



NATIONAL RESEARCH UNIVERSITY
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**FRAMING THE MEMORY OF THE
RECENT PAST: THE COMPETING
NARRATIVES OF THE
CONSTITUTIONAL CRISIS OF 1993**

**BASIC RESEARCH PROGRAM
WORKING PAPERS**

**SERIES: POLITICAL SCIENCE
WP BRP 84/PS/2021**

This Working Paper is an output of a research project implemented at the National Research University Higher School of Economics (HSE). Any opinions or claims contained in this Working Paper do not necessarily reflect the views of

HSE

FRAMING THE MEMORY OF THE RECENT PAST: THE COMPETING NARRATIVES OF THE CONSTITUTIONAL CRISIS OF 1993²

The article presents some results of a study of framing the collective memory about “the 1990s” in Russian political discourse. It is devoted to the most dramatic event of the post-Soviet transition in Russia – the political crisis of 1993 that led to adoption of the Constitution that formally functions till now. The author analyzes constructing the conflicting interpretations of the crisis by studying mass media publications in the post-Yeltsin period. To reveal the evolution of competing public narratives, the article focuses on three round figures anniversaries of the events, in 2003, 2013 and 2018, that reflect different stages of Russia’s political development. It demonstrates the significant change in the official discourse after Vladimir Putin’s coming to the presidential office. The narratives about the victory of reformers over counter-reformers and pre-emptive violence aimed to stop a civil war, that were used by Yeltsin, dropped off to be substituted by the story about the Constitution as a historical choice of the Russian people. Putin tended to remember about the 1993 crisis to emphasize “the stability” that was considered the main achievement of his rule. The narratives articulated by the Communists and other successors of the memory of the White House defenders did not change much over time. The author explains it by noting that, in these discourses, the events of 1993 took the shape of the “myth of origin” of Putin’s political regime. On the contrary, the discourse of the Liberals evolved, as, by the 2010s, the apologetic interpretations typical for 2003 gave a way for the critical ones. The tendency for bridging between the narratives about the consequences (though not the reasons) of the crises articulated by the Communists and the Liberals became visible in the recent period. However, it does not prevent the symbolic conflict between them that plays a decisive role in constructing their political identities.

Keywords: Political uses of the past, collective memory, political narratives, the political crisis of 1993 in Russia, Constitution of Russian Federation, official political discourse, the Communists, the Liberals.

JEL Classifications: Z

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² The publication was prepared within the framework of the Academic Fund Program at the HSE University in 2020–2021 (grant № 20-01-058).

Introduction

Memory is an important factor of political behavior, especially when it concerns a dramatic social transformation, such as Russia had experienced in the 1990s [Belmonte & Rochlitz, 2019]. Perceptions of the past, even if they are based on a personal experience, essentially rely on theories, narratives, symbols and images available in mediatized discourses [Irwin-Zarecka 1994: 14; Langenbacher, 2010: 29 etc.]. Politicians, journalists and film-makers start interpreting significant events of the recent past much earlier than professional historians put them under close scrutiny. For this reason, a study of repertoire of shared ideas about the past is none the less important for understanding the mechanisms of political behavior than surveys exploring its perceptions by the public. By Jeffry Olick's terms, we should study both *the collected memory*, as aggregated individual memories of members of a group, and *the collective memory*, as "the social and cultural patternings of public and personal memory" [Olick 1999: 333]. Sociological surveys tell much about the dynamics of collected memory about the post-Soviet transformation in Russia [Doktorov et. al 2002; Sobytiya 2017; Greben', Agapeeva 2020], but till recent the construction of collective memory, as a shared repertoire of ideas, images, symbols and narratives about the early 1990s, remains largely understudied [for the first signs of growing research interest, see Sharafutdinova 2021, Malinova 2021a, Makhortykh 2021]. By following the evolution of competing elite discourses about the early period of post-Soviet transformation we can better understand the role of collective memory as both an outcome of the ever continuing struggle for meanings and a factor that affects perceptions of the current politics.

