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Missile Defences and Yeltsin’s Russia

Although the ending of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union significantly changed the context of relations between Moscow and Washington, during these years missile defences continued to play an important role in Russian diplomacy. In his first address to the United Nations Security Council as President of an independent, post-Soviet Russia, Boris Yeltsin called for the Americans to join Russia in a research and development effort to create a new global system to protect their territories from attack by nuclear missiles. Yeltsin’s speech was intended to send a signal to Washington that Moscow’s attitude towards the West was friendly and that it was willing to cooperate in all fields, even those which were formerly the most sensitive. By the end of Yeltsin’s second term, however, this proposed cooperation on missile defences had not materialized in any substantial form and instead Russia was under pressure from the United States to agree to amendments to the ABM Treaty which would permit the Americans to deploy a theatre missile defence – a development which many Russians feared would be the first step towards a national missile defence for the United States.

Throughout the 1990s there were considerable and contradictory pressures on Russian ABM policy. Supporters of an expanded Russian missile defence effort were more vociferous than ever, referring in their arguments to an increase in regional threats to Russia as well as cool relations with an expanded NATO alliance. The armed forces – many of whose analysts favoured missile defences – were in a stronger position to influence security policy than their civilian counterparts, who no longer enjoyed the direct access to policymakers which many had experienced during the Gorbachev years. There was at the same time, however, deep concern that any statements from Moscow indicating
an increase in the Russian missile defence programme would further undermine the ABM Treaty and encourage the Americans to move still faster towards a national defence of their own. But the deciding factor which prevented a significant Russian ABM effort during the 1990s was the continual financial crisis experienced by the state budget, which could barely afford to maintain the existing Galosh system deployed around Moscow, let alone embark on a new missile defence project.

**Politics and policymaking in post-Soviet Russia**

During Yeltsin’s leadership political life in Russia underwent some remarkable transitions. In some respects politics in Yeltsin’s Russia was more democratic than at any time in the Soviet period. Regular elections for the State Duma (parliament) involving multiple candidates and multiple political parties became an accepted fact of life. Russia gained a constitution approved by referendum, an independent judiciary including a constitutional court and its President successfully campaigned for re-election in 1996. But while some institutions and practices have developed in a democratic manner, the same cannot be said for policymaking, in particular for policy decisions affecting national security, which continued to be made by a small group of ministers and advisers who surrounded the President.

Although Yeltsin had risen through the ranks of the Communist Party, serving as First Party Secretary in Sverdlovsk and later leading Moscow’s Party organization, during the *perestroika* period he gained a reputation for being a champion of the ordinary people. Yeltsin’s opposition to the Party’s practice of providing a comfortable and privileged life for its elite won him much popularity. Although his impatience with the slow pace of reform and his criticism of Gorbachev at a meeting of the Central Committee in 1987 cost him his high-profile post, he managed to rebuild his political career, increasingly looking outside the Party for allies and eventually breaking with it entirely, dramatically resigning his membership in 1990 and going on in the following year to win the newly-established post of President of the Russian Federation. The early months following the failure of the August 1991 coup attempt was a time of enormous optimism for many in Russia. Yeltsin was widely seen both at home and abroad as a democrat and a reformer. But in spite of the promise of a new, post-Soviet era, old political habits proved hard to overcome. Yeltsin and his team of reform-minded ministers and advisers soon became locked in