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Insight

The Moscow coup(s) of 1991: Who won and why does it still matter?

by Ian Bond, 17 August 2021

Thirty years after the coup that triggered the Soviet Union's collapse, Russia is ruled by the heirs of the plotters, not their democratic opponents. Why?

The August 1991 coup by hard-line conservatives against the reformist Soviet president, Mikhail Gorbachev, ended in failure after three days. But three decades later, modern Russia's political system owes more to the putschists than to the Russian democrats who defeated them. What can the West learn from what went wrong?

Gorbachev had become General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) in March 1985, at the end of 'the epoch of stagnation' – the period after the overthrow of Nikita Khrushchev in 1964, marked by political repression and a lack of reform, under an increasingly aged and decrepit Soviet leadership. Gorbachev's goal was to make the Soviet system work better, not to dismantle it. His economic reforms (*perestroika*, or 'restructuring') aimed to force state-owned enterprises to take some account of the laws of supply and demand, rather than just the targets in the central plan. For the first time since the 1920s, co-operative businesses were permitted, in an effort to provide the goods and services that the state sector did not. These reforms, however, did little to improve Soviet economic performance. Among other things, Gorbachev had to cope with oil prices plummeting from $70 when he came to power to $26 a year later. Shortages of foodstuffs and consumer goods, always a feature of the Soviet planned economy, were becoming intolerable by 1991.

Meanwhile, Gorbachev's political and human rights reforms (*glasnost*', or 'openness') were designed to expose inefficient or corrupt officials, seen as the obstacles to successful reform, but also gave people the confidence to criticise the fundamental tenets of the totalitarian system. Importantly, in the 15 republics making up the Soviet Union *glasnost*' gave nationalists – previously subject to brutal repression – the freedom to agitate for independence. Though Gorbachev occasionally used force in response to secessionist activities, he also – in the face of conservative opposition – gave the republics more autonomy in an effort to placate the nationalists.

There were in effect two coups in August 1991. The first began on August 18th when Gorbachev was placed under house arrest in his holiday home in Crimea. The heads of the KGB, interior ministry

and armed forces, together with Gorbachev's vice-president, prime minister and a handful of other Communist Party officials, aimed to roll back Gorbachev's political and economic reforms, and in particular to stop the signing on August 20th of the so-called Union Treaty, transferring considerable power and property from the central authorities to the republics. They declared themselves the 'State Committee on the State of Emergency' (with the Russian acronym GKChP) and announced on the morning of August 19th that Gorbachev had resigned for health reasons.

The second 'coup' began as soon as the GKChP showed its hand on August 19th. With Gorbachev held incommunicado in Crimea, Boris Yeltsin, the charismatic but erratic president of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RFSFR) – the largest of the Soviet republics – co-ordinated resistance to first coup, calling publicly for Gorbachev's return, but was simultaneously the prime mover in the second.

Unlike Gorbachev, elected Soviet president by the Congress of People's Deputies (the partly-democratic Soviet Parliament), Yeltsin had been elected by a popular vote in June 1991, defeating Gorbachev's preferred candidate. Yeltsin initially responded to the GKChP coup by demanding "a return to normal constitutional development", and calling Muscovites onto the streets. But by the time the GKChP was dissolved on August 21st, he had transferred power over the Russian economy and the Soviet security forces on Russian territory to himself, though he had no constitutional or legal power to do so, and had reduced Gorbachev to insignificance. This second coup was the one which counted.

These events took the West by surprise. Western leaders were heavily invested in Gorbachev, who had signed far-reaching arms reduction agreements with them, and presided over German unification and the (relatively peaceful) end of communist rule in Eastern Europe. Gorbachev's standing in the West, however, blinded Western politicians to the fact that his domestic position was much more precarious. Muscovites did not take to the streets to protest when Yeltsin unconstitutionally stripped Gorbachev and the Soviet authorities of power after the coup. Gorbachev's unpopularity meant that even though the majority of the Russian population would probably have preferred to keep the Soviet Union in one piece, there was no unrest when Yeltsin unilaterally withdrew Russia from it. He thereby made it easier for other republics to leave. The final nail in the Soviet coffin came when the leaders of Belarus, Russia and Ukraine met on December 8th and declared that the Soviet Union "as a subject of international law and a geopolitical reality is ceasing its existence"; it legally expired on December 25th.

