Chapter Two


Either we create presidential power or chaos triumphs. This is our choice.

—an unnamed “government source” in Pravda, 1990

Social Chaos and the Soviet Presidency

Although Boris Yeltsin was elected president of the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic in June 1991, he took office under the shadow of another presidency barely older than his own. Little more than a year earlier, the Soviet Congress of People’s deputies had elected Mikhail Gorbachev the first “president of the USSR,” a new office that represented the first independent executive post in Soviet history. Although it may have seemed another step on the road to a changed, democratic Soviet Union—a newly formed legislature had chosen the nation’s first independent president—it was in fact an act of desperation. Until 1990, the theory and practice of governing the Soviet Union had been predicated on the explicit rejection of the very idea of separated powers, or even of classical models of parliamentarism. But that was before perestroika had gone awry, and Soviet society had descended into chaos and violence. Gorbachev’s post was created as a reaction to this turmoil and growing fear, conditions that would be bequeathed to the Russian presidency (and its counterparts elsewhere in the Commonwealth of Independent States) when the Soviet government finally imploded. The Soviet president was the first, but not the last, in this region, and the lessons of Gorbachev’s doomed experiment would not be lost on Yeltsin or the Russians as the
Union crumbled about them and power made its inexorable way from the president of the USSR to the presidents of the republics. This acceleration of social disorder spurred the emergence of a rough system of separated powers in the final years of the Soviet period. The fall of Gorbachev as Soviet president coincides with Yeltsin’s return from political exile, just as the collapse of the Soviet presidential system was paralleled by the rise of the Russian and other republican presidencies. The Soviet presidential experiment is important not only in terms of the institutions it left behind in the Russian Federation, but also in terms of how it affected the Russians and the politicians who would emerge as their new leaders.

The Failure of Perestroika

Perestroika was a paradoxical approach to reforming the USSR, and a lesson in the law of unintended consequences. The paradox lay in the fact that perestroika, as it was originally conceived by Gorbachev and his advisors in late 1985 and early 1986, relied heavily for its success on the very thing it was supposed to create: Gorbachev’s plans to restore order in the workplace and morale in the streets required precisely the kind of civic, disciplined, lawful, and cooperative society (a society, in other words, rich in accumulated social capital) that the Soviet Union lacked in the first place. The unintended consequences arose from the regime’s basic misunderstanding of the forces it had unleashed. Soviet reformers found that their main problem was not that perestroika had failed to reinvigorate public life, but rather that it had succeeded too well, by opening the public arena to a torrent of movements over which the regime quickly lost even the semblance of control. The atomization of Soviet society in the previous six decades meant that beneath the surface of Soviet repression was not a nascent civil society waiting only for the right moment to emerge, but rather a loose hodgepodge of small underground groups reflecting conflicting and often extreme views and interests. Little wonder that the period between 1986 and 1990 is characterized by Russian researchers as one of “mass disorder in the USSR.” Far from uniting society or creating a new basis of legitimacy for the regime, the openness associated with perestroika and glasnost actually allowed for the vocal expression of complaints, and for the settling of scores old and new.

Gorbachev and his advisors did not understand the contradiction built into their own thinking about reform, or how that contradiction led to the Communist Party’s eventual loss of control over Soviet society. In part, this