Chapter Five

Electing the Russian President, 1996

The most important fact connected with elections of the Russian Federation president was that these elections occurred at all.

—Roy Medvedev, 1996

We know Yeltsin and we know what to expect from him. He would not cut Russia off at the knees, burying the reforms. He would not introduce censorship. He would not strangle democracy. And nothing more of a president is required.

—journalist Leonid Zhukovitskii, 1996

The 1996 Elections:
A True Test of Russian Democracy?

The 1996 elections for the Russian presidency were not, in the end, a final or comprehensive test of the durability of Russian democracy. That the elections took place at all was important, of course, but they ended in continuity rather than change. The incumbent was returned to office, and so a defining moment in the life of a young democracy—the peaceful transfer of power from the ruling group to its opponents—has been put off at least until the 2004 elections or even later. But the elections were a test of something as, if not more, important than electoral procedure: the relationship between the Russian citizen and the democratic process itself. The elections showed that Russians, despite everything they had been put through by their national leaders since 1991, still cared about politics and still believed that participation in the political process mattered.

This was no small achievement, considering the prevailing mood of cynicism that supposedly dominated Russia at the opening of the campaign...
season. As veteran Russia-watcher (and former U.S. ambassador to the USSR) Jack Matlock later wrote, conventional political wisdom in Moscow in the winter of 1996 “incorporated two convictions: (1) that elections, if held at all, would be a sham; and (2) that, though Yeltsin was unlikely to go quietly, it would not make much difference to the country if he were to lose the election, even to the Communist candidate, Gennady Zyuganov.” That summer, the conventional wisdom was defeated, as Russians turned out in large numbers to vote in a free and fair election for candidates among whom there were recognizable differences. Encouragingly, the results were accepted by the winners and losers alike. Less than three years had passed since the destruction of the Supreme Soviet and the collapse of the First Republic, and thus the wide participation and acceptance of the election was itself an encouraging sign that Russians remained, despite evident misgivings, broadly committed to the democratic institutions they had put in place in the new constitution.

But in a society as mistrustful as Russia’s, does the mere fact of completing a presidential election really have any lasting implications for democratic consolidation? Critics of presidential systems argue that presidential elections, even when held successfully, in fact cause more political damage than they prevent. If the only choice, the argument goes, is between two candidates, then the contest is by definition one in which first prize is supreme executive power and second prize is complete political defeat, and this stark, zero-sum struggle can only serve to polarize society. The winner-take-all character of a presidential election should be perceived as especially threatening by social or political minorities; while the electoral process may require some sort of short-term consensus to produce a victory, “the popular election of the president and the concentration of executive power in one person are strong influences in the direction of majoritarianism” that serve to discourage the formation of cohesive parties that might otherwise represent those minority interests.

Such criticisms, however, cannot account for the situation in which Russia found itself after the Soviet collapse. The lack of cohesive parties was not due to the presence of presidential institutions, but was due rather to social conditions created by seven decades of communist rule. Russia’s presidential election, by offering voters a clear choice between two broad approaches to government, helped to overcome, rather than to exacerbate, Russian social divisions—a reversal of the expectation of antipresidentialist arguments. As one American political analyst later wrote, “the key factor determining Yeltsin’s surprising reelection in 1996 was the consolidation of reformist and centrist voters behind a single candidate,”