Vladimir Putin was a KGB officer in Dresden from 1985 to 1990 – while Gorbachev left East Germany to its fate. By 1991 he had become deputy mayor of St Petersburg, as the Soviet Union's economic and political order disintegrated. What lessons did he draw from the coup and the events around it? In his authorised autobiography/interview 'First Person', published in 2000, Putin says "In the days of the putsch all the ideals and goals that I had on going to work in the KGB collapsed". It is not clear whether he was disappointed that the KGB had tried to depose Gorbachev, or that it had failed so incompetently. But evidently he did not lose his faith in the methods of the KGB, or in its personnel. Yeltsin split up the KGB into a number of different services; Putin has reassembled most of them in the Federal Security Service (FSB), with the exception of foreign intelligence. He has also placed former KGB officers in key national security and economic posts: Nikolai Patrushev as Secretary of the Russian Security Council (which Putin chairs); Sergei Ivanov as defence minister and then (till 2016) as Kremlin chief of staff; and Igor Sechin as boss of oil giant Rosneft. Thirty years after the failed coup attempt, the KGB and its successors are as central to the way Russia operates as they were in the late Soviet period; the reformers around Gorbachev and Yeltsin are largely irrelevant.

Putin also understood that Gorbachev was in the end weaker than Yeltsin because the latter had a democratic mandate, and the backing of the Moscow street. Putin has put considerable effort into ensuring that no potentially dangerous opponent (such as the anti-corruption campaigner Alexei Navalny) can win an electoral mandate and that there are harsh punishments to deter street protests. The current Russian system does not leave room for any opponent of Putin to develop an alternative power-base.

Like many Russians, in 1991 and since, Putin seems to be astonished that the Soviet Union fell apart so quickly after the coup. He said in 2005 that its collapse was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century, and in 2018 that he would reverse it if he could. He struggles to see why nations ruled from Moscow, and especially Ukraine, might have wanted to be independent. In his July 2021 article 'On the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians' he claims that in 1991 "people found themselves abroad overnight, taken away… from their historical motherland" – a characterisation that might surprise the Ukrainians, more than 90 per cent of whom voted for independence in a referendum in December 1991.

Because he does not acknowledge Ukrainian independence and the collapse of the Soviet Union as the inevitable consequences of the Soviet system's insoluble problems and Gorbachev's failed reforms, Putin attributes them to age-old Western plans to weaken and divide Russia. Yet ironically, in the run-up to the coup, Western leaders like President George H W Bush had tried to keep the Soviet Union together. After meeting Gorbachev in Moscow, Bush had visited Kyiv and warned Ukrainians against pursuing independence. Once the Soviet Union had collapsed, however, Bush proclaimed: "By the grace of God, America won the Cold War" – ignoring the role played by Gorbachev, Yeltsin and the Russian citizens who came out onto the streets to resist a return to totalitarianism, and feeding the narrative, subsequently adopted by Putin, that the West had humiliated Russia.

What lessons should Western countries and institutions learn from what has gone wrong in Russia since 1991, both for Russia policy and for broader crisis response?

★ First, to de-personalise the analysis on which policies are based. Western leaders by-and-large liked the civilised reformer Gorbachev and distrusted the often boorish and unpredictable Yeltsin, so they convinced themselves that Gorbachev was more secure than he was, and that Yeltsin was irrelevant. The risk now is that Western policy-makers focus too much on Putin and his personal power (which is considerable) at the expense of understanding other elements of the Russian economy and society – which may matter more in a decade or two (or sooner).

