

Yeltsin's Legacy

by Michael McFaul

Days after staring down the August 1991 coup attempt, Russian President Boris Yeltsin boasted a 90 percent approval rating at home, adorned the cover of every international weekly in the world, and was christened a democratic hero by world leaders from Washington to Tokyo. When he suddenly resigned as president on December 31, 1999, Yeltsin enjoyed an eight percent approval rating at home (with a margin of error of plus or minus four percent). He probably had only two or three international calls to make. With the exception of Bill Clinton and a few others, Yeltsin had almost no friends in high places left. Even the Western media all but ignored the passing of this onetime hero. When Clinton appeared that morning to comment on Yeltsin's retirement, most American television networks chose instead to air the fireworks display in Beijing.

Many would argue that Yeltsin's pathetic passing from power correctly reflected his performance as Russia's first democratically elected president. In part, it did. In his resignation speech, Yeltsin himself apologized to the people of Russia for his mistakes, a rare act for any politician but especially out of character for this fighter. For many in Russia (and abroad), the apology was too little, too late. As he left office, a war was under way in Chechnya, the state had just manipulated a parliamentary election, and rampant corruption had stymied economic reform. Still, for many others, Yeltsin's parting plea for redemption sparked nostalgia for a fallen hero. And Yeltsin certainly deserves credit for monumental achievements. On his watch, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union was destroyed, the largest empire on earth was peacefully dismantled, and electoral democracy was introduced into a country with a thousand-year history of autocratic rule.

As the emblematic figure and presiding force during the tumultuous last decade of the 20th century in Russia, Yeltsin invites and eludes a ringing assessment. Was he a heroic revolutionary, or an erratic reformer? An astute politician and a committed democrat, or a populist improviser with little interest in the hard work of coalition building? Was he a daring economic reformer, or a blundering tool of the oligarchs? And finally, from the vantage of the new millennium, does he emerge as a larger-than-life leader who rose to unprecedented challenges, or as a figure overwhelmed by the enormity of change?

The answer, not surprisingly, is that Yeltsin was all of the above. Initially, the revolution made Yeltsin great, but eventually the revolution



Facing down the hardliners in August 1991, Yeltsin enjoyed his finest hour.

also undermined Yeltsin's greatness. At first glance, his is the classic story of the man made for heroic times whose talents proved the wrong ones during a time of transition and rebuilding. Indeed, Yeltsin in many ways embodied his country's dilemma: Ready to throw off its chains, Russia was far from prepared for what was to follow. But Yeltsin's is also an ironic saga of missed opportunities, which is surely why he inspired such high hopes and left behind so much disappointment. Yeltsin owed his rise to masterful political maneuvering within the crumbling Soviet order and to his bold sense of timing in declaring Russia's independence in 1990. Yet his own experience notably failed to serve as his guide once he was in power. Yeltsin's major missteps as president lay in failing to seize the moment to foster further political reform and to clarify the federal order of Russia. He skirted the question of secession, and let party and governmental confusion spread, all in the name of focusing on economic reform. Yet those mistakes guaranteed that the goal of a new economic order receded even further out of reach.

Three decades ago, few would have predicted that Yeltsin would one day become a revolutionary. Where Mandela, Havel, and Walesa devoted their adult lives to challenging autocratic regimes, Yeltsin spent much of his political career trying to make dictatorship work. Mandela, Havel, and Walesa all paid a price

for their political views. Yeltsin won promotion within the Communist Party of the Soviet Union for his. To be sure, Yeltsin had a reputation within the party as a populist crusader who worked hard to fulfill five-year plans, improve the economic well-being of his people, and fight corruption. Still, he was not a dissident. During the three decades he spent steadily rising within the Soviet Communist Party to become first secretary in Sverdlovsk Oblast, he did not advocate democratic reforms, market principles, or Soviet dissolution. He embraced these ideas only after his fall from grace within the Communist Party.

