

BORIS YELTSIN: JUDGING THE LEGACY

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Say what you want about Yeltsin – and you're probably right.

Obituary writers will have a hard time figuring out how to judge Boris Yeltsin's role in history. Yeltsin is a towering figure, central to Russia's emergence as a modern state out of the collapsed "Union of Soviet Socialist Republics" (even the *name* seems to belong to a forgotten era). And yet Yeltsin is a difficult man to place. Was he a democrat, or a dictator? A Westernizer, or a nationalist? A market reformer, or the front man for a criminal oligarchy?

In reality, Yeltsin was all of these things. He was a complex figure, a mass of contradictions that reflected the conflicted identities of Russian society as it made the difficult transition from a failed communist model to a new and uncertain future.

BIRTH OF A SEMIMARKET SEMIDEMOCRACY

In the West, Yeltsin's image has been almost fully eclipsed by the men who preceded and succeeded him at Russia's helm: Mikhail Gorbachev and Vladimir Putin. Mikhail Gorbachev has already been written into the history books as the man who ended the Cold War, who brought a more or less peaceful end to a conflict that had gripped the world for half a century. Gorbachev has carefully cultivated this favorable image since he left the political stage in 1991. Serious, sober and intelligent, Gorbachev is now a fixture on the international lecture circuit.

Yeltsin, in contrast, is seen as a mercurial figure whose drunken pranks and erratic policy shifts reinforced Russia's aura as a wild and crazy place, one whose inhabitants did not quite conform to Western behavioral norms. Yeltsin launched Russia on the path of "market democracy" without apparently having a firm grasp of what either of those terms mean. Unlike Gorbachev, Yeltsin has been pretty much invisible on the Russian and international stage since his retirement on December 31, 1999. (Though he has published an excellent, ghost written three-volume autobiography.) This is partly because of illness and mental deterioration, and partly, one suspects, because of instructions from Putin that he stay out of politics.

In the seven years since he became President, Vladimir Putin has established himself as *the* face of the New Russia, both for Russians at home and foreigners abroad. The Putin phenomenon has effectively relegated Yeltsin to a transitional role in Russian history. Yeltsin is now indelibly associated with the turbulent 1990s, a decade when living standards plummeted, inflation soared, and a bloody war raged in Chechnya. Russia became an international laughing stock, the basket case of the international system. It was a has-been superpower who for old times' sake was given a seat (in the corner) at meetings of NATO and the Group of Seven leading industrial countries. Putin has avoided criticizing Yeltsin directly, but his occasional public references to the Russia of the 1990s make it clear that he does not have a very high opinion of Yeltsin's accomplishments.

Russians admire Putin for bringing order to Russia and restoring their national pride. It helps that his tenure in the Kremlin has coincided with seven years of sustained economic growth, driven in large part by the buoyant world oil market. Westerners acknowledge that Putin has forged a new Russia, but are dismayed at the deterioration in the quality of Russian democracy and are skeptical of the sustainability of Putin's economic model. But most Russians and Westerners

would agree that the 1990s were a disaster for Russia, and few of them would be prepared to argue for a return to the policies of the 1990s.

YELTSIN THE WARRIOR

Yeltsin can only suffer from the comparisons with Putin. Russians who admire Putin's achievements have only contempt for Yeltsin's incapable leadership. And many Westerners who are critical of Putin are reluctant to laud Yeltsin as the founding father of Russian democracy. After all, Putin was Yeltsin's anointed successor, and Putin's authoritarianism can be seen as the continuation of trends already established under Yeltsin's rule.

It's important, therefore, to remember the positive achievements of Boris Yeltsin. He has a number of singular accomplishments to his credit. He was the first leader in Russia's 1,000 year history to be popularly elected in a free and fair election (in June 1991). He was also the first Russian leader ever to voluntarily step down from office. (Nikita Khrushchev and Mikhail Gorbachev were forced to resign, and all other Soviet and Russian leaders died in office.)