This paper is a part of the study of framing the collective memory about "the 1990s" in Russian political discourse in 2000-2010s. It focuses on competing narratives about the crisis of 1993 that was the most dramatic event with huge consequences for the political regime in Russia. The conflict between the president Boris Yeltsin and the parliament over the course of economic reforms was brewing over several months. It was escalated by the struggle over the project of Constitution that finally resulted to a political stand-off [Ellison 2006: 71-98; Urban et al. 1997: 285-288]. Things had reached the crisis point on the 21st of September 1993, when President Yeltsin aimed to dissolve the country's legislature (the Congress of People's Deputies and its Supreme Soviet), although the constitution did not give the president the power to do so. In response, the parliament declared the president's decision null and void, impeached Yeltsin and proclaimed vice president Aleksandr Rutskoy to be acting president. After two weeks of confrontation, on the 3rd October, demonstrators removed police cordons around the parliament and, urged by their leaders, took over the Mayor's offices and tried to storm the Ostankino

Television Centre. In response, the army, which had initially declared its neutrality, stormed the Supreme Soviet building on the 4th of October by Yeltsin's order, and arrested the leaders of the resistance. According to government estimates, 187 people were killed and 437 wounded, while the opposition claims that the number of victims was about 1000. On the 12th of December, the new Constitution was adopted by referendum. It created a strong presidency and significantly restricted the parliament control over executive power. On the same day, the chambers of the parliament – the State Duma and the Soviet of Federation – was elected.

The fact that the Constitution, that provides a legal basis to the contemporary Russian state, has become the result of violent suppression of Yeltsin's opponents makes this episode of the recent history highly important for current political discussions. In 2020, when Putin proposed vast amendments to the Constitution, the circumstances of its adoption in 1993 became one of his major arguments [Malinova 2021b]. For this reason, a study of the evolution of positions of the key mnemonic actors can tell much about changing strategies of legitimation and delegitimation of Russian political regime.

The paper aims to follow the evolution of competing narratives about the events of 1993 focusing on the round figures anniversaries in 2003, 2013 and 2018.

The Methodology

The paper analyzes the narratives of mnemonic actors who articulate a memory of the groups that politically succeeded to the sides of conflict. As soon as over years the Russian political scene has changed significantly, there is no strict continuity, even if the some participants of the conflict remained politically active. However, there is a kind of symbolic succession, as soon as political identities of contemporary actors partly reproduce the watersheds that took a shape in a previous period. For the purposes of this research, I focus at the discourses of three groups: a) the state officials whose interpretations were articulated “by the name of the state”, b) the successors of memory of “the defenders of the White House”, c) the successors of memory of the Democrats, i.e. the group that supported Yeltsin's reforms in the beginning of the 1990s.

In memory politics, narrative is the most important form of representing past events. Narratives provide “coherent accounts of the past” [Topolski, 1999: 199] by presenting a chain of events that are supposedly connected by causal relationships. Instead of providing analytic arguments about causes and effects, narratives organize the events to some sequential order thus hinting about their connection [Da Fina, 2017: 233]. Politicians usually operate by short-cut narratives that refer to the information that their audiences supposedly know from another sources.

The competing narratives about “the same” event differ not only by their causal perspectives but also by selection of elements that are remembered and reconsidered or subjected to oblivion. It is difficult to compare the narratives articulated by mnemonic actors as total entities, but it is possible to distinguish several characteristics that provide essential criteria for comparison. In my study of the competing narratives about the crisis of 1993, I focused on four questions/dimensions that are essential for the competing narratives:

- 1) How was the crisis interpreted in the context of the “larger” narrative about the post-Soviet transition (*What was it?*)
- 2) Why did the crisis take place (*What were the reasons for the conflict?*)
- 3) What roles did the main actors play (*Who was an offender, a victim, a traitor, a hero etc.?*)
- 4) How did the crisis affect the subsequent transition of Russia? (*What was the result?*)

Public commemorations for the most part follow the calendar logic. It is supposed that good round figures anniversaries of the prominent events oblige for commemoration. The increasing distance between the present moment and the past event calls for reinterpretation. So, the round figures anniversaries have good chances to become what Alexander Etkind calls *memory events* – “acts of revisiting the past that create ruptures with its established cultural meanings” [Etkind, 2013: 178]. For this reason, to reveal the evolution of the competing narratives, I focused on the “jubilee periods”.

The material for analysis consisted of commemorative speeches and discussions in the central media outlets produced from September to December in 2003, 2013 and 2018. The collection from the author’s archive was supplemented by the systematic search in the collection “Russian Central Media Outlets” at the platform “East View”. All publications referring to the October crisis in 1993 were included into the analysis. The total number of the analyzed sources was 260 (74 – for 2003, 101 – for 2013, 85 – for 2018). The memoirs of some participants of the events were used as a secondary source. The main method was qualitative content analysis using the application MAXQDA 2018. The codes were organized according to the above-mentioned four dimensions. The study of commemorative practices was based on media reports, as well as on the field research of the grass route commemoration that took place near the White House in October 2019. The field research entailed observation and short interviews.