That fall occurred soon after Yeltsin's arrival in Moscow in 1985. Shortly after assuming leadership of the Communist Party, Mikhail Gorbachev invited Yeltsin to relocate to Moscow and join his reform team. Six months later, Gorbachev asked Yeltsin to become first secretary of the Moscow Communist Party, one of the highest jobs in the Soviet system, because he believed that Yeltsin shared his commitment to making socialism work. In that position, Yeltsin seized upon Gorbachev's reform agenda, pushing especially for renewed vigilance against corruption within the party. Yeltsin's tirades against party privilege, coupled with his populist proclivities (he used to ride the metro and buses to work) earned him immediate support among the masses in Moscow. Yeltsin became increasingly critical of Gorbachev's go-slow attitude toward fighting corruption, which Gorbachev did not appreciate. In 1987, he finally sacked Yeltsin, demoting him to deputy chairman of the Ministry of Construction.

In the pre-perestroika system, Yeltsin's demotion would have signaled the end of his political career. Stunned by his ouster, Yeltsin himself thought as much and began to drink even more heavily than usual. But these were not ordinary times. They were revolutionary times in which, under Gorbachev, the rules of the game were changing, and ironically enough, in ways that resuscitated Yeltsin's political prospects. After tinkering unsuccessfully with minor economic reforms, Gorbachev concluded that the conservative Communist Party nomenklatura was blocking his more ambitious plans for economic restructuring. To dislodge the dinosaurs, Gorbachev introduced democratic reforms, including a semicompetitive electoral system for selecting members of the Soviet Congress of People's Deputies.

These elections, held in the spring of 1989, were only partially free and competitive. Still, they gave Yeltsin the chance to resurrect

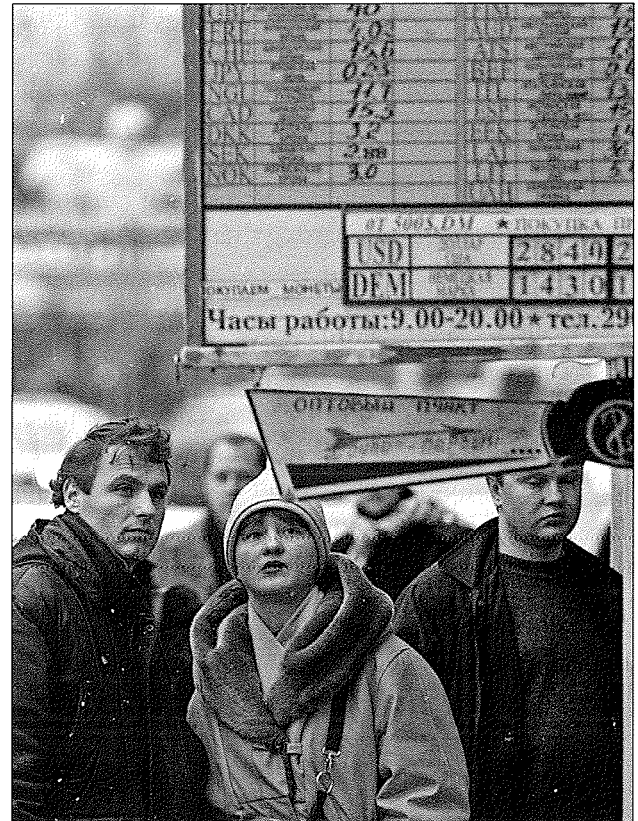
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his political career, and he took full advantage of it. Running in Moscow, Yeltsin conducted an essentially anti-establishment campaign, calling the party's leadership corrupt, and vowing to roll back the privileges of the party's ruling elite. The rebel won in a landslide.

At this stage in his new career, Yeltsin was a populist running against the grain of the Soviet regime. If what he stood against was clear, what he stood for was less obvious. At the time, many considered him to be a Russian nationalist.

Others cast him as an autocratic demagogue, less cultured, less liberal, and less predictable than his chief rival, Gorbachev. Western leaders in particular looked askance at this rabble rouser, fearing he might disrupt the "orderly" reforms being executed by their favorite Communist Party general secretary, Gorbachev.

