at least make enlargement appear not threatening in a military sense. But again, at the end of the day, I think it turned out that, one, perhaps we could have been a bit more creative in addressing Russian concerns.

The other thing, though, as alternate history, is: how would NATO-Ukraine or NATO-Russia have developed had it not been for the NATO decision to go to war with Serbia over Kosovo? Because I think in 1997—and literally I left months after Madrid—but my initial thoughts were that NATO-Russia was off to a pretty good start. It was totally derailed, of course, in the spring

⁴ John Kornblum Memorandum, “NATO-Russia: A Framework for the Next Phase,” 29 July 1996. U.S. Department of State. National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/32232-document-9-john-kornblum-memorandum-nato-russia-framework-next-phase>.

of 1999 and only really got back on track when Putin met with the NATO leaders in May of 2002 to give a new impulse. Had you not had that [in 1999], the relationship might have developed in a different way.

There was one other thing: this is a conversation I had probably in 2002 or 2003 when I had just come out of three or four days in Moscow, and I stopped in Stuttgart, Germany, to visit the U.S. European Command for a conference there. And we had a conversation with the Commander, who also wears the NATO SACEUR [Supreme Allied Commander of Europe] hat, he said, ‘The Russians seem frustrated about the military exchanges we have.’ He said, ‘They call it military tourism. It’s not doing something real.’ And I could kind of see the problem, and I said, ‘Well, is there some kind of a military capability that NATO doesn’t have on its own? And if the Russians don’t have on their own, building a joint capability might be a tool that we would turn to and your Russian opposite number would turn to?’ This is like right after 9/11, lots of concerns about terrorist attacks, WMD. So my suggestion was, ‘What about a chemical weapons attack? Say there was a terrorist attack using chemical weapons in downtown Liverpool or in St. Petersburg. The consequences of that could be pretty extensive and could either tax NATO capabilities or Russian capabilities. What if you had a group that trained together that could then deploy to address that?’

At the time, NATO might have felt it had all the capabilities it needed and didn’t really need that—but I do wonder, had we been able to develop some real capabilities where the Russians said, ‘This NATO-Russia force can actually be of use to us in such a circumstance,’ but we never really got that far. And then, I think, particularly after 2008, Russia’s interest in NATO-Russia cooperation began to wane.

Ledesma: Vershbow, in my interview with him, dubbed you his “co-conspirator” at the NSC. And he also said you’re the main person, or the Russia point man, for the “flying squad.” So, I was curious if you have stories about conversations with Vershbow that you’d like to share with us or takeaways from the “flying squad.”

Pifer: We had what we called the “Troika balcony.” Which was when I became Senior Director. My office opened up through a door onto the balcony in the Old Executive Office Building, which was the best office I ever had. I just had a gorgeous view of the White House and the West Wing. But “Sandy” Vershbow’s office opened up from a door to the same balcony. And then Dan Fried actually could climb through a window and get on the balcony. And so, we’d sit down, we’d meet for about 25 or 30 minutes, and we’d just have a conversation. And we could scope out, ‘O.K., here’s what we ought to do.’ This is one of the reasons why I enjoyed working at the NSC. The NSC is a pretty flat organization bureaucratically, right? So we could scope things out, and the next day have a memo to the president saying, ‘here’s how we think we ought to proceed.’ And the problem with a larger bureaucracy like the State Department was, of course, a struggle to get the deputy secretary, they’ve got Jim Collins, who’s the ambassador to the newly independent states, John Kornblum, who’s the assistant secretary for Europe. It would take them a day to arrange a time where they could all sit down and eat together. So, it was just—what they used to call—the ‘Troika memos,’ which would be the updates and things like that we put out.

I think we had a pretty good sense of where to go. Dan and I would sometimes have a little bit of tension—sometimes he resisted a little bit when I was going to put in the cautionary paragraph and said, ‘Well, we have to tell the President that this could make some other things that are important to him harder to do.’—but we worked out the language amicably.

The “flying squad” was really in 1997—well, there was still a couple of “flying squads,” but the one that I took part in—because NSC people usually don’t travel, unless it’s something specifically related like to a presidential summit. Strobe had a very good connection with Javier Solana, the NATO Secretary General. Solana agreed that ‘Look, we’ll let you Americans take the first crack at trying to work out the document that would be the basis for the NATO-Russia relationship.’

So I think we made our first trip to Moscow probably in January of 1997, and there were maybe three or four trips. I think I made all but one of them. And we very closely stayed in touch with Solana so that either going to Moscow or coming back from Moscow, we’d stop somewhere where we could brief Solana.

I can remember one time we’d flown military air from Moscow back to Amsterdam. And we’d come out right of meetings in Moscow, we’re in our suits. And so they’ve got this side room set up at the Amsterdam Airport. Solana and a couple of his guys came up from NATO. And we’re giving him the debrief. We’re changing into our travel clothes. The suits are coming out, the blue jeans are coming on, and we’re having that kind of conversation. But it was a very, I mean particularly between Strobe and Javier, I mean they were just very closely wired together.

It was probably on the last of these trips, and actually I think “Sandy” Vershbow was there. We were in Paris, and we were getting ready to go with Secretary Albright (or Strobe) to Moscow. The word came out that somebody at NATO was prepared to put down a draft text for the NATO-Russia document. They had kept asking Solana: ‘What is the draft of the NATO-Russia declaration going to look like?’ Solana kept putting them off. And we got the word that this other delegation was going to try to table something the next day. So we took the draft that we’d been

working on with the Russians and sent it to Solana. Solana that morning puts our draft down as his document. I still remember the reporting message. Somebody from the British delegation came up to one of our Americans at NATO and said, ‘The next time you ghostwrite a document for Solana, you got to remember to replace the S’s with C’s.’⁵

Because NATO uses British English, not American English. People probably had a sense about that. Then, at that point, then it was turned over to Solana. But at that point, most of the language had been worked out. It was then done as the NATO-Russia Founding Act. I think there was just a very good relationship that Talbott and Solana had. A lot of confidence between them so that we could carry that weight and get things done. And it was probably a little bit easier for us to do that just because NATO is a consensus organization. Solana would have to be checking a lot of things, whereas we just had to work within the American bureaucracy.