Under Boris Yeltsin, Russians enjoyed personal freedoms that they had never before experienced. Elections were held at regular intervals, and the media were more or less free to criticize political leaders. Yeltsin continued Gorbachev's approach of seeking integration with the West. But unlike Gorbachev, he concluded that the Soviet Union could not and should not be saved. Instead, Yeltsin harnessed the creation of the Russian nation-state to liberal policies of democracy and market reform. This is something we now tend to take for granted, but it was a remarkable development. One can only imagine what the world would have looked like if a Slobodan Milosevic had succeeded Gorbachev as the new leader of Russia, and had used the state's military might to try to "gather in the lands" where 22 million Russians lived outside the borders of the Russian Federation, in Ukraine, Kazakhstan and the Baltics.

We should be deeply grateful that Yeltsin did not wage war on his neighbors. He did, however, wage war on his own people, in the form of the invasion of Chechnya in December 1994. Why did Yeltsin embark on that reckless adventure? In part, it was simply because his generals assured him that it would be a "short and victorious war." But also it was because he needed to take some dramatic action to divert attention from his disastrously unpopular economic policies, and thereby boost his chances for reelection in 1996.

That in turn leads us to the darkest hour in Yeltsin's presidency – the decision to shell the Congress of People's Deputies into submission in October 1993. That step came in the wake of the parliament's refusal to accept Yeltsin's unconstitutional order that they dissolve. The parliament, elected back in 1990, was packed with communists and nationalists who opposed Yeltsin's economic reforms. Yeltsin had declined to hold fresh elections to the Russian parliament in 1991 – in part because he feared that reform opponents would win. Yeltsin's resort to tanks to solve the political argument with his adversaries polarized the Russian political landscape. It exposed the liberals as fair-weather democrats, and it made them so fearful of a possible victory by the opposition in the 1996 presidential election that they would go to any lengths to ensure that Yeltsin stayed in office. Thanks to a massive media campaign, featuring skillful "black PR" and an artificially arranged ceasefire in Chechnya, Yeltsin was just about able to win re-election. Western governments heaved a huge sigh of relief – but had few illusions about the quality of Russian democracy.

CO-AUTHOR OF A WORK IN PROGRESS

The 1996 election brought only a brief breathing space: the shaky political model that Yeltsin had erected continued to disintegrate. Oligarch looting of the state led to the August 1998 financial crash, in which all the private banks went belly up and the hard-pressed Russian middle class lost most of their savings for the second (or third) time in a decade. Yeltsin's leadership was utterly discredited and the political elite scrambled to find a successor. A suitable candidate was eventually found, in the form of Vladimir Putin, who was promoted from head of the Federal Security Service to Prime Minister. But Yeltsin chose to exit office in a less than democratic fashion – he resigned in December 1999, appointing Putin “acting president” and giving him the considerable benefits of incumbency for three months in the run-up to the March 2000 election.

Putin's intelligence and charisma enabled him to lay the foundations of a new political order – but that political order included a new war in Chechnya, new restrictions on the media, and slow but steady contraction of the degree of political pluralism allowed in Russia. Putin removed the elected regional governors from the upper house of parliament, and a single pro-Kremlin party won control of the lower house, the State Duma, in 2003. The next year Putin abolished popular elections for regional governors, the last remaining element of true contestation in the Russian political system.

Putin's successful consolidation of an authoritarian regime undercuts those Yeltsin defenders who would still like to portray him as the “father of Russian democracy.” Likewise, Putin has presided over the reassertion of state control over the Russian economy, as exemplified (but not limited to) the 2003 arrest of Mikhail Khodorkovsky and the state seizure of his Yukos oil company. So even Yeltsin's claim to have set Russia on the path to a market economy now looks increasingly hollow.

Yeltsin undoubtedly played a huge role in the birth of the new Russia. But it is hard to unscramble his contribution from the broader wave of events that have swept Russia over the past two decades. Fifteen years after the disintegration of the Soviet state, Russia remains a curious hybrid of contradictory forces: an authoritarian democracy, a pseudo-market economy, and a truculent but sometimes cooperative international partner for the West. The Russian transition is still a work in progress, and the new Russia may ultimately prove to be only slightly more attractive than the old Soviet Union.

Thus historical judgments about Yeltsin's role in Russia's *past* will depend on what happens in Russia's *future*. If Putin leaves office on schedule in 2008, and if elements of political and economic pluralism return to Russia at some point thereafter, then Yeltsin's liberal credentials may yet be refurbished.