Yeltsin could have become all these nasty things. Indeed, his flirtation with militant nationalist groups earlier in the 1980s suggests that his political ideas weren't firmly formed when he suddenly became the focal point of the anti-Soviet opposition in 1989. During the 1989 Russian parliamentary campaign, Yeltsin and his aides made their first contact with Russia's grassroots democratic leaders of the so-called informal (*neformal'nye*) movement—thanks to the initiative of those leaders, not Yeltsin. By the late 1980s, informal social associations had sprouted throughout the Soviet Union in response to Gorbachev's political liberalization. Their aims at the outset were modest—convening to speak foreign languages, gathering to rehabilitate Russian cultural traditions. But these non-Communist public organizations soon embraced overt political objectives, not least getting their own leaders elected to the Soviet parliament. Their strategy was to ride Yeltsin's coattails to



A dropping ruble is only one symptom of Russia's economic decay. The economy shrank by nearly 50 percent between 1989 and 1999.

power, and to that end candidates from the informal movement such as Sergei Stankevich sought out Yeltsin to win his endorsement. They succeeded, drawing Yeltsin into a democratic political culture he had not known previously.

Both Yeltsin and Stankevich ran on protest platforms, but the staffs supporting them came from very different strata of Soviet society. The supporters of Stankevich and the other informal movement candidates were young, highly educated, liberal-minded activists who had little or no experience with the Communist Party. Many, in fact, were ardent opponents of the party and the Soviet system more generally. Yeltsin's entourage was a mix of former members of the ruling elite—like Yeltsin himself—and populist, grassroots leaders of voter clubs, primarily from working-class neighborhoods in Moscow. Though also new to politics, these Yeltsin supporters were older, less educated, and less ideological than those around Stankevich and candidates like him. At this stage, all they shared was a common ideology of opposition, a shared hatred of the Soviet Communist Party.

Yeltsin and his scruffy new allies did not sweep into power after the 1989 election. On the contrary, they won only a small number of seats in the new Soviet parliament and quickly became marginalized in this institution dominated by Gorbachev. Frustrated by their lack of power and by Gorbachev's unwillingness to cooperate, Yeltsin and his allies made a tactical decision to abandon Soviet-level politics and focus their efforts instead on the upcoming elections for the Russian Congress of People's Deputies and, even more locally, on city council elections throughout Russia. It was a fateful decision, with dire consequences for the future of the Soviet Union. Yeltsin spearheaded the charge. His aim was to seize control of political institutions from below as a means to undermine Gorbachev's power from above. The Russian Congress and the Moscow City Council—institutions never before important to Soviet politics—would eventually whittle away the legitimacy and authority of Kremlin power.

Thanks to voters restless with Gorbachev's pace of reform, Russia's anti-Communist forces captured nearly a third of the seats in the Russian Congress in the 1990 elections. With additional votes from Russian nationalists, Yeltsin then won election as chairman of the legislative body. The anti-Communists had seized control of their first state institution. In one of their first acts as the newly elected representatives of the Russian people, the Russian Congress declared Russia an independent state in the summer of 1990. Yeltsin called on the Russian people to consider the Russian Congress, rather than the Soviet Congress, the highest political organ in the land.

Yet the Russian Congress and the Russian state were located within the Soviet Union. The Kremlin, not the White House (the home of the Russian Congress), still controlled all the most important levers of power. A protracted struggle for sovereignty between the Soviet state

and the Russian government ensued. In a replay of Russian history circa 1917, Russia once again experienced dual power during 1990–91. From January to August 1991, the balance of power shifted back and forth between radicals and reactionaries several times. Large demonstrations throughout Russia to protest the Soviet military invasion of the Baltic republics that January reinvigorated the democratic movement. But Soviet conservative forces soon won political victories, introducing major changes in the composition of the Soviet government. Of the original perestroika reformers in the highest echelons of the Communist Party in the late 1980s, only Gorbachev remained. A referendum in March 1991 looked like another triumph for Gorbachev and his new conservative allies, when a solid majority of Russians (and Soviet voters in participating republics) voted to preserve the Soviet Union. But they also voted in favor of a proposal, astutely added to the ballot by Yeltsin, to introduce the elective office of president of Russia. Once again, he had an opening. In June, Yeltsin won a landslide victory to become Russia's first elected president, a vote that returned momentum to the anti-Communist forces.