The Crisis of 1993 in the official discourse: from Yeltsin to Putin

The violent outcome of the president's confrontation with the Supreme Soviet created a huge problem for legitimation of Yeltsin's political regime, even if he managed to push through "the Constitution of victors" and thus re-establish the state power. It was rather difficult to justify the president's actions during the political crisis. For this purpose, two legitimizing narratives were used – that of *victory of reformers over counter-reformers* and that of *pre-emptive attack against the organizers of "the military revolt" that could result in a civil war*.

The narrative about *the victory of reformers over counter-reformers* was based on the arguments that Yeltsin persistently used since December 1992, when the first major clash between him and the Congress of People's Deputies took place. The deputies strictly criticized the economic reforms that started in January 1992. In December 1992 the Congress refused to approve Yegor Gaidar as the Head of Government and to prolong the President's extraordinary powers. Yeltsin represented this conflict as the struggle of reformers against counter-reformers who concentrated in the Soviets, as remnants of the "old" institutional system. Of course, this interpretation was not completely true, as in many places the elections to the Soviets of all levels, that took place in March 1990, were quite competitive, which was not typical for the "old" system. Besides, even in the Congress of People's Deputies there were different political forces, and some of them were critical to the program of Yegor Gaidar but still pro-reformist. Nevertheless, the struggle between the reformers and counter-reformers was the most often-used explanation of the conflict between Yeltsin and the leaders of the Supreme Soviet in the Kremlin's discourse.

The narrative of *pre-emptive violence aimed to stop a civil war* entered on the scene at the moment of violent escalation of the conflict. In the TV address translated on the 6th of October, Yeltsin presented the storm of Wight House as *pre-emptive security measures* against "the military revolt (*miatezh*) that was planned and prepared by the leaders of the former Supreme Soviet, former vice-president, and the leaders of some parties and organizations" with the purpose of "establishing a bloody Communist-Fascist dictatorship in Russia" [Yeltsin, 1993]. For those who followed the news, this narrative should look only half-true. It was clear that the confrontation was escalated by Yeltsin's decree, and that the danger of a civil war arose from the interactions of both sides of the conflict. Besides, even if among the political forces who rallied around the White House³ there were some militants pushing for the attacks to the Mayor's offices and to the Ostankino Television Centre on the 3rd of October, the harm caused by their actions was incomparable to the damage caused by the president's side on the 4th of October. The fact that a level of violence was evidently

³ i.e. the House of Soviets that in 1993 was a residence of the Supreme Soviet.

disproportional made the story of the suppressed military revolt not enough plausible. Remarkably, that when Yeltsin came back to the crisis in his first Annual Address to the newly created Federal Assembly, he did not mention “the military revolt”. He labelled the recent events as “political confrontation” and claimed that now, as soon as “tens millions of people with different views had voted for the Constitution”, there is “a solid basis for consent” [Yeltsin, 1994].

These narratives did not contradict to each other. So, it was not a surprise that in the most extensive statement of Yeltsin’s vision of Russia’s recent history, that was included to his Annual Address in 1996, they were combined. The Address was delivered at the start of the president’s electoral campaign; it intended to legitimize the policy of the early 1990s. The crisis of 1993 was presented in the Address as a crucial episode of the struggle between the reformers and counter-reformers that started in 1992. According to Yeltsin, the former had concentrated in the executive power, while the latter had occupied the Soviets. He represented the decree of the 21st of September as an induced measure that should prevent cutting-off the reforms, and especially emphasized that the final decision was to be done by the citizens who were expected to vote for the Constitution and for the new parliament. In this context, the shooting of White House was presented as a pre-emptive measure against those who “had chosen... the way of direct confrontation that led to a civic war” [Yeltsin, 1996]. So, the story of the prevented civil war well complemented to that of the struggle between the reformers and counter-reformers. As I demonstrate later, both narratives transmitted to discourses of “the Democrats” / “the Liberals”.

With Vladimir Putin’s coming to the president’s office, both narratives dropped off the official discourse. As time passed, Putin preferred to forget about the tragic events of October 1993 rather than to persist in justifying the decisions of his predecessor. However, the fact that the Constitution, which provided the legal basis for the Russian state, resulted from this crisis did not allow a complete forgetting. Any celebration of the Constitution involved remembering the circumstances of its adoption. Till 2004, the 12th of December was a public holiday that was officially celebrated. Since 2005, with amending the calendar of public holidays, the Constitution Day ceased to be a day off, and had got a status of a commemorative day (*pamiatnyi den*). It released Putin from annual speeches on this occasion. However, he, as well as later Dmitry Medvedev, as the next president, had to attend a celebration in the jubilee years. Besides, the Constitution must be mentioned in some formal speeches, like Annual Addresses. So, even if Putin was not eager to legitimize Yeltsin in his conflict with the leaders of the Supreme Soviet, while commemorate the birth of the Constitution he had to say something about the crisis of 1993.