Ledesma: Changing topics from NATO to Russia domestically and then also with its war in Chechnya, I was curious: from 1995 to 1997, when you were in the NSC, did you have any capacity with analyzing Yeltsin’s process and the war in Chechnya? And if so, what did you see in that?

Pifer: What I saw of Yeltsin, Yeltsin was determined not to let Chechnya go. Now, I don’t think Yeltsin then managed the military. I think Yeltsin basically said there’s going to be a Russian flag flying over Chechnya. And then the Russian military and Russian security services, which I think by nature, as we’re seeing in Ukraine, are pretty brutal, they did it ‘the Russian way.’ We ended up trying to find a compromise because we did not want to undercut Yeltsin on Russian

⁵ In reference to the British-English spelling (such as “defence”) vs. the American-English spelling (such as “defense”).

territorial integrity, in part because that had implications. If all of a sudden we're saying well Chechnya can break away from Russia, how can we defend Crimea as part of Ukraine or Transnistria as part of Moldova? So, there was a U.S. position that the 1991 borders agreed with the Soviet Union collapsed are the borders, and for a variety of reasons, we did not want to see those borders endangered in any way because, if changed in one country, it could have a knock-on effect on another country.

Our first talking point both in the First Chechen War and then when I was the DAS during the Second Chechen War was always that the United States supports the territorial integrity of Russia, and we do not agree that the Chechens have a unilateral right to secede. The second point, is that we hope, expect, and believe that Russia should, in preserving its sovereignty and territorial integrity, observe human rights considerations when they're conducting military and security operations.

It was 1995 or 1996, probably 1995. Clinton gave a press conference in Moscow and sort of was comparing the American civil war with Lincoln to Yeltsin and Chechnya. I wasn't there, but Chip Blacker (Coit D. Blacker) told me that when Clinton came off the stage, and it would have been Tony Lake and Chip there, and Clinton says, 'probably shouldn't have made that Lincoln comparison, right?' It happens.

Ledesma: But do you think that the Clinton Administration felt it couldn't do more to persuade Yeltsin because he pretty much blocked Doctors Without Borders, blocked a lot of humanitarian aid in these locations? Do you think that the West could have done more in the First Chechen War?

Pifer: It was a hard one to do because we were trying to do so many other things with Russia that were important to U.S. interests. So, perhaps we did not pay as much attention to trying to help out Chechnya as we could have. But the Chechens, watching the Chechens, they were not particularly a group that attracted a lot of empathy. I remember one time, and this would have been in 1995, when a group of Chechens seized a hospital with about 700 people in Budyonnovsk. Chip Blacker was going with President Clinton up to Halifax. We had the G7 plus one, so Yeltsin was going to be there. And as Chip's walking out the door, I said, 'here's the draft statement you're going to need when the Russian security forces storm that hospital and kill 300 people.' Because that's what I expected the Russians to do. It wasn't like that in the end, but it was one of those things where the Russians just have a different way of doing things. It's a little bit beyond the scope of your thesis, but this came up again in the George W. Bush Administration during the Second Chechen War. We kept getting requests from the White House, they would schedule Deputies meetings on how we deal with Chechnya. And I finally called the guy, I think it was either Dan Fried or Tom Graham, who was doing this at the NSC, and I said, 'We can't get the Russians to lay off Chechnya unless we want to put pressure on them. So, what are we prepared to do? Are you prepared to tell the Russians we won't do the new Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty with them? We won't try to encourage American investment? What costs are you prepared for?' And nobody wanted to go there. And I said, 'Okay, well, then we're just going to have to accept the Russians are going to keep doing this. And we're going to have a stance that says we support territorial integrity.' We wish they were not so brutal about it. But we're not going to have an impact unless we make a decision to sacrifice other interests to try to pressure them. And I'm not sure at the end of the day we could

have pressured them because I think the territorial integrity part was really pretty key for Moscow.

Ledesma: Scholarship does say on the First Chechen War that Yeltsin approached the war as a way for political means, especially starting it and also how he tried to end the negotiations with the Yandarbiyev government at the time. So what did you see, if you did see any of this, was his opinion or perspective on the war? Because, of course, we can't ask him now. What did you ever capture from Yeltsin?

Pifer: My assumption was losing Chechnya at that point would have been a real gift to his opponents, who would have said, 'Look, he's now giving away parts of Russia.' So, even if Yeltsin was personally inclined to say we should be much less brutal about this, he still was going to be of a mind that Chechnya has to remain Russian. That, I think, would have been the kind of thing that he saw as very threatening to his presidency.

Ledesma: Now that we have covered these questions, I wanted to go to missing history. What are some stories of diplomatic moments in the U.S.-Russian relationship that you think aren't as emphasized in the 1990s in scholarship or have not yet recognized their significance? And we talked about the Trilateral Statement, which is one of them. Additionally, if there are others, whether it's just the U.S. relationship with Russia or just Russia internally at that time, what would you want the scholarship to know?

Pifer: A couple of things. It's got a bit of attention, but what was interesting to me was in 1995 when we went into the decision that NATO would replace UNPROFOR [United Nations Protection Force] in Bosnia. And I'd actually, I had been in London and had been invited to a conference along with a U.S. General who came out from the Pentagon. I think the British

invited us just to embarrass us because we were the only ones who didn't have people in UNPROFOR and on the ground in Bosnia, and I remember coming out of the room thinking, 'thank God we have no Americans in there' because the rules of engagement were just too weak. There was a concern because there were three different countries that had battalions in the area of Sarajevo, and it looked like things might fall apart, and they might then have to fight their way to the Adriatic Sea to withdraw. It turned out they didn't have common communications. They couldn't talk to each other. The radios were different.

And so as NATO began to think about this, I remember a group of British MPs went to meet with General John Shalikashvili. He was NATO's SACEUR [Supreme Allied Commander of Europe] at the time. And they asked him about the possibility of replacing UNPROFOR if NATO came in. Shalikashvili said, 'First of all, you're not going to paint my tanks white.' And then he said, 'And the first Serbian corporal who's drunk and tries to stop one of my convoys is going to really regret it.' And so, SFOR and IFOR—the NATO force—really had pretty robust rules of engagement. And it was designed less as a peacekeeping than a peace enforcement mission.