Soviet conservatives attempted to strike back. After prolonged negotiations, Yeltsin and most of the other republican leaders were prepared to join Gorbachev in signing a new Union Treaty, an event scheduled to take place on August 20. Soviet conservatives saw this treaty as the first step toward total disintegration of the Soviet Union, and preempted its signing by seizing power. While Gorbachev was on vacation, the State Committee for the State of Emergency (GKChP in Russian) announced on August 19 that it had assumed responsibility for governing the country. The GKChP, drawing heavily on nationalist rhetoric, justified its actions as a reaction against “extremist forces” and “political adventurers” who aimed to destroy the Soviet state and economy. Had these forces prevailed, it is not unreasonable to presume that the Soviet Union, in some form, would still exist today.

But they did not prevail, because Yeltsin and his allies stopped them. Immediately after learning of the coup attempt, Yeltsin raced to the White House and began to organize a resistance effort. As the elected president of Russia, he called on Russian citizens—civilian and military alike—to obey his decrees and not those of the GKChP. In a classic revolutionary situation of dual sovereignty, Soviet tank commanders had to decide whether to follow orders from the Soviet regime, which were coming through their radio headsets, or the orders from the Russian president, which they were receiving by hand on leaflets. At the end of the day, enough armed men had obeyed Yeltsin's leaflets to thwart the coup attempt. By the third day, the coup plotters had lost their resolve, and began to negotiate an end to their rule.

What looked like a triumph of democratic sentiment was only in part that. Yeltsin's success in orchestrating this peaceful collapse is all

Russia's Moral Rearmament

"Looking at the present condition of my country. . . . I cannot but wonder at the short time in which morals in Russia have everywhere become corrupt." Prince M. M. Shcherbatov, an aristocrat during the reign of Catherine the Great, made this observation in a 1786 treatise, *On the Corruption of Morals in Russia*. But his assessment might just as well have been voiced today by any number of journalists writing about Russia's current predicament.

Money laundering, corruption, filthy electoral campaigns—these are the catch phrases in Western media coverage of things Russian. According to critics, business and politics in Russia are driven by greed and seething with criminal activity. After succeeding Boris Yeltsin, Vladimir Putin himself announced that "the revival of people's morals" would be the cornerstone of his program.

In the decades following the death of Peter the Great in 1725, Russia wrestled with a similar moral crisis brought about by the introduction of new economic, social, and political standards. Peter the Great, like Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin, was the product of a conservative and cumbersome administrative culture that he first modified and later destroyed. Indeed, it is tempting to draw up a modest list of cognates between Peter on the one hand and a melding of Mikhail and Boris on the other—from Harvard University economist Jeffrey Sachs, the modern counterpart to Peter's adviser, German philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibnitz, to Peter's famed Westernization during the early 18th century.

The Western-style customs and standards Peter introduced along with his "technology transfer" from Europe directly affected only the privileged. Succeeding generations of elites, in a process at once gradual and fitful, moved away from being subjects of a Westernization initially imposed from above—commanded by a formidable and terrifying monarch who cut off the sleeves of the boyars' kaftans with his own shears, forced the recalcitrant nobles among them to build houses on the swamp that was only beginning to take shape as St. Petersburg, and required aristocratic men and women to wear Western dress and mingle at social gatherings. Many members of the elite were eventually transmogrified into eager recipients of Western-style luxuries and adornments. Prince Shcherbatov thought their passion for Western "voluptuousness" had led to moral collapse. But by the time of Alexander Pushkin, early in the second quarter of the 19th century, many of these nobles had evolved into educated and worldly gentlemen and ladies imbued with the very spirit of Western refinement. The moral crisis that so alarmed Prince Shcherbatov had passed.

In Russia today, Vladimir Putin is right in his insistence on the need for moral regeneration. According to what precepts does he imagine such a revival ought to take place? Surely not the homely, stolid, and prudish conventional morality characteristic of so many hardworking drones of the high Brezhnev period, nor the inner-directed, conscience-driven teachings of that paragon of bourgeois virtue, Benjamin Franklin.