Quite understandably, Putin and Medvedev preferred to concentrate on the narrative about *the Constitution as a historical choice of the Russian people*. Without paying too much attention to “an uneasy period” of “political confrontation” [Putin, 2013], they focused on the outcome of referendum of the 12th of December and praised “the choice of freedom and real democracy” [Putin, 2003]. The tragedy of 1993 became a symbolic background for representation of the Constitution rather than a focus of the story. Depending on a changing political context, its adoption was interpreted as a symbol of democratic choice (2003), of public consensus and consolidation of the society (2013), as “a lesson of reconciliation and solidarity for posterity” and a remedy to political turbulence of the 1990s (2018).

The tragic events of October 1993 perfectly fit to the image of the 1990s as “one of the hardest periods” in the Russian history [Putin, 2019] that is often used by the Russian state officials [Malinova, 2021a]. So, even if they are not mentioned explicitly, they are an important element of the story. For example, in his recent talk at the Valdai Discussion Club, Putin argued about the danger of “the break-up and disintegration of the state” that Russia faced in the 1990s. This claim looked rather vague, as it apparently concluded Putin’s speculation about the “aggression of international terrorism” but was followed by the phrase about “a large-scale civil war” that “we could plunge into” (Putin 2019), the most plausible correlate for which were the events of autumn of 1993. Considering that Putin’s talk was given on the 3rd of October, on the eve of the anniversary of the tragic events, it is hardly a surprise that his words were interpreted as a statement about “the prevented civil war” [Latukhina, 2019], and raised a discussion, if the civil war was prevented [Kott, 2019]. So, despite Putin’s reluctance to discuss the dramatic events of 1993, even his indirect references can feed public debates.

In 2020, in the context of pushing through the most extensive amendments to the Constitution, the modus of political using of memory about the crisis of 1993 in the official discourse has visibly changed. While until then it was mentioned to emphasize the threats that may result from a radical revision of the Constitution, in 2020 it was used to demonstrate a contrast between “now” and “then”. The changes that have happened since the 1990s were the major argument for the proposed amendments. At the same time, the unwillingness of the ruling elite to revise the first two chapters, that should result in bringing the revision of the Constitution to hands of the Constitutional Assembly, evidently arose from the fear of destabilization that was supported by the experience of political crisis of 1993 [Malinova, 2021b].

Both in the 1990s, when Yeltsin tried to justify the violence conducted in 1993, and in 2000-2010, when Putin and Medvedev tended to downplay the tragic events that brought the

Constitution, the Russian state official avoided any steps aimed at official commemoration of the tragedy. Their desire to “forget” reveals itself not only in lowering of the symbolic status of the Constitution Day but also in the persistent resistance to erect the monument to the defenders of the White House that is insistently lobbied by the Communists.

The Narratives of the “Successors” of Memory of the White House Defenders

The mnemonic actors articulating the story of the constitutional crisis of 1993 from the perspective of the defenders of the House of Soviets do not represent a single mnemonic community. Instead, there are multiple groups with different worldviews, the configuration of which loosely resembles the diverse political composition of both the Supreme Soviet and its defenders. What unites them is a radically negative attitude towards Yeltsin’s legacy and critical approach to Putin’s regime. There are several partly overlapping mnemonic communities who reproduce their memory in face-to-face communication⁴. Their narratives are either not mediatized or circulated in a small number of copies mostly inside these groups. The most visible part of their activity is the annual commemoration of victims, which takes place on the 3rd-4th of October, in the anniversaries of the storm of the Ostankino TV Center and of the White House⁵. The forms of this activity include constructing self-made memorials, performing commemorative rituals and religious services on the place where people had died, and sharing literature. Some of these “grass-root” mnemonic communities are rather critical towards the actors who produced the most visible mediatized memory, i.e. the former leaders of the White House and the Communists. Some leaders of such “grass-root” mnemonic communities published their memoirs [e.g., Kuznetsov, 2018], or were interviewed by journalists of federal media outlets. Also, there is the website “Oktiabr’skoe vosstanie 1993 goda” (<http://1993.sovnarkom.ru/>) that collects various documents about the events and updates the list of the dead⁶. However, the memory of the defenders of the White House is more visibly represented in the media by their ex-leaders, as well as those of its defenders who became public politicians and thus have much better access to means of public communication.