What was interesting was that the Russians wanted to be involved. And we wanted involvement because, first of all, a Russian military contingent may build some confidence with the Bosnian Serbs. But what really came out was that the Russians did not want to work for NATO. They said 'we can't,' and this is again, they're hanging up on NATO. 'We can't, our commander cannot report to a NATO commander. He can report to an American commander.'

And so, Secretary Perry, I think Minister Grachev came to the U.S., this is late 1994/1995 at one point. And they worked it out and basically said, 'Okay, we worked out the deal. There's going

to be a Russian contingent,' I forget how large it was. 'It's going to be under command of U.S. General such and such.' Of course, U.S. General such and such also has a NATO hat. So, it was one of these things that, 'General, you just have to remember that you're speaking in your American capacity.' And it actually worked out, and the Russians—there's a little bit of corruption—but it was actually useful having Russian forces on the ground. Now, of course, a couple of years later when Kosovo happened, that was the base, of course, where the Russians, when they launched out to occupy the Pristina airfield. But this is actually a story I heard when I was a diplomat in residence at Stanford. There was a U.S. military officer who had been with the Russian contingent. There were a couple of American military officers there as liaison people, and he said one day 'We noticed all of a sudden this Russian unit is they're packing up to go somewhere. One of the Americans asked the Russian executive officer, 'What was going on?' He said, 'Well, just between us, we just got orders to move to Pristina.' And the American gets on the phone right away. 'You need to know this.' And so, the Russians got to Pristina, and it was interesting. I was in Ukraine at the time. The Russians then wanted to fly transports to land airborne forces at the airfield. And so we were going to the Ukrainians and saying, 'No, don't give them air clearance.' The Ukrainians were not pro-Serb, but the Ukrainians were not comfortable with what NATO had done during the attacks on Serbia. But the Ukrainians finally came up and said, 'Okay, here's our plan. We're going to approve Russian overflight requests provided the Russians have onward clearance from like Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary, or the other countries.' And those countries are all saying 'no.' So they could tell the Russians, 'It's not our fault.' So we were able to block the reinforcement there. It was a more difficult situation. I think had Kosovo not happened, it would have been interesting to see how the NATO-Russia relationship would have developed.

Another interesting moment, which I'm not sure has been reported. There's no reason not to report it now. But in the spring of 1996, when Chip Blacker was still there. I had moved from NSC Director for Ukraine to become NSC Director for Russia. And we had [Yeltsin Presidential Advisor] Sergei Karaganov come. And he paid a call to us, wanting to talk about things. And at the end of the meeting, he said, 'What would the reaction of your boss be if Yeltsin were to postpone the election this summer [in 1996]?' And we said, 'Very bad.' We said, 'One of the reasons that we engage and support Yeltsin is we see him as a democrat and democratic presidents normally do not postpone elections.' And so, in fairly strong terms, we said that. And so after Karaganov left, I said, 'Chip, we should let the President know. Just in case, to be sure the president doesn't have another view.' We wrote it as an information memorandum to the President, which said, 'Karganov came, he said this, this, this. We told him 'no' for these reasons.' A reason why I enjoyed working for Clinton was that Clinton always read papers with a pen in hand. And so, typically when you sent a memo up, and the memo would come back to the author, and you could see that Clinton reacted, and you could see he was marking 'yes' in the right spot. So he was entirely on board [with our statement to Karganov]. Boris was his buddy, but he wasn't going to agree that Boris should be postponing elections. So that was an interesting point.

One thing I found really interesting was when the story came out a couple of years after the election that there had been these two or three Democratic operatives who had gone to Moscow to advise Yeltsin and the Yeltsin family on the election. I don't know if you ever saw this. It was a story that came out in Time because I remember reading the story and being utterly shocked and calling Chip asking, 'Did you have any idea?' We had no idea at all that this had happened. And I think this was probably Clinton maybe talking to one of his political buddies saying, 'I

think Boris could use a little bit of advice on how to do an election. Can you make something happen?’ So it was done, as far as I can tell, without the U.S. government’s knowledge or at least without the knowledge of the NSC staff.

With Yeltsin, I can remember one of the more interesting phone calls I had to make was when we learned that Yeltsin had had this heart attack, between the election rounds. We knew it was clearly noticeable that he was not campaigning. We heard there were some health issues, but we did not know exactly what. And then afterward, it was revealed that he had a heart attack. They asked for a U.S. surgeon to be present, Dr. Michael DeBakey. He was probably the best heart surgeon in the U.S. down at the University of Houston Medical Center. But the Russians asked him to come for the operation. And so I was tasked to call the surgeon and say, ‘Doctor, we’re sure glad you’re going to be there, but we think it would be best if you not pick up any instruments.’ The nightmare would have been Yeltsin dies under the hands of an American doctor. We didn’t want that. But what was also interesting was, I remember talking to the head of the White House Medical Office, and he said, ‘We have the name of the Russian surgeon. And he said, ‘Look, I’ve done some checking. This guy has done like 4,000 or 5,000 open heart procedures.’ And he said, ‘That’s what you’re looking for. Somebody who’s had that many procedures, it’s a kind of routine for him. He’s probably had enough things go wrong that he knows how to respond.’ So the American doctor, he said, ‘Yeltsin is going to come through the surgery, don’t worry about that.’ He said, ‘Yeltsin’s problem is going to be is when he gets the post-surgery advice, which is going to be no alcohol, adjust your diet, exercise.’ And he said, ‘if Yeltsin doesn’t do those things, Yeltsin’s going to find his recovery is going to be very slow and he, maybe still won’t make it.’ Because we did remember, one of the things we would kind of watch was at meals at meetings, and Yeltsin was drinking a pretty hefty amount of wine.

Two other stories come to mind.

One was after one of the Clinton-Yeltsin meetings during the UNGA session in September or October. This may have been 1995. Chip was still there, so it couldn't have been 1996. So, there's a meeting at UNGA, and there's going to be a bilateral between Clinton and Yeltsin. And the White House organized FDR's Hyde Park as the venue for the bilateral. Yeltsin flew up with the president on Marine One; we were on the backup helicopter. And it's always kind of interesting, the backup helicopter leaves after Marine One, but it flies ahead, so it's on the ground first. And so we got there about five minutes before, and they took us in to show us the room that's set up for the meeting. They had the cape displayed that FDR [U.S. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt] had worn at Yalta. They had some letters from Stalin to FDR. It was just perfect, and we heard that later, Yeltsin was really touched by the history there.