It may be that a campaign to change popular morals will take the form of vaguely Christian pontifications, hand in hand with punitive anticorruption measures, since Putin, like Boris Yeltsin before him, has allied himself closely with the Russian Orthodox Church and its obscurantist patriarch, Aleksy II. Indeed, Putin says he was secretly baptized as a baby and is an observant Christian.

More than 70 percent of Russians are Orthodox Christians. Catholics, Protestants, and Jews each account for less than one percent of the population, and estimates of the size of the Muslim segment vary widely. Baptist and Pentecostal evangelicals are among the fastest growing religious groups in the country. If the promised revival of morals takes the form only of theopolitical utterances represent-

ing one of the many faith traditions currently very much alive in the Russian Federation, then the prospect of moral renewal from above remains troubling. In Russia's long and turbulent history, many rulers have attempted to meddle with popular morals. Emperor Nicholas I's 1826 edict established a particularly pernicious form of morality-based censorship, and he personally supervised the editing and rewriting of poetry he deemed impious or unseemly, all in the name of saving the souls of his unwitting subjects. In the autocratic



Peter the Great

political culture of old Russia, with which Stalin self-consciously allied himself (that is why he took such a personal interest in Sergei Eisenstein's cinematic masterpiece of the 1940s, *Ivan the Terrible*), the monarch assumed staggering responsibility but also reserved the unique right to bestow privilege as he saw fit. Both the caprice and the totality of the ruler's authority found expression in Moussorgsky's famous "Song of the Flea," in which a king bestows upon a favorite flea a velvet kaftan, and also "complete freedom."

Putin seems neither capricious nor (as yet) autocratic. He realizes that any genuine moral change needs to come from the people themselves. In an open letter to Russian voters at the end of February, he spoke about the need for a core set of moral values: "For a Russian citizen, what is important are the moral principles which he first acquires in the family and which form the very core of patriotism. This is the main thing. Without it, it is impossible to agree on anything; without it, Russia would have had to forget about national dignity, even about national sovereignty. This is our starting point."

But Putin also shares with the Romanov emperors a passion for the military. He used war (and genocide) to achieve nonmilitary goals such as social unity and civil accord. The war in Chechnya and the demolition of its capital, Grozny, were purportedly launched to fight terrorism. It seems natural for Putin to turn to the military in his campaign to revive popular morals. Not long ago, he reintroduced into Russian schools the teaching of "military preparedness," which in the Soviet era was a salient feature of a "military-patriotic upbringing."

Patriotism, respect for the armed forces, and a government-sponsored Orthodox Church—these are the three likely sources of Vladimir Putin's program to combat "the corruption of morals in Russia" today and in the months to come. They have a solid grounding in Russia's past, and might indeed provide a kind of stability that the country needs. A Russian moral revival is not necessarily good news for the West.

—Nina Tumarkin

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the more remarkable in that he accomplished it in the face of a surprising lack of widespread support. To be sure, the democratic movements in Moscow and St. Petersburg mobilized tens of thousands on the streets, yet only a very small minority of Russians actively resisted the coup attempt. Yeltsin's call for a nationwide strike on the second day of the coup was largely ignored, while the rest of Russia and the most of the other Soviet republics stood on the sidelines, awaiting a winner.

Yeltsin deserves great credit for making it seem inevitable that he would be that winner, for it was not. The outcome of the August 1991 putsch attempt fundamentally changed the course of Soviet and Russian history. For the first time since the Bolsheviks seized power in 1917, Soviet authorities had moved to quell social opposition in Russia and failed. The moment was euphoric. For many Russian citizens, no time is remembered with greater fondness than the first days after the failed coup. Even Gorbachev belatedly recognized that after the August events, there "occurred a cardinal break with the totalitarian system and a decisive move in favor of the democratic forces." Western reactions were even more ecstatic; a typical headline declared "Serfdom's End: a thousand years of autocracy are reversed." Yeltsin, the unquestioned leader of this resistance, was at the height of his glory.