As soon as a matter of my analysis are the mediatized narratives available for broader public, it is concentrated on the discourses of the public politicians who were on the side of the Supreme Soviet in 1993⁷, and of the Communist Party of Russian Federation. These two groups compete over the memory of “victims”. The defenders of the White House disavow the Communist

⁴ For revealing the composition of these communities a special research is needed.

⁵ The reported observations are based on the field research conducted in 2019.

⁶ It is difficult to estimate the popularity of the website as the metrics of attendance does not work.

⁷ This group includes the elected speaker of the Supreme Soviet of RSFSR Ruslan Khasbulatov, ex-vice-president of RSFSR Alexander Rutskoy, and politicians who were on the side of the Supreme Soviet in 1993, like Sergei Glaziev, Sergei Reshul’sky, Sergei Baburin, Oleg Rumiantsev, Yuri Slobodkin etc.

Party of Russian Federation’s claim to be the key representative of the victims of Yeltsin’s anti-constitutional coup d’état. It should be remembered that the CPRF was established a few months before the constitutional crisis, in February 1993, as the successor organization of the Communist Party of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic that was banned after the August 1991 coup. It had no representation in the Congress of People’s Deputies and its Supreme Soviet, and, as a political party, did not play any significant role in the crisis. The defenders of the Supreme Soviet blame its leader, Gennady Zyuganov for abandoning the White House in the first days of its siege. In their turn, the leaders of the Communist Party claimed that such events “cannot be privatized” [Mel’nikov, 2003] and blamed Rutskoy and Khasbulatov for provoking the violent response from Yeltsin’s side [Zyuganov, 2003].

The narratives of “the defenders” and “the Communists” have much in common, as they both criticize Yeltsin. However, there are also remarkable differences that are summarized in the table 1.

Tab. 1. The narratives of the “successors” of the defenders of White House

	The non-Communist politicians and public actors	The CPRF
What was it?	<p>a) a tragic episode of the struggle for the proper course of reforms;</p> <p>b) a struggle for power based on personal ambitions;</p> <p>c) an illegal usurpation of power that opened a way for</p>	<p>a) a struggle against the Soviet power who defended the rights of workers</p> <p>b) a capitalist counter-revolution</p> <p>c) a coup d’état prepared by Yeltsin and the West</p>

	privatization of people's property by the corrupted elite	
What were the reasons for the conflict?	<p>a) because the president's side using illegal measures to win the struggle for power</p> <p>b) because of personal defects of Yeltsin as political leader</p>	<p>The Yeltsin's side striving to finish off the Soviets, which would open a way for "plundering the country" and privatizing people's property</p>
Who was who?	<p><i>The offenders:</i> Yeltsin and his adherents</p> <p><i>The heroes:</i> the defenders of the White House</p> <p><i>The victims:</i> those who were killed</p>	<p><i>The offenders:</i> Yeltsin and his adherents, the West</p> <p><i>The victims:</i> the Russian people</p>
What was the result?	<p>The crisis resulted in establishing the super-president power that prevents development of real democracy</p>	<p>The shooting of the White House paved the way to restoration of capitalism and establishment of the power of corrupted, criminal minority</p>

The narrative of the former leaders of the Supreme Soviet depicts the crisis as a result of political interactions within the group of reformers who happened to decide about Russia's future in the beginning of the 1990s. They represent the conflict as a struggle for a proper course of reforms. According to ex-speaker of the Supreme Soviet, Ruslan Khasbulatov, "There were two positions that were opposed to each other. On the one side, there were the legislative branch and the body of deputies, who stood for the path of balanced economy, for social orientation of the reforms that took place in the country, and for the rule of law (*strogoe sobliudenie zakonnosti*). On the other side, Yeltsin and the Kremlin adhered to 'shock therapy' as they hoped to solve all problems at one stroke, by a Bolshevik tip-and-run attack" [Khasbulatov, 2003].

While the conflict between the president and the leaders of the Supreme Soviet was interpreted as a crucial choice of the trajectory of Russia's transition, its tragic outcome was attributed to the struggle for power, and to negative aspects of Yeltsin's personality, i.e., his lust for power, treachery, and alcoholism. According to ex-vice-president of RSFSR Alexander Rutskoy, Yeltsin needed to escalate the conflict to get an opportunity to resort to force because he wanted "to avoid a responsibility for the collapse of the USSR, disintegration of economics, nulling people's savings in banks" [Rutskoy, 2018]. The need to get the *carte blanche* for privatization of property is another popular explanation in the discourse of this mnemonic community. According to Sergei Glaziev, who has left Yelstin's government after the decree of the 21st of September, "Yeltsin and those who pushed him for dissolving the legally elected parliament, had done anti-constitutional coup to usurp power with the aim to capture public property" [Khaimova, 2003].

