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Russian President Proposed Far-Reaching Nuclear Reductions, Bush Not So Sure

U.S. ambassador on Yeltsin: Russians "want a tsar with a common touch"

Russian leaders sensitive to Ukrainian concerns but saw Ukraine as the "main destabilizing factor"

By Svetlana Savranskaya and Tom Blanton

Washington D.C., January 30, 2023 - The George H.W. Bush administration was reluctant to embrace the "relations of deep mutual trust and alliance" proposed by the newly independent Russian Federation and its leader, Boris Yeltsin, in early 1992, according to declassified U.S. documents published today by the National Security Archive.

The Bush administration's cautious management of U.S.-Soviet relations at the end of the Soviet Union in 1991 had focused primarily on command and control of the remaining Soviet nuclear weapons that were scattered over 15 republics, plus encouragement of radical economic reforms in Russia, without much in the way of U.S. economic aid - just exhortations.

The documents show Yeltsin was eager for new and dramatic arms control arrangements that would exceed whatever former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev had offered in his "arms race in reverse" in the late 1980s, and that Yeltsin sought American backing for Russia to take the Soviet Union's place in a bipolar world. But the 1990s were the years of the American "unipolar moment" in geopolitics, and tragic years for Russia, where rule by decree replaced any parliamentary democracy, the economy collapsed twice into depression, and the legacy was a return to authoritarianism. Yeltsin describes his economic troubles candidly and warns his American counterparts that if there is no aid to the countries of the commonwealth, "there would be a reversal."

The subject of relations with Ukraine comes up in almost all of the conversations. Yeltsin is committed to resolving disputes amicably and describes his relationship with President Leonid Kravchuk as "very good." The Russian president understands the domestic pressures Kravchuk faces from nationalist groups in the parliament. While trying to be sensitive to the Ukrainian concerns, the Russian leaders believe that Ukraine is "our main destabilizing factor." Yegor Gaidar believes that Russian-Ukrainian issues will take a long time to be fully resolved but assures Bush that there would be no "Yugoslav-type case in Russian-Ukrainian relations." Ukraine, Kazakhstan, and Belarus agreed to send Soviet nuclear weapons back to Russia for dismantlement and signed the Lisbon protocol making them parties to the START I Treaty as non-nuclear states in May 1992.

Declassified as the result of Freedom of Information Act requests by the National Security Archive, these documents represent early highlights from a forthcoming reference collection covering the entire 1990s, *US-Russian Relations from the End of the Soviet Union to the Rise of Vladimir Putin*, to

be published by ProQuest in the award-winning Digital National Security Archive series.

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