The other time I think that's something that worked where, okay, it would have been 1996 and so Yeltsin had won his re-election in the summer, Clinton had won his re-election and there was going to be an OSCE summit in Lisbon, Clinton wasn't going to go, Gore was going to go. And I remember thinking, and this—I think Tom Pickering was our ambassador in Moscow—and he kind of gave me the idea. And we were sort of thinking, what's going to happen in the second terms of Yeltsin and Clinton?

And I said, 'There's kind of this sense here, and in Moscow, that steam has run out of the relationship.' And Tom is a really energetic, and we said, 'We got to make sure we give it all, so let's give it a boost.' So I drafted a letter from Clinton to Yeltsin and ran it by the State Department. As a letter from Clinton to Yeltsin, it was about the three or four issues to work on. Of course, 1997 was going to be big because we hoped to finish the NATO-Russia relationship.

There was going to be, of course, NATO enlargement, NATO-Ukraine. There was still hope that we could get the START II treaty ratified and even begin to talk about START III.

We had the letter, and then the idea was to suggest to the President that, at the end of the typed letter (which Gore could hand to PM Chernomyrdin in Lisbon), he write in pen something on the lines of, 'Boris. The pundits say we've lost steam. Let's show them. Let's get some big things done.' And then the President was able to jazz it up more. So Gore gives the letter to Chernomyrdin, Chernomyrdin gives it to Yeltsin, but it's got this handwritten note. And we heard back later on from the Russians that Yeltsin really liked it. Yeltsin likely saw that 'Okay, I know this letter was not just given by a bureaucrat to the President to sign here, but he actually put some thought into it.' And so, it was kind of touches like that where sometimes we felt we could push things along a little bit.

But looking back on the 1990s, I think NATO enlargement worked. I have to confess, in 1993, I was a little bit hesitant about it, thinking this was going to make things with Russia a lot more complicated. And I think actually Strobe was probably hesitant too, but once, by 1994, the President made the decision, we were going to work with that. I look now and think NATO enlargement was a really good thing because Putin uses NATO enlargement as a pretext for the war against Ukraine. I don't think it was a cause of the war. I think there are lots of instances where Putin didn't really care about NATO enlargement. Putin knows NATO is never going to attack Russia on its own. But Putin doesn't like NATO because he sees NATO as a constraint on his ambition to increase Russian influence and even physical control of the post-Soviet space, maybe in Eastern Europe. So had NATO not enlarged, I still think because Putin is something of a neo-imperialist, that he would be trying to basically recover parts of the Russian Empire that were lost when the Soviet Union collapsed. And he would be doing it without having to face an

enlarged NATO. You'd have a lot of countries—the Poles would be going batshit crazy right now.

They're nervous, but they have NATO. And so, I'm not sure we would have averted what Russia is doing to Ukraine, and you would have had a lot fewer countries that feel protected and stable because of NATO. I wish the NATO-Russia relationship had worked better. Again, I think we underestimated the Russian antipathy towards NATO. We overestimated our ability to change that. But I also think that the Russians could have tried harder. And I never really saw, particularly after things got back on track supposedly in 2002, the Russians were never really trying to be creative and make it work. And that was even after NATO had done something that was an innovation for NATO. I mean, the Russians did complain in 2001, 2000. They said, 'whenever we have a NATO-Russia conversation, NATO talks to us on the basis of a position agreed by the 19 NATO members. And the Russians would say, by the time that you've made all the compromises necessary among 19 to get an agreed position, you're not going to change it for us.' And that actually makes some sense. NATO in 2002 defined a set of issues. And they said, 'on these issues, NATO will talk to the Russians not at 19 plus 1, but at 20.' And that is, each country will talk about it on the basis of a national position. And so there are some accommodations, but I never really got the feeling that the Russians were trying to make NATO-Russia work in a cooperative way. I think the Russians sometimes, and you see this in negotiations, they tend to let the other side do the creative stuff, make the compromises, things like that. And I wonder if the Russians had been more helpful there. You know, perhaps they could have helped their case by being a little bit more innovative on their side.

Ledesma: Do you think that Yeltsin was a Westernizer, a Democrat, or do you think that he was a Tsar? How would you characterize Yeltsin?

Pifer: An imperfect democrat. I think he had a belief in democracy, but he was also looking at his alternatives, Zyuganov and Zhirinovsky. He basically said, 'if I lose to these guys, Russia's going to go back, or Russia's going to head in the wrong direction.' And that, which is why at the end of the day I was glad to see the President basically support what we told Karaganov about, 'No, the election has to happen.' Because I think in the end, President Clinton was a believer in democracy with Yeltsin. If it had been Zhirinovsky or Zhirinovsky, I think that would have knocked Russia off course. The problem that Yeltsin had, and I think we still suffer from, is, for Russians, the period of reform of the 1990s, when they had an imperfect democracy, but they see that democracy is associated with economic collapse, economic contraction and such, so it has a bad name. I think if we had a Zhirinovsky or Zyuganov, they would not have been able to save Russia from those painful economic times had they been elected in 1996.

Ledesma: And so there's also a really common claim now in scholarship that's also substantiated by the now declassified Wayne Merry 'long telegram of the 1990s' which suggests this idea that Yeltsin's personal power as president was bolstered without amplifying greater democratic forces in Russia. And so I talked to Vershbow about this as well. And he said that he doesn't buy the claim necessarily because he believes that the Clinton Administration actually did a lot to try to boost democratic forces in Russia generally, outside of Yeltsin's personal power. So I wanted to ask you what your take is on the idea that the Clinton Administration may have gone too far in supporting Yeltsin rather than regular forces of democracy.

Pifer: In 1993, when Yeltsin shelled the parliament, I think we bet on Yeltsin there. I'm not totally sure whether that was good—whether we should have leaned that hard in his direction at that point. But I think in general, if you were looking for an agent that was most likely to maneuver Russia to democracy, it would have been great had they had someone like Boris

Nemtsov, but he wasn't going to win the election then. In terms of the leaders that were going to have a likely chance of winning the Russian election in the 1990s, Yeltsin was the best bet.