This explanation was central in the CPRF's narrative. It represented the crisis as a struggle of "the criminal minority" against the true defender of people's interests – the Soviet power [Zyuganov, 2003; Zyuganov, 2013; Zyuganov, 2018]. As Zyuganov stated, "Yeltsin's camarilla wanted to sell people's property to private hands as soon as possible. Those people well understood that they cannot realize their plans without destroying the Soviet power" [Zyuganov, 2013]. In this version of the anti-Yeltsin narrative, the main emphasis was made on the Soviet nature of the dissolved parliament / discarded Constitution, though issues of usurpation of power and provocation for violence from the president's side were often mentioned as well. The storm of the White House was interpreted as a conclusive moment of crushing the Soviet state, which gave the opportunity to combine the class rhetoric with the nationalist one. On the one hand, the defenders of the White House were ranked with the insurgent Russian workers, who died almost at the same place in 1905, and "our fathers and grandfathers who defended the Soviet power from the fascists" [Zyuganov,

2018]. On the other hand, the Communists blamed Yeltsin for destroying the Soviet civilization that was represented as “a peak of achievements of the Russian state”. According to Zyuganov, “to give our children... the powerful state for which the defenders of the White House fought”, we need to combine “the great Russian idea, high spirituality and collectivism with socialist ideals, advanced science and education, and technical progress” [Zyuganov, 2013]. Considering “the West” among the “offenders” contributed to a nationalist tinge to the Communist narrative. Opposing to Yeltsin’s interpretation of the events of October 1993 as “the military revolt”, the Communists claim that it was “a coup d’état that was carefully prepared by Yeltsin’s team and its foreign consultants” [Zyuganov, 2003].

Both versions of the considered narratives represented the negative outcomes of Russia’s transition, including the “parasitic capitalism”, the Chechen war, the decline of economy, poverty, corruption etc. – as direct consequences of the tragedy of October 1993. However, the non-Communist politicians and public actors tend to focus on the political consequences, such as establishing the super-president regime that prevents development of real democracy, while the Communists utilize the memory about the tragic events of 1993 for criticizing the current political course across all issues of its agenda.

I have not found a significant evolution of these narratives between 2003 and 2018. Though the patterns of its political use have been changing according to the political context. It is especially evident in the case of the CPRF. In its discourse, “the people’s revolt in Moscow for a defense of the Soviet Constitution” plays in its discourse the role of *the founding myth* of Yeltsin’s/Putin’s regime that explains all current failures and misfortunes. So, speeches delivered at the meetings that the CPRF annually organized on the 4th of October in Moscow and many other cities provide a long list of the fatal consequences of the shooting of the White House. The following excerpt from the speech published in the *Pravda* newspaper gives some impression of such rhetoric: “The chaos introduced by the coup d’état lasts till now. Almost 3,000 of villages in Pskov region are depopulated, collective and state farms, plants and construction industry have collapsed... Recently over 800 of workers from the battery farm “Pskovskaia” were fired without compensation. At the moment, hundreds of thousands of Pskov inhabitants are cold because heating has not been turned on yet” [Yerkina et al., 2013].

The CPRF routinely uses the anniversaries of the tragedy for political mobilization connecting them with the current agenda. In 2013, it focused on the consequences of the economic crisis, and in 2018, on pension reform. Overall, the CPRF is eager to use its organizational resources to maintain the role of “a key representative” of the memory of victims. For the

Communists, the latter category includes not only those who died or were wounded and their families, but also “the Russian people”, who suffered from Yeltsin’s “criminal regime”.

In 2003, on the tenth anniversary of the event, and after Yeltsin’s resignation, the “successors” of memory of the White House defenders tried to change the official approach to (non)commemoration. The deputies from the Congress of Russian Communities Sergei Glaziev and Dmitry Rogozin proposed to the State Duma the memorandum that promised to establish a committee for investigation of the events of the 3rd – 4th of October 1993, to pay a compensation to the families of victims and to set up the official day of commemoration of the defenders of the Constitution on the 4th of October [Krivtsov, 2003]. The project was supported by the Communists but blocked by the majority of deputies.

