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Yeltsin's Attack on White House, 20 Years On

By Alexei Pankin

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I spent the second half of August visiting Japan and kept abreast of events in Russia by reading the local English-language press.

Here's what I learned. Renowned track and field athlete Yelena Isinbayeva turned out to be homophobic. Also, frightened by the protests in response to the law against homosexual propaganda aimed at minors, President Vladimir Putin issued a decree banning public rallies

in Sochi prior to and during the Winter Olympic Games there in 2014. The state-controlled RT television channel invited a Western journalist to discuss the sentence against WikiLeaks informant Bradley Manning, but instead of answering the questions posed by the anchor, he went off on a diatribe against Russia's anti-gay law.

Although flooding in Russia's Far East left thousands of people homeless at the same time that those other stories were grabbing headlines, the local English-language press was silent on the disaster.

Back at home, I reflected on the 20th anniversary of tragic events in Moscow. In the fall of 1993, I worked in Germany and tried to convince my European colleagues that President Boris Yeltsin's decision to dissolve the Congress of People's Deputies was a coup d'etat by the state. They responded by quoting their countries' newspaper reports from Moscow that Yeltsin was a popularly elected president and that the parliament had been created by the former Communist regime.

But I argued that Yeltsin and the deputies had been elected in Soviet times on the principle of "one person, one vote" and that this very parliament had passed the laws that had enabled Yeltsin to become president.

"But the deputies refused to obey Yeltsin's decree on the early dissolution of the Congress," they answered.

To which I shot back: "But according to the current Constitution, the supreme authority in Russia is the Congress of People's Deputies. The president has no right to dissolve it."

"But the deputies resorted to violence," my colleagues offered.

"But if you and I were barred from entering our office and the phones, electricity, heating and plumbing were all shut off, we would eventually hit the streets in protest also," I answered.

"If that's true, then our media is engaged in disinformation," concluded these European intellectuals.

And while I compared the past and present attitudes of the Western press to Russia, Komsomolskaya Pravda published a transcript of the debate between famous Soviet dissident Alexander Zinovyev and Yeltsin, who had just been elected chairman of that very same parliament. Their debate was televised on the France 2 channel in March 1990 and basically amounted to Yeltsin expounding on the points of his democratic program and Zinovyev postulating on what would come of those plans. For example, Yeltsin said, "We will eliminate the benefits and privileges of the bureaucratic elite." To which Zinovyev said, "And the social inequality in the Soviet Union will increase substantially." Yeltsin said, "We will be even more decisive in pushing forward the perestroika program initiated by Mikhail Gorbachev."

Zinovyev answered, "Ten years from now, people will remember the stagnation under former Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev as a 'golden age.'" And that is exactly what happened.

Zinovyev also said, "Why does the West applaud Gorbachev, and why does it applaud Yeltsin? It's simple. The West wants the Soviet Union to collapse. And the moment the West sees that

Gorbachev and his cronies are not bringing on that collapse, in place of praise they will heap mountains of scorn on him. Mark my words!"

Keep up the good work, Mr. President.

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