I do think, though, it didn't mean that we sort of devoted everything to Yeltsin. If you go back and look at the USAID programs, democracy promotion, and funding by the National Endowment for Democracy, both the International Republican Institute and the National Democratic Institute were there doing programs. And while I can't remember exactly going through those programs in this way, I did when I was in Ukraine, but the general philosophy is that those programs funded by the U.S. government should be nonpartisan. Also helping to sort of build a free press. So I think we were working to try to put some of the pieces of democracy there in Russia in addition to our support for Yeltsin.

The only comment I would make about Wayne's cable is that it was a dissent channel cable [where Merry sent the telegram]. And so that means that, the way I read it was that that was his view. In the end, his view perhaps turned out to be right, but it was not the view of the U.S. embassy at the time. Had it been an embassy view at the time, it would have come in as a front channel message. He had every right, and it's good for him to do that kind of dissent. But again, when I'm reading it there with all the other cable traffic coming in from Moscow, I'm thinking, 'Okay, well, that's one person's view, but it doesn't seem to be consistent with the other things we're hearing from the embassy.'

Ledesma: If you were going to go back in time to your time on the NSC and give any advice regarding U.S. policy towards Russia or towards NATO or just Europe in general, what would it be? What advice would you want to give your former self?

Pifer: How do you persuade Boris Yeltsin to appoint Boris Nemtsov to be the prime minister [in 1999] instead of Vladimir Putin? I think history could have turned out greatly different. I mean, individuals matter. And I think somebody who shared or had an even a stronger belief in democracy than Yeltsin, had they come in. They might have been able to manage things differently. Putin came in at a really lucky time because the Russian economy basically followed the same track of the Polish economy, the Ukrainian, the Bulgarian. Every economy when they left command economy status, moving towards a market had a period of three or four years—at least in the Ukraine’s case because they didn’t do it right, about eight years—of contraction before they probably started growing. Well, Putin came in when the Russian economy had started growing, and the price of oil went up, and so he started growing the gross domestic product. It would be interesting to have someone like Nemtsov as president from 2000 and have been able to take advantage of the economic boom that the Russians had. I still remember in 2003 or 2004, probably the last time I visited Moscow and I was still in the U.S. government, I had a meeting with members of the Moscow Helsinki Committee and a couple of people spent time in the Gulag and I remember asking them at that point, I said, ‘From my time in Ukraine, I really do feel that the population as a mass there is kind of interested in democracy. They want to have a political voice.’ I said, ‘I don’t really get that feeling in Russia, that there’s a mass feeling, that there’s a ground up push for democracy.’ And it was interesting, they agreed with me. They said, ‘That’s one of our frustrations too. We don’t see that.’ This was prior to 2003. They thought that when the economics reach a point where folks don’t have to be so focused on their day-to-day livelihood, maybe then there would be a growing interest in democracy. Now, of course, by the time that hit and Russia began to have a middle class, you’ve got Putin, it’s 2004. And already by 2003, Putin’s beginning to kind of reduce political space. What if they had something

like Yeltsin, who was prepared to be a democrat? And in those economic circumstances, it could have been a very different story.

Ledesma: So, why do you think that Yeltsin did choose Putin in 1999?

Pifer: I think he saw Putin as efficient and as someone who could protect him and his family. I think it boiled down to that. And probably because of Putin's background, he thought Putin had the experience to do that, whereas Nemtsov didn't really have that institutional base that would provide that protection.

Ledesma: I also have a question on this as well because on one of the declassified cables, it was Yeltsin talking to Clinton in a meeting in Türkiye. It was in November 1999. But Yeltsin said to Clinton that 'Putin knows the West,' but in an unclarified regard. What do you think that Yeltsin saw in Putin in terms of how he would approach the West?

Pifer: Hard to say. Putin spent some time in Germany, but East Germany would not be called the West. Although it's interesting, remember that Putin worked as a deputy mayor to Gaidar in St. Petersburg. And Gaidar was pretty forward-leaning, reform-minded, and Putin apparently respected Gaidar. There's kind of that disconnect, although I think there's a certain amount of evidence that Putin was already engaged in a couple of fairly corrupt operations by then. But maybe that was what affected Yeltsin's choice. This guy has worked for Gaidar; he understands democracy like Gaidar, and he can kind of carry on. That Yeltsin-Clinton meeting took place when I was already in Ukraine, so I was a little bit removed. But I do remember that when President Clinton came to Ukraine after he'd been to Moscow in June 2000 where he'd met with Putin, and Putin was the President because he'd won the special election in March and Clinton seemed to think, 'We can probably do some business with this guy.' Although I think Putin made

a huge mistake, at that time, Clinton made one last push to try to get the Russians to agree to amend the anti-ballistic missile treaty. And basically, as I understand, the idea was to, instead of allowing one location for missile interceptors, maybe allow three or four, and instead of 100 interceptors, allow a couple hundred interceptors. So, it would have been an expansion of the anti-ballistic missile presence compared to the treaty, but it would not have expanded it so much that the Russians, with their numbers, could not have easily defeated it. And Putin basically said, 'No, no, I'll deal with the next guy.' Of course, the next guy was George W. Bush, and Bush came into office: 'I'll solve this problem. I'll just withdraw from the treaty.' But I think Clinton did seem to have a sense that we can work with this guy. The Ukrainians were a lot, based on their discussion, were a lot more nervous. They saw Putin as something different from Yeltsin.

Ledesma: So, in what ways did he approach Ukraine differently early on in his presidency, from like 1999 to 2002? What was Putin's early approach to Ukraine?