★ Second, not to stereotype populations. Before the coup, Soviet citizens were assumed to be passive, cowed by decades of repression. Yet when the GKChP threatened the new freedoms that Gorbachev had given them, they came onto the streets in enormous numbers to defend them, despite the considerable risk. The fact that Russia has only had a democratic system of government for a few chaotic years in the 1990s does not mean democracy in Russia is impossible, if conditions are right in future. The same applies to other authoritarian states.

★ Third, not to assume that desirable economic changes will automatically lead to desirable political and legal changes – a mistake of Western policy towards China as well as Russia. Much of the Western advice that Russia and other former Soviet states got after the coup focused on economic reforms, setting up stock markets, fostering small businesses and the like. Much less attention was devoted to establishing the rule of law, and breaking the power of the KGB. Immediately after

the coup attempt when the KGB had discredited itself and Yeltsin could have been persuaded to reconstruct it from the ground up, the West was at best an interested spectator. Though Yeltsin had formally split the KGB's functions between a number of successor agencies, large parts of it continued to exist, unreformed, with new names but no new ethos. Russia became a kleptocracy in which serving and former intelligence officers played a disproportionate role in politics and business, and were often the biggest thieves. By contrast, in Central Europe the KGB's affiliates were abolished, and replaced, with Western advice, by intelligence and security structures better adapted to modern democratic states.

★ Finally, to have contingency plans even for unlikely events, and be ready to implement them decisively. Though Russian history had plenty of examples of long periods of stasis followed by sudden and dramatic periods of change, the Western assumption before the coup was that change in the Soviet Union would be modest and gradual. In 1987, experts met in the UK to discuss prospects for the Soviet Union in preparation for a visit by Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher to Moscow; they concluded: "The Soviet system might at best evolve in 20 years time into something resembling Yugoslavia today." Nicholas Burns, US National Security Council Soviet affairs director in 1991, told the historian Serhii Plokhy "I do not think anyone thought on the American side in summer 1991 of any realistic possibility that the Soviet Union would disintegrate".

No-one was prepared for Gorbachev to be overthrown; though he had been such a vital partner in ending the Cold War, the West had no plan, except to see what the outcome of the coup was. Because the subsequent rapid collapse of the Soviet Union had seemed unimaginable, the response ended up being hastily improvised. At a time when the post-Soviet space was like molten metal, waiting to be poured into a mould, opportunities to reshape it radically were missed: European security might have turned out differently had NATO ministers responded more positively when Yeltsin wrote to the Secretary General, Manfred Wörner, in December 1991, stating that it was Russia's long-term political aim to join NATO. Instead, British foreign secretary Douglas Hurd's reaction was typical of the Western view: "It's a long way off. It won't be on the actual agenda for a bit of time to come". The official *communiqué* from the meeting at which the Russian representative delivered Yeltsin's message does not even mention it.

As Putin ages and Russia's hydrocarbon-dependent economy struggles on, it is easy to see parallels between today's Russia and the stagnation-era Soviet Union. But they are not the same, even if political freedom is shrinking and repression is increasing. Though Russia's economy has structural problems, there is still food in the shops, and Putin does not face the kind of internal opposition that dogged Gorbachev in 1991. But it would be a mistake for the West to base all its plans on the idea that Putin's rule will continue serenely until 2036, when he will be succeeded by a clone. The 1991 coup(s) should be a reminder that Russia – and other apparently stable countries – can be full of surprises.

The account of events in 1991 draws partly on my recollections, but more importantly on Sir Rodric Braithwaite's 'Across the Moscow River: The world turned upside down'; Fiona Hill and Clifford Gaddy's 'Mr Putin: Operative in the Kremlin'; Serhii Plokhy's 'The last empire: The final days of the Soviet Union'; and Angela Stent's 'Putin's world: Russia against the West and with the rest'.

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