He and his revolutionary allies immediately took advantage of their windfall political power to arrest coup plotters, storm Communist Party headquarters, seize KGB files, and tear down the statue of Felix Dzerzhinskii, the founder of the modern-day KGB. The pace of change within the Soviet Union accelerated rapidly. Yeltsin and the Russian Congress of People's Deputies in effect seized power themselves. They pressured the Soviet Congress of People's Deputies to dissolve, disbanded the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, assumed control of several Soviet ministries, and compelled Gorbachev to acquiesce to these changes. Most dramatically, Yeltsin met with the leaders of Ukraine and Belarus in early December to dissolve the Soviet Union. On December 31, 1991, the Soviet empire disappeared. Buried with this empire were Soviet autarky, the Soviet command economy, and the Soviet totalitarian state. Staring down the August 1991 coup may have been Yeltsin's bravest moment. Dissolving the Soviet Union may have been his most important achievement.

But, as in all revolutions, destruction of the old regime proved easier than construction of a new order. Now that the Soviet past was closed, what would Russia's future look like? What kind of political regime, economic system, or society could or should fill the void? Even the borders of the state were unclear. The tasks confronting Yeltsin and his allies in the fall of 1991 were enormous. The economy was in shambles. There were shortages of basic goods in every city. Inflation soared, trade stopped, and production plummeted. Many predicted massive starvation during the winter. Meanwhile, the centrifugal forces that helped pull the Soviet Union apart had spread to

some of the republics within Russia's borders. Months before the Soviet Union dissolved, Chechnya had already declared its independence. At the same time, the political system was in disarray. Yeltsin enjoyed a honeymoon period of overwhelming support after his August 1991 performance. Yet the rules of the game for sharing power between the executive and legislative branches remained ambiguous. Yeltsin, after all, had only been elected president of Russia the previous June. As part of the deal struck to permit this election, the constitutional amendments delineating his power were scheduled for approval in December, and thus were not in place when Yeltsin suddenly became head of state in the newly independent Russia.

The Russian state did not yet even exist. In the autumn of 1991, Russia's "independence" was an abstract concept, not an empirical reality. It must be remembered that in August 1991 Russia had no sovereign borders, no sovereign currency, no sovereign army, and weak, ill-defined state institutions. Even after the December agreement to dissolve the Soviet Union and create the Commonwealth of Independent States, Russia's territorial location was still contentious, while Russians' psychological acceptance of a Russia without Ukraine, Belarus, or Crimea still had not occurred. Throughout the former Soviet Union, some 30 million ethnic Russians became expatriates overnight at the same time that ethnic minorities within the Russian Federation pushed for their own independence.

In tackling the triple transition of political change, economic reform, and empire dissolution, Yeltsin and his allies were on their own to an unparalleled degree. In many transitions to democracy in Latin America, Southern Europe, and East-Central Europe, old democratic institutions, suspended under authoritarian rule, were reactivated, a process that is much more efficient than creating new institutions from scratch. Russian leaders had nothing to resurrect. Similarly, even the most radical economic reform programs undertaken in the West—including Roosevelt's New Deal—took place in countries that had experience with markets, private property, and the rule of the law. After 70 years of communism, none of the economic institutions of capitalism existed in Russia. Even the memory of such institutions had been extinguished among the Russian citizenry after a century of life under a command economy.

Yet Yeltsin and Russia's revolutionaries did not enjoy a tabula rasa in designing new market and democratic institutions either. They had to tackle the problems of empire, economic reform, and political change with many of the practices and institutions of the Soviet system still in place. The shadow of the past extended far into the post-Soviet era because Russia's revolutionaries ultimately refrained from using violence to achieve their goals of political, economic, and state transformation. Even the Communist Party, after a temporary ban, was allowed to reappear on the Russian political scene.

Nor did the revolutionaries really know what they wanted to do. Democracy and capitalism were buzzwords of Yeltsin's ideology of opposition, not concepts he had grappled with over years and years of struggle behind the scenes. The informal movement had only begun to develop overtly political ideas in the last year before the dissolution of the Soviet Union; it had not generated blueprints for a post-Communist society in Russia, for few within this movement believed that change would occur as fast as it did. Democratic Russia, the umbrella organization for Russia's grassroots democratic movement, held its founding congress in October 1990, only 10 months before the coup attempt. In contrast, Solidarity had been in opposition for a decade before taking power in Poland. The African National Congress in South Africa spent most of the century preparing for power.

