



## **RUSSIA: TODAY AND TOMORROW**

### **THE CAMDEN CONFERENCE SEVENTH FOREIGN AFFAIRS CONFERENCE**

The 1994 Conference featured an impressive level of comment and questions from speakers and attendees alike. Panelists provided a clear picture of whom the Russians had become, the many problems they faced, and U.S. interests in the rapidly developing, very complex transformation of Russia in a new world in which former Soviet allies and 14 Newly Independent States (NIS) had gained independence from Moscow's rule. And questions from the audience, in response to those informative presentations, prompted additional thoughts and observations about what was taking place at that time – giving all those present a better idea of how Russia and the Russians were coping with their new circumstances.

Keynoter James Collins and almost all the other speakers agreed that this would be a long and very difficult process, and that we should not expect instant results as the Russians went about transforming their political and economic systems, Russian foreign policy in its many aspects, and a whole set of values and identities. Their second major theme: since this was an ongoing process, we had to respond to changes as they occurred, not wait for a final package of reforms to emerge; and we had to recognize that the Russians must find their own way to salvation, not follow some formula concocted in Washington, DC, or elsewhere in the West.

Most speakers were candid about the severity of Russia's problems: the crumbling economic infrastructure, inexperience in self-government, mounting ethnic tensions, a lingering sense of Russia's "special mission" in the world, and bitter resentment that Moscow had not only "lost" the Cold War but had now become dependent on Western aid and advice just to survive. But they were also rather optimistic that Russia would find its own way – if only in 20 years or so – to a working market economy, viable democratic institutions, and a nation at peace with itself and ready to cooperate with the outside world, including NIS neighbors that had recently been fellow republics within the now-defunct Soviet Union.

Ambassador Collins, Professor James Thompson (Indiana University, retired) and others knew that none of this would be easy. They acknowledged that Russia faced a protracted period of dangerous "instability" in both political and economic terms – a period when failed structures had vanished, but new institutions and procedures had yet to take root. In their view, if reform efforts stalled, the result could be chaos, the destabilization of almost every aspect of Russian life, and a new authoritarianism, possibly including some of the worst features of the Stalin era. Meanwhile, Western "Russia Hands" would be working in uncharted territory – adjusting their analysis and interpretations "on the fly" – trying to keep up as new developments proved that at least some previous judgments had been unfounded.

Indeed, Professor Ben Slay (Bates College) was the only speaker to sound a truly pessimistic note – warning that economic reforms would bear little fruit as long as political considerations continued to trump economic needs in Russian policy deliberations. When pressed on his views about the future, Slay observed that recent moves indicated that Moscow was retreating from its earlier economic reforms, making him very worried about Russian prospects in the near future. Other speakers acknowledged that Russian reform efforts might stall, but tended to accentuate the positive – specifically, there was no going back to the failed systems of the past.

Finally, most speakers still thought very highly of then-President Boris Yel'tsin, praising his enormous contributions to the reform effort – while standing firm against the anti-Gorbachev plotters during the August 1991 putsch, bringing about the collapse of the former Soviet Union in December 1991, and getting Russian voters to approve a new constitution – with strong civil and human rights guarantees, and creating a framework for a democratic form of government – in December 1993. Some speakers even predicted that Yel'tsin would not seek re-election in 1996, and might see the new constitution as the legacy he wanted to leave his country.

Not surprisingly, no one foresaw the manner in which the late President would take his nation to the abyss, and ultimately right over the precipice during his second term in office (1996 – 1999), before giving way to his successor, the then-unknown Vladimir Putin. Nor did any attendees at the 1994 Conference have an inkling that this former mid-level KGB officer would soon become the architect of a “Putin Restoration” – resurrecting so many corrupt practices and authoritarian features of the earlier communist rule, albeit without all the excesses of the Stalin, Khrushchev, or Brezhnev eras. But the same could be said of most U.S. “Russia Hands” at that time: very good at explaining what has happened and why, but not always right with their predictions.

Dick Topping, December 2011

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