Pifer: They had a meeting with Yeltsin, and I remember getting the debrief. So this is the Ukrainians. When I got the debrief, this is from Ukrainian Deputy Foreign Minister Valeriy Chaly, who thought the Russian president had shown a lot of changing positions. The Russians, although nominally they had a free trade agreement, had exempted 300 Ukrainian products. So they were trying to get the Russians to basically fix those, not much luck. Putin was pushing to take care of outstanding debts. And his proposal was, and this was I think a proposal you saw repeated by Putin many times, which is either 'pay debts or give us some of your assets.' At one point the Russians said, we'll just take the pipeline system that goes through Ukraine to move gas. They said that the Russians were balking at Ukrainian proposals to have some say over upgrades and modernizations of their Black Sea Fleet based in Sevastopol and Crimea. But what was interesting is they said that Putin, this would have been in 2000, 'no complaints at all about

NATO.’ And also, no complaints about where Ukraine was going with NATO. At that time, they had the NATO-Ukraine relationship. And then what was interesting was, and again, this was when I was back in Washington, in about February of 2002, the Ukrainians, actually, Deputy Foreign Minister Chaly asked our ambassador in Kyiv, ‘What would the American reaction be if we announced that our policy was to join NATO?’ And the response we gave back to him said ‘the United States would be prepared to support that, provided that you guys do the homework.’ And that means not just military reform, it means political, you got to do better on democracy. There was the NATO-Putin meeting in Rome in May 2002 where Putin agreed to re-energize and give a new depth to the NATO-Russia relationship. And then you had President George W.Bush going to Moscow for the summit meeting there. And I was there for that meeting. While we were in Moscow, the Ukrainians announced that their policy was to join NATO. And I think what the Ukrainians had done is they saw Putin moving to reinvigorate the NATO-Russia relationship as giving them cover to come out and say this. I don’t think the Russians treated it as a serious comment, and as we subsequently saw, the Ukrainians were not prepared to do the homework. At least Kuchma was not prepared to do the homework. So it’s kind of a non-issue at the time. But also, about that same time, there was a meeting between Putin and Kuchma, in which Putin basically said, ‘It’s up to Ukraine and NATO to figure out how far the relationship goes. It’s not our issue.’ That’s one of these points that leads me to conclude that now NATO enlargement is a pretext. It’s not really a cause of the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Ledesma: Our closing question. Because I believe we’ve discussed in full scope everything of our conversation, I really wanted to ask this as a student, and also, many of my friends would love to hear this from you as well. What words of advice do you have for those who aspire to work in diplomacy or within the U.S. government foreign service, especially as it relates to

European security and Russia? Additionally, what do you hope that America seeks to be in the world where the existing international system is continuously being challenged?

Pifer: Let me start with the second part. I spent my formative years at the State Department on the NATO desk. I think the North Atlantic relationship, while the Europeans do need to do more on their part and increase defense spending, which I think is now happening, the relationship still serves American interests. We share interests and values with Europe. There's a huge economic relationship there. It should matter to us whether Europe is part of the transatlantic community or whether it has to make accommodations with Russia. And, allies give us forward basing. They give us troops sometimes. The only time Article 5 was ever invoked was in defense of the United States after 9-11, and 1,000 NATO troops died in Afghanistan, and they were only there because they were allies. Even if they don't contribute actual forces, they contribute their political support. It's not the Americans being a rogue cowboy. We have more diplomatic legitimacy. So I think there's a whole bunch of assets there that I don't think President Trump recognizes, and I fear he's going to sacrifice this. The only plausible geopolitical theory that I've heard for all of this is that, and actually Secretary Rubio has referred to this, that maybe they figure if they can throw Ukraine under the bus and perhaps move a little bit back from Europe, we can somehow peel Putin off of Xi. And I just think that's a fundamental misunderstanding of the relationship between Putin and Xi. And it also does not understand Russia's dependence on China. And if we were to pursue that policy, I mean, first of all, Putin is not going to throw Xi over to make a bet on Donald Trump, who is A) unpredictable and B) will not be in office in four years' time. But if we do follow those mistaken assumptions and that policy, I think what we're going to find is two or three years down the road, we will be facing a tandem of Russia and China. They won't necessarily be allies with each other, but they will certainly be cooperating and coordinating very

closely. And we're going to find that we have many fewer friends and partners with which to deal with that challenge.

Advice. The Foreign Service was a great career. I think if somebody's interested in doing international relations and doing it as opposed to writing about it and researching about it, it's a great career. It's interesting in that for the Foreign Service at least, I think there's been a real change. There was a change, actually, by the end of the 1990s. So, when I came in in the late 1970s, the sense was that they were recruiting mainly people with poli-sci, econ, history degrees. After I finished in Ukraine, I spent nine months as a diplomat in residence at Stanford, and I did some recruiting for the State Department. And at that point, they're saying take all degrees. They apparently did a big study in the late or mid-1990s about what makes a successful foreign service officer. And they found that there was absolutely no correlation between field of study and success in the Foreign Service. They also found that there was no correlation between whether you had a graduate or undergraduate degree and success. And that was kind of valid. I came in at a pretty lean time, I think there were only 30 or 32 people in my entry class. All except four of us had either a master's or PhD. The first two in our class to make ambassador were from the four who only had a bachelor's. The Foreign Service is open to that. The skills that they're looking for are the ability to write, to do analysis, and increasingly to work in a group. Sort of the organizing principle now for an embassy, we call it a 'country team.' Basically it brings all the heads of all the agencies and the key sections of the mission together, trying to make sure that you're working as a group to advance certain objectives, or at least be aware of them. I would usually use the country team meetings, which we did in Kyiv once a week, was I wanted kind of each head to say, 'This is what I'm working on.' So everybody else would be aware, and someone would say, 'Hey, I can help you achieve that.' 'We can do the AID mission.' 'Hey, we

have a program here that would support what you're trying to do in the defense attache's office,' that sort of thing. I think even at one point, I don't know if it continues now, but when I came into the Foreign Service, the oral exam was you had about a half an hour to write a brief essay and then you spent an hour and a half with about five Foreign Service officers defending the essay and answering just a wide range of questions. And I think it's changed now to a half-day assessment period. But one of the exercises they would do is they would put eight candidates together in a room, and the group would have two hours to work out a solution to a general problem, but you each have a kind of a secret objective. And so you were rated on: Did the group achieve its objective, and did you achieve your secret objective without the rest of the group wanting to hang you?