Finally, Yeltsin also had to deal with the ambiguous balance of power between political actors who favored reform and those who opposed it. There was no consensus in Russia about the need for market and democratic reform. Russia's elite and society were divided and polarized, a very different situation from the comparative cohesion in several Eastern European countries. In August 1991, political forces in favor of preserving the old Soviet political and economic order were weak and disorganized, but they soon recovered and regrouped within the Russian Congress of People's Deputies, in regional governments, and on the streets to demonstrate their power. On the other side of the barricade, those in favor of reform looked invincible immediately after the August 1991 coup. But this anti-Communist coalition quickly fell apart after the Soviet Union collapsed. A common enemy had united them. When that enemy disappeared, so did their alliance.

The changes under way on every front plainly overwhelmed Yeltsin, who left Moscow in October and hid out in Crimea for three weeks, allegedly in a drunken stupor. On his return, he made a series of critical decisions that shaped the course of Russian political and economic reform for the rest of the decade. But he also refrained from making some important decisions, which arguably had an even more profound influence on Russia's first years of independence. Yeltsin's most consequential omission was one that his own recent rise might have warned him against. He had watched as Gorbachev's miscues regarding political reform had undermined his economic reforms. Yet Yeltsin proceeded to miss an opportune moment to give the anti-Communist coalition, on which he and his programs depended, a chance to solidify and develop.

In the afterglow of the coup, Yeltsin could have, of course, used his power to establish an authoritarian state, as many a revolutionary leader faced with a radical transition has done. He could have disbanded all political institutions not subordinate to the president's office, suspended individual political liberties, and deployed coercive police units to enforce executive policies. His opponents expected him to do so. Even

some of his allies urged him to do so, arguing that it was the only way to introduce radical economic reform. Or Yeltsin could have taken steps to consolidate a democratic polity. He could have disbanded old Soviet government institutions, including first and foremost the Russian Congress of People's Deputies, and replaced them with more democratic structures. After all, the system of soviets put in place by the Bolsheviks was never designed to govern. He also could have adopted a new constitution codifying the division of power among executive, legislative, and judiciary as well as federal and regional bodies. And he could have called new elections to stimulate the development of a multiparty system. In this crucial transition period, he also could have joined Democratic Russia or created a new party of his own as a step toward creating a national reformist party.

Yeltsin, however, pursued neither strategy. He did not attempt to create a dictatorship, but he also did little to consolidate a democratic regime. Most important, he resisted calls for new national elections, and actually postponed regional elections scheduled for December 1991. He also did not form a political party. Finally, he delayed the adoption of a new constitution, even though his own constitutional commission had completed a first draft as early as October 1990, codifying the relationship between both the president and the Russian Congress and the federal and regional governments.

Instead, Yeltsin decided that economic reform and Russian independence took priority, and made his boldest moves on those fronts. He hired a small group of neoliberal economists headed by Yegor Gaidar to oversee the introduction of radical reforms. Beginning with the freeing of most prices on January 1, 1992, Gaidar and his team initiated the most ambitious economic reform program ever attempted in modern history. His goal was to liberalize prices and trade, achieve economic stabilization, and privatize property, all within a minimum amount of time, earning his plan the unfortunate label of "shock therapy."

Yeltsin did not understand the plan, but initially embraced it as the only path to creating a "normal" market economy in Russia. And as Gaidar explained, "you cannot do everything at the same time." Yeltsin and his new government believed they could sequence reforms. First, they wanted to fill the vacuum of state power by codifying the new borders of the Commonwealth of Independent States, then begin economic reform, and finally reconstruct a democratic polity. Yeltsin and his advisers believed that they had achieved major political reforms before August 1991. Free elections, an independent press, and the triumph over the coup attempt made it appear that democracy was secure; now the development of capitalism needed their attention. Western governments and assistance organizations also encouraged this course, devoting nearly 90 percent of their foreign aid budgets to economic reform.

