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REVIEW ESSAY

WHERE WILL PRESIDENTIAL AUTOCRACY TAKE RUSSIA?

Sergei Khrushchev

Nichols, Thomas. *The Russian Presidency: Society and Politics in the Second Russian Republic*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999. 200pp. \$45

This book describes the Russian presidency between 1990 and 1996, its society, and its politics in the “Second Russian Republic” between 1993 and 1996. Examining one of the most dramatic periods in the history of Russia, Nichols begins with Mikhail Gorbachev’s attempt to pull down the old authoritarian system and to push Russia onto a democratic path of development.

In the first two sections, the author—a Naval War College professor—briefly recounts the events of the years 1985–1991, offering his own interpretation of Gorbachev’s failure. He poses a question: What kind of democracy, parliamentary or presidential, suits Russia better? This issue has never before been discussed in this way, even though it is a most urgent topic with respect to what has been happening, and is happening now, in Russia. Nichols concludes that presi-

dential democracy is preferable, maintaining that “presidentialism in Russia is not a ‘mistake,’ an experiment, or an authoritarian hoodwinking of the public, but rather a deliberate act, a compromise among elites who, like the public that elected them, see it as the system most likely to protect all of them from each other.”

Furthermore, the author finds confirmation of his thinking in the chaotic parliamentary democracy of Gorbachev’s time, when both politicians and the people, unaccustomed to liberty, fell upon each other

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with mutual accusations, paralyzed the office of the president, and disoriented the whole of society, all of which rapidly led to the disintegration of the economy, inflation, and loss of central control over vast regions—culminating in December 1991 in the breakup of the country and the departure of Gorbachev from the political scene.

As a counterbalance to Gorbachev, Nichols advances Boris Yeltsin, who was elected in June 1991 as the president of Russia. Yeltsin began a bitter struggle with parliament and parliamentarism. He struggled for the establishment of strong presidential power—so strong that soon his democratic-reformist appointees (especially Boris Nemtsov) almost openly called the president a tsar.

Nichols is absolutely right. Between the uncircumscribed freedom of parliamentarism, which in Russia's case was accompanied by anarchy, and a presidentialism that resembles monarchism, the latter is preferable. In the former case, the response to anarchy would be an even harsher dictatorship, but in the latter case there could be hope that the country would pass over the reefs of a transitional period and gradually enter the mainstream of normal democratic development.

Nichols argues his case quite persuasively, dividing Yeltsin's presidency into the "First Republic" (up to the shelling of parliament by tanks in October 1993) and the "Second Republic," when Yeltsin carved out for himself a presidential republic, in which the Duma became in large measure a deliberative organ, as during the rule of the last Russian emperor, Nicholas II. In the author's opinion, this turnaround allowed Russia to overcome the political crisis of 1993 and offered the chance for peaceful development. This fairly detailed account of the events of those years closes with the election of Yeltsin for a second term as president of Russia in June 1996.

Where will presidential autocracy take Russia? Nichols poses the question without answering it, for no answer exists. However, the book obliges the reader to consider deeply the complexity of introducing democracy into an undemocratic society, and the vicissitudes of that process. Unfortunately, in explaining the difficulty of the democratic transformation in Russia, Nichols makes the usual mistake of Western studies of describing all obstacles as proceeding from the totalitarian Soviet epoch, the atomization of Soviet society, etc. In fact, everything is much more complicated. The Soviet period was undoubtedly totalitarian, notwithstanding its Marxist ideological dogma, little different from the preceding centuries of Russian monarchical absolutism. Whereas the West, especially the United States, grew out of the Roman tradition of respect for written law, and therefore for constitutions, or basic laws, Russian political culture matured with the Byzantine emphasis on the Will as something higher than the Law. Seventy years of Soviet rule did not change the Russians; they reinterpreted

Marxism, and Western ideology, in their own fashion, just as they are now trying to reinterpret Western democracy. Therefore, Russia's progress toward a normal democratic government will be more painful than Nichols represents.

Having given a history of the Russian presidency, the author unfortunately limits himself to a superficial account of the myriad interparty confrontations. Within Russia all the "party" intrigues appear to be merely reflections of a struggle for national power among oligarchic-criminal groups that emerged as a result of fraudulent privatization—groups that control political parties, power structures within the government and the administration, the press, and television. Regrettably, this key aspect of political life in both the First and, especially, the Second Republics is completely absent from the book, a fact that substantially lessens its value for understanding what is and has been going on in Russia. Neither does Nichols in his analysis hesitate to indulge an easy division of historical players into good and bad.

For example, he paints the speaker of the parliament in the First Republic, Ruslan Khasbulatov, and Vice President Aleksandr Rutskoi in exclusively dark tones. Such an interpretation of events simplifies the author's exposition but distorts the historical picture. In the parliament-president conflict of 1992–93 both sides were to blame—and perhaps Yeltsin, with his pathological striving for personal power, more than Khasbulatov. Undoubtedly, the Yeltsin-Khasbulatov struggle had to result in the elimination of one of them from the political arena. Nichols seems to welcome Yeltsin's victory, but *The Russian Presidency* would doubtless have benefited had the author turned his attention to the forces that the two players stood for. It would have been interesting to examine the possible results had Yeltsin *not* signed the unconstitutional Decree 1400 that dissolved parliament and the constitutional court, and suspended the operation of the constitution itself.

In addition, not to the author's credit are several political clichés that have been transferred to this serious, historical work from the pages of periodicals. Thus Vladimir Zhirinovskiy and his Liberal-Democratic Party are presented by the author as a demonic, fascist opposition force. Yet Nichols declares it to be well known that Zhirinovskiy and his party have always been controlled by the government and the president, voting in parliament as ordered by the Kremlin, and that its extremist-hooligan rhetoric serves a single goal, to divert the populace from the actual oppositional and protofascist movements, like the Russian National Unity Party.

Also questionable is Nichols's contradistinction in the last chapter between Boris Yeltsin and the Belorussian president, Aleksandr Lukashenko, as a civilized and powerful president versus an abominable dictator, respectively. In such a scientific-historical work, such propagandistic methods used without concrete

evidence are inadmissible and reduce confidence in the author. If one is to be objective, Lukashenko is the very image of Yeltsin. In 1994, he repeated everything that Yeltsin did in 1993 but without having tanks shoot at the Belorussian parliament. The emergence of president-autocrats has been a phenomenon in the post-Soviet era; Yeltsin and Lukashenko, far from being exceptions, require separate, serious analyses along the lines established by this book.