It's a great career. You've got to be prepared to move every three years. So, flexibility is in demand. It can make it difficult for spouses who are pursuing their own careers. In my case, my wife had a PhD in molecular biology, and she gave up lab science because it was not compatible, although then she spent a number of years both in the State Department and an NGO doing science policy with other countries. I think for some of the younger generation, one of the issues is it's like the military. You're going to get promoted in a step-by-step process. You could be really brilliant, but you're going have to go through the process, there still is this sense in the Foreign Service that by going up through the ranks like that, when you get to senior levels, you will have a broader degree of experience and expertise, which will position you better to either manage a mission overseas or a large office in the State Department. The opportunities there to work overseas, travel overseas, meet interesting people, sometimes be on some really interesting events, I think are really, really intriguing.

The last point I would just make is that the Foreign Service and diplomatic work are a little bit different from most parts of the private sector, where you focus on a big contract or you do a big deal. I mean, you're looking for positive achievements. Diplomacy is about securing positive achievements, but more often than not, it's about managing problems and avoiding disaster. So, I look at the problems in the Middle East. This may be my naivete because I don't know that much about the Middle East. But there are problems there that I think we will never solve. The challenge for diplomacy, though, is can we manage them in such a way that we contain them and keep them from blowing up in a way that affects major American interests? And so disaster avoidance is usually the main job as opposed to sort of racking up daily achievements.

Ledesma: I really, really appreciated our conversation today. We talked a lot about the history of the 1990s. Hearing clarifications from you will improve my thesis as well. I fully enjoyed our conversation. So, again, thank you for taking the time out of your day to talk. And as always, a very big inspiration and an inspiration to many others.

Appendix Three

Miscellaneous Primary Sources

Source One

The Situation in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe October 1990 to March 1991, Document C-M(91)18, NATO Archive at NATO Headquarters.

This excellent NATO declassification reports on the political drama between Gorbachev and Yeltsin, along with NATO views of Yeltsin before he became President of Russia. Specifically, the document stated, “Yeltsin’s challenge, moreover, could pose serious dangers for Gorbachev, particularly Yeltsin is able to become a popularly elected President of the Russian Federation.” The document also noted that Yeltsin set a “groundwork for establishment of the position of a popularly elected president of the Russian Federation, a post he expects to win. The intensity of the attacks each has made on the other recently suggests that at least under present political circumstances, neither is seeking compromise, but the defeat of the other. Yeltsin holds many cards, including his personal popularity, the low esteem in which many Russians hold [for] Gorbachev, and growing social discontent. On the other hand, he [Yeltsin] has not yet had to stand the test of political responsibility, and his impulsive temperament and political inconsistency may make him vulnerable.” The document noted that “The essential weakness of the Centre was Gorbachev’s own lack of real legitimacy as a President elected by a quasi-democratic Congress rather than popular vote.” The document also discussed the KGB: “The KGB as an institution came under severe attack under *glasnost* as revelations multiplied about its past crimes and abuses and pressure grew to reduce its powers in keeping with the proclaimed intention of introducing a state based on the rule of law and parliamentary democracy.”

Source Two

The Situation in the Soviet Union and the Other Central and Eastern European Countries March to October 1991, Document C-M(91)93, NATO Archive at NATO Headquarters.

This NATO declassification offers their early opinion of Yeltsin. The document noted that “The outcome will depend on the Russian Republic and President Yeltsin who is now the dominant political force on the scene.”

Source Three

Ministerial Meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Berlin 3 June 1996, Document M-NAC-1(96)63, NATO Archive at NATO Headquarters.

This NATO document commented on the First Chechen War: “We remain deeply concerned about developments in Chechnya which have caused so much suffering and so many casualties. We welcome the announcement of a ceasefire in Chechnya and look forward to its full and effective implementation. We call for continued meaningful negotiations leading to a peaceful settlement of the dispute, using the continuing good offices of the OSCE. We support the efforts of the Minsk Group to achieve a political settlement of the conflict in and around Nagorno-Karabakh.”

Source Four

Ministerial Meetings of the Defense Planning Committee and the Nuclear Planning Group on 12th June 1997, Document M_DPC_NPG_1(97)70, NATO Archive at NATO Headquarters.

This document, from the NATO Defense Planning Committee and the Nuclear Planning Group, stated: “We welcome the signing of the Founding Act and look forward to reciprocal

exchanges with Russia in the framework of the Act on nuclear weapons issues, including doctrine and strategy, and consultations on nuclear safety issues. We are convinced that such exchanges can help to increase transparency and build mutual confidence between NATO and Russia. The 27th May statement made by President Yeltsin in Paris to the effect that Russia will no longer target NATO countries should contribute to developing this mutual confidence.”

Source Five

NATO Secretary General Javier Solana Madariaga Letter to Lloyd Axworthy, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Canada, SG/97/1230, 10 December 1997, NATO Archive at NATO Headquarters.

NATO Secretary General Javier Solana wrote to Lloyd Axworthy: “First, Russia. There are always ‘teething’ problems at the start of anything new. The evolving NATO-Russia relationship in the Permanent Joint Council has not been an exception. Russia has sought to place items on the PJC agenda for consultation or cooperation which test the parameters of the Founding Act. We should remain firm in defending our interests and the agreed provisions of the Founding Act. Our message should be consistent: while we will not permit Russia to have a *droit de regard* over Alliance activities, we are committed to openness and cooperation, and will fulfill our part of the Founding Act. I believe that overall we have made a good start in developing with Russia a constructive relationship that will build confidence between the two sides.”

Source Six

“Public execution in Grozny, 3 September 1997,” Video File: CA-03-V-139-S02, 0:04-1:43, The Chechen Archive by the Society for Threatened Peoples.

Chechens conduct a public execution. While doing so, they say “The world community is worried because human rights are being violated in the territory of the Chechen Republic. In the territory of the Chechen Republic, not only human rights are being violated, but in general the entire humanity. The Russian army was destroying, bombing our people, burning children, killing the elderly. So, the world community that is worried today was only concerned. So, gentlemen, do not worry. We know how to fight our crime and what methods. We will deal with ourselves at home.”

Source Seven

“VTS_01_4 (3)” Fighting in Grozny. Interview with Chechen soldiers, Fight till the last drop of blood he says., 08 August 1996, Video File: CA-01-V-175-S04 _01_4(3), 12:03-14:10, Chechen Archive by the Society of Threatened Peoples.