The Narratives of the “Successors” of Memory of the Democrats of the 1990s

The narratives developed by the public figures who, in the beginning of the 1990s, adhered to the camp of the Democrats were much less consolidated than those articulated by their opponents. The crisis of 1993 split the Democrats. For some of those who supported the economic reforms and were on Yeltsin’s side in his conflict with the Supreme Soviet, the way he resolved the conflict was unacceptable. People who did not welcome the Decree of the 21st of September and the shooting of the White House could be found in practically all liberal parties and blocks that appeared on the eve of elections to State Duma and the Soviet of Federations in December 1993. Of course, by that time a large part of the Democrats still supported Yeltsin and shared his legitimizing narratives about *the victory of reformers over counter-reformers* and *suppressing the military revolt / preventing a civil war*.

Over time, as Russia’s deviation from democratic transition became more and more evident, the narrative about the victory of the Democrats over counter-reformers became more problematic. In a story about the *failed* democratic transition, there must be some moments when “it went wrong”. For some former Democrats, this moment came in the mid-1990s, for others, it was in the end of the 1990s, or with Putin’s coming to power. For example, Sergei Filatov, who in 1993 was the ex-head of the President’s Administration, put it this way: “At that time we defended it (democracy – O.M.), as well as reforms. But in 1996 Yeltsin made a deal with oligarchs and thus cancelled out everything for which we fought. As a result, today we move towards the managed democracy and the ‘vertical of power’ of the strong state” [Filatov, 2003].

However, for many Democrats of the 1990s, the turning point was in 1993, when the Constitution, that opened a way for the presidency endowed with enormous amount of power was

adopted. For a period of my study, in the 2000s – the 2010s, many former Democrats (now they are conventionally labelled the Liberals) considered Putin’s regime, which they more or less strongly criticized, as the result of the distribution of power that took shaped up owing to Yeltsin’s “victory” in 1993 [Furman, 2003; Editorial, 2003; Vishnevsky, 2018].

Ignoring nuances, it is possible to distinguish between two narratives articulated from the perspective of Yeltsin’s supporters / the reformers of the 1990s – the apologetic and the critical one (see table 2). Both of them remarkably vary in detail from speaker to speaker.

Tab. 2. The narratives of the Democrats / Liberals

	The apologists of Yeltsin	The critics of Yeltsin
What was it?	<p>a) struggle for reforms against the revanchists, who wanted to preserve / restore the “totalitarian” regime and the planned economy</p> <p>b) a painful but necessary adaptation of the political system to the new, democratic institutions</p>	<p>a) a struggle for political course</p> <p>b) a struggle for power</p>
What were the reasons for the conflict?	<p>a) the political opposition between the reformers and counter-reformers</p> <p>b) the</p>	<p>The defects of leadership from both sides</p>

	unwillingness of the leaders of the Supreme Soviet for a compromise	
Who was who?	<i>The offenders:</i> the leaders of the White House <i>The victims:</i> those who were killed	<i>The offenders:</i> both sides were guilty <i>The victims:</i> those who were killed
What was the result?	a) the reforms continued b) the civil war was prevented c) Russia received the most democratic Constitution it ever had	The way the crisis was resolved had blocked / hampered Russia's democratic transition by creating the unbalanced structure power

The apologists of Yeltsin developed two official narratives constructed in the 1990s, i.e., that of *the victory of reformers over counter-reformers* and that of *suppressing the military revolt / preventing a civil war*. For years, it was not that easy to sustain these narratives. Several supplementing argumentation strategies could be distinguished in the discourse of the Liberals:

(1) Representing *the crisis as the episode of the revolution, hence as something extraordinary*. It supposed reasoning in terms of opposition between social / political groups and using macro sociological categories / historical analogies. Here are some examples: “the totalitarian empire attacked the democratic republic”; “revolutions are cruel affairs” [Khrumchikhin, 2003]; “revolution that does not violate the law is something like the Immaculate Conception”

[Radzikhovskiy, 2003]; “it was an attempt of revenge for 1991” [Svanidze, 2013]; “Yeltsin forestalled the attack” [Filatov, 2003].

(2) Arguing that *as a result of Yeltsin’s actions, the reforms could be continued*. This argument was typical for those who considered the economic reforms the decisive factor of successful transition to democracy. As Evegny Yasin put it: “Boris Yeltsin violated the Constitution of that time, i.e. fall back on coup d’état. It allowed the government to maintain the course for reforms, but created the anti-democratic precedent” [Yasin, 2003].

