

# 1. Conflict Studies Research Centre

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## Russia: Fragile Stability?

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The introduction of an anti-crisis programme by the Russian government makes clear that Russia's economic and political situation is grim. But it is not clear whether the programme will be accepted in its entirety by the parliament, and even if formally adopted by it, whether the Russian state machine has the will and the ability to implement the programme's measures. If parliament fails to adopt the measures then it is possible (although unlikely, as the president can introduce the measures by decree) that parliament will be disbanded, which would add to the political tension in the country.

Russia has been relatively stable since the forcible disbanding of the old parliament in October 1993. The military intervention in Chechnya did not adversely affect stability elsewhere throughout the Russian Federation. This high degree of stability has been surprising to many, and it may well last. It is important, however, to be mindful of how stable systems can suddenly become extremely unstable. The communist system in Poland almost collapsed overnight in 1980 when price rises led to nationwide workers' riots and the establishment of the Solidarity trade union. Iran appeared stable until the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in late 1978 culminated in a revolution which overthrew the Shah. The collapse of communist regimes in Eastern Europe in 1989 was also unexpected, particularly the violent overthrow of the Ceausescu regime in Romania. The riots that occurred in Indonesia in May 1998 were unpredicted, and led to the overthrow of President Suharto. There are therefore plenty of precedents of how stable systems can suddenly become unstable. Russia's stability might last, but it should not be automatically assumed that it will.

### **POSSIBLE SOURCES OF INSTABILITY**

1. Yel'tsin's uncertain health and impetuous style of rule means that he is no longer the guarantor of stability that he appeared to be several years ago. His capriciousness could cause instability.
2. The miners' strike that has resulted in the blocking of parts of the Trans-Siberian railway.
3. Strikes and protests of workers in the defence industry. Striking defence workers in the Maritime Province have called for Yel'tsin's resignation. Defence industry workers have also demonstrated in Moscow.
4. The election of Aleksandr Lebed' as governor of Krasnoyarsk region could result in a more conflictual centre-regional relationship.

None of these developments necessarily mean that Russia could face the sort of mass unrest that toppled Suharto in Indonesia, or the communist regimes in Eastern Europe in 1989. It is quite

possible that the miners' and defence workers' strikes could pose no threat to political stability, and so inflict no damage on the body politic. It is however unwise to assume that simply because these developments have so far not undermined stability that they will never do so.

There is considerable latent discontent in Russia. The 40% of votes cast for Yel'tsin's communist challenger, Gennady Zyuganov, in the 1996 presidential election reveal dissatisfaction with the status quo. It is possible that, had Yel'tsin been confronted by a more attractive non-communist candidate in 1996, he would have been defeated. It is therefore quite within the realms of probability that if an individual emerges with the necessary personal qualities (ie charisma and organisational backing), then he could perhaps focus this discontent and thereby create a powerful opposition force to the status quo. The likelihood of this will increase if the economy collapses. It is also possible that large-scale outbreaks of mass violence could occur that could directly threaten the Yel'tsin leadership.

The emergence of a powerful opposition movement, or mass violence, or a political crisis caused by an unconstitutional disbanding of the Duma and Federation Council increases the possibility of some form of coup attempt, either by opponents of Yel'tsin within the ruling elite who may feel that he has become a liability, or by Yel'tsin himself in order to maintain his grip on power.

Such developments are unlikely at present, and the IMF loan, plus some of the anti-crisis measures undertaken by the government of prime minister Sergey Kiriyenko are likely to ensure social peace for the immediate and medium term future (ie over the next 18 months). There is no leader or movement currently capable of galvanising resistance to the Yel'tsin leadership, and any unrest caused by economic hardship is likely to occur only in specific regions and will therefore be easily containable. However, it is important to bear in mind that simply because there has been no mass unrest since the end of the USSR does not mean that there can never be mass unrest and serious political upheavals.

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