Interviews of Chechen fighters. “We had to take up arms. They forced us. They kill civilians, women and children. They mock people. We have no peace. We have nothing left but to take up arms. We will drive this fascist scum out of here. So that they know, and so that the future generations know, that we don’t need to go there. We didn’t go to the Russian Federation to rob it. We don’t rob it, we don’t demand anything from it. We demand that we are left alone, that we live in peace, that our children go to school, that they work.”

Source Eight

“The peacemaking group of Khasbulatov before the first war, September 1994,” Video File: CA-03-V-092-S01, _1 - _5, 1:52-4:00, The Chechen Archive by the Society of Threatened Peoples.

Beyond which is highlighted in the thesis, there is another notable moment:

Q: What is your opinion on the inevitability of a civil war?

Khasbulatov: There will be no civil war here.

Q: Why?

Khasbulatov: Why not? Because people are afraid of blood. There has never been violence in fashion here. Cruelty is not typical of our people. On the contrary, compassion and kindness. But the fact is that these people are working with Dudayev, I don't know where they came from, what kind of people they are. These mercenaries, some methods they have used.

Source Nine

“Chechnya: A Russian Nightmare,” A BBC Documentary, 1995, Video File: CA-01-V-017-S11, 7:00-8:00, The Chechen Archive by the Society of Threatened Peoples.

Beyond which is highlighted in the thesis, there is another notable statement. A barber at a salon in Chechnya said: “It's all a terrible situation. We are living in a power keg, that could blow up at any time. Yeltsin said in America ‘the Chechens are bandits, go and kill them.’ So they can and have killed us. Look at us. Are we bandits?”

Source Ten

“Tim Guldemann, Head of the OSCE Assistance Group in Chechnya meets human rights activists, 4 April 1996,” Video File: CA-01-V-184-S06, The Chechen Archive by the Society of Threatened Peoples.

Here, Tim Guldemann said: “It [the war] gets far more attention than any other country, and this is linked to the Western attitude to Russia, the West would like to approach Russia, ‘we see you are just like the communists,’ and here we have it in Chechnya. To what extent they like to hear about Chechnya, as if the Western public opinion has been too much fed on Chechen media.”

Source Eleven

“Reportage, Elections center at the time of presidential elections in the Russian Federation, 1996,” Video File: CA-03-V-024-S02.1, The Chechen Archive by the Society of Threatened Peoples.



Figure Seventeen

The Russian Presidential Election 1996

53.55% Boris Nikolaevich Yeltsin, 40.55% Gennady Andreevich Zyuganov. Against all candidates 4.90%

Source Twelve

Christina Catherine Krause, “75 years of NATO: The North Atlantic Treaty Alliance at a critical juncture,” Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 2024, <https://www.kas.de/en/75-years-of-nato>.

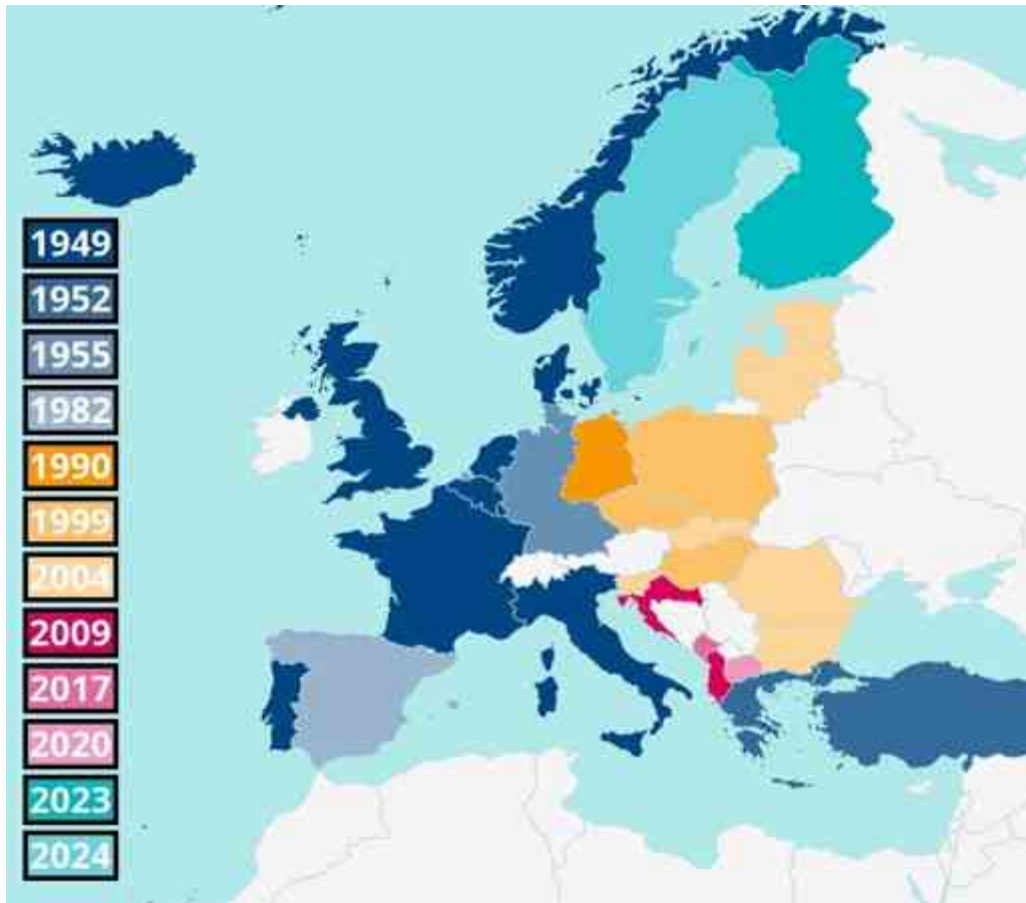


Figure Eighteen

The Historical Timeline of NATO Expansion

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@GreyDynamics [private U.K. intelligence firm] posted on November 18, 2021, on X (Formerly Twitter), with the caption: “Alexander Rutskoy, acting Russian President during the 1993 constitutional crisis in Moscow with his security staff. Rocking AKS-74Us, tracksuit and Converse Sneakers. ‘It’s a whole vibe’ as the kids say...,” <https://t.co/TEtA3KFQOv>.