(3) Arguing that *democracy actually did not suffer / has been advanced with the resolution of the crisis*. People who followed this strategy typically pointed to the fact that Yeltsin did not established a dictatorship but scheduled elections to the Federal Assembly [Tret’iakov, 2003; Radzikhovskiy, 2003]; argued that Yeltsin’s opponents actually were not convinced Democrats and the political regime they could establish probably would be worse [Sheinis, 2003; Radzikhovskiy, 2003]; pointed to the fact that the Supreme Soviet was not a parliament but rather a special type of institution [Khramchikhin, 2003].

(4) Arguing that it *was the lesser of two evils / that finally Yeltsin “was more right than his opponents*. For Gennady Burbulis, who has left Yeltsin’s government before 1993, both sides were wrong but “from the historical perspective Yeltsin turned to be more right than the others” [Burbulis, 2003].

(5) *Stigmatizing the opponents*. Yeltsin’s opponents were represented, on the one hand, as reactionary defenders of the ancient régime, and on the other, as aggressive nationalists. The fact that the militarized right-wing radicals were a visible group among the defenders of the White House was used to emphasize the dangers that could befall Russia in a case of their success. As Viktor Sheinis put it, “the worse things had not happened, there was no civil war, and the Communist and Nationalist-Statist forces did not come to power” [Sheinis, 2003].

The arguments of the Liberals who are critical towards Yeltsin are even more varied. Speakers from this group are less inclined to indulge the president for his illegal actions, though do not vindicate his opponents as well. Their analysis is more focused on the political system that has been established as a result of reforms than on economic reforms. They argue that the way the crisis was resolved had blocked / hampered Russia’s democratic transition by creating an unbalanced structure of power and thus facilitated (or even caused) the appearance of Putin’s regime. These arguments became especially pronounced in 2018, when the anniversary of the crisis was used for Putin’s critique not only by the left wing of the political spectrum (as it was before) but also in the

Liberal / centrist media outlets. According to one of observers, “even if considering the rough autumn of 1993 a starting point of Putin’s system is not a commonplace yet, at least such point of view is not exotic anymore” [Kashin 2018]⁸.

Overall, the discourse the Liberals was less consolidated than that of their opponents, and its evolution is more noticeable, as since the 2010s the articulations of apologetic narratives became rare, and critical voices appeared salient. Still, there is no consensus nether about interpretation of the October crisis nor about its role in further development of political regime in Russia in the Liberal camp.

Conclusion

By focusing this research on the analysis of public discussions unfolding during the round figures anniversaries of the dramatic events of 1993, I intended to follow an evolution of the competing narratives. Yet, some narratives turned out to be rather stable.

The most radical changes took place in the official discourse between the 1990s and the 2000s. After Vladimir Putin’s coming to power the narratives about *the victory of reformers over counter-reformers* and *suppressing the military revolt / preventing a civil war*, that were so important for Yeltsin, were dismissed. However, the memory of the political crisis of 1993 could not be easily “forgotten” as soon as the Russian authorities continue to celebrate the Constitution that provides the basis for the current political system. So, in the official discourse of the 2000s – 2010s, the crisis is mentioned as a negative background for adoption of the Constitution that is considered as its “solution”. Besides, the events of 1993 tend to be an example of the past problems that have been overcome by Putin. Such a discursive approach was particularly visible in 2020, in the context of adopting the amendments to the Constitution.

Quite expectedly, there is a clear-cut opposition between the narratives articulated by the groups who “succeeded” the memory of the sides of the conflict. However, the anti-Yeltsin narratives are much more consolidated, and supported by the institutionalized commemorative practices and rituals. They have not changed much, but rather were tuned according to the context. Such stability of the discourse could be explained by the fact that on that side of the ideological spectrum the dramatic events of 1993 are considered as the myth of origin of Putin’s regime.

On the contrary, there were some notable changes in the discourse of the Democrats / Liberals. While in 2003 it was dominated by the apologetic interpretations, that vindicated Yeltsin,

⁸ This publication is created and (or) disseminated by the foreign media outlet, that performs the functions of foreign agent, and (or) Russian legal entity, that performs the functions of foreign agent.

the critical voices have become more visible in the past 10-15 years. In 2018, drawing causal connections between the way the crisis of 1993 was resolved and the emergence of Putin's regime became quite a salient tendency in this segment of the ideological spectrum. So, one may speak about some rapprochement between the competing camps concerning interpretation of the consequences of the crisis. However, this does not reduce the degree of hostility, which can be explained by the fact that the crisis of 1993 is considered as a nodal point of the competing narratives about Russia's post-Soviet that are fundamental for constructing contemporary political identities.

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