In retrospect, Yeltsin's failure to focus on political reform during 1991–92 was his greatest mistake as Russia's first president, haunting his administration for the rest of the decade. By postponing elections, party formation, and work on the constitution, he fueled ambiguity, stalemate, and conflict between Moscow and the regions as well as between the president and the Congress. Both confrontations ended in armed clashes. Political instability, in turn, impeded the very market reforms Yeltsin had set his sights on.

Conflict between the executive and legislative branches of the federal government came first. The Russian Congress of People's Deputies was an odd foe for Boris Yeltsin. He had risen to power within it, and thwarted the coup from within its building. In November 1991, the Congress had voted overwhelmingly to give him extraordinary powers to deal with economic reform, and a month later the Supreme Soviet of the Russian Congress ratified his agreement to dissolve the Soviet Union. To be sure, Communist deputies controlled roughly 40 percent of the seats in the Congress, yet Yeltsin had nonetheless prevailed against his opponents throughout the heady early months of revolution. There was nothing that should have prevented him, once he became president of Russia, from reaching agreement with this Congress about the rules that would govern their interaction with each other, especially with a newly minted constitution already on hand. Indeed, after the putsch attempt, political relations were initially smooth, with most deputies supporting Yeltsin.

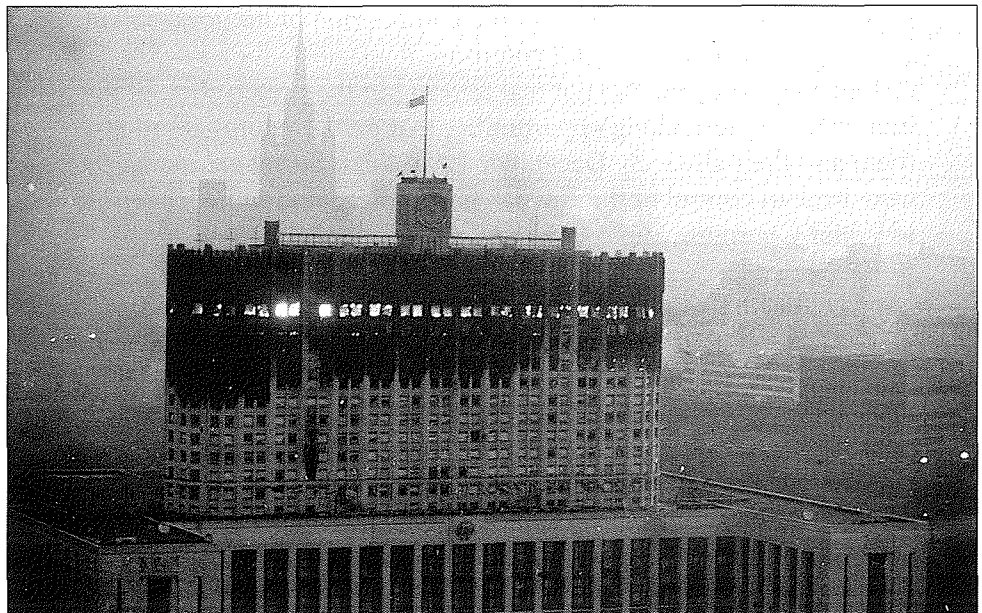
But after price liberalization and the beginning of radical economic reform in January 1992, the Congress began a campaign to reassert its superiority over the president. Disagreements about economic reform spawned a constitutional crisis between the parliament and the president. With no formal institutions to structure relations between the president and the Congress, polarization crystallized yet again, with both sides claiming to represent Russia's highest sovereign authority. Preparing for the 10th Congress of People's Deputies during the summer of 1993, deputies drafted constitutional amendments that would have liquidated Russia's presidential office altogether.

Yeltsin preempted their plans by dissolving the Congress in September 1993. The Congress, in turn, declared Yeltsin's decree illegal and recognized Vice President Aleksandr Rutskoi as the new interim president. In a replay of the 1991 drama, Russia suddenly had two heads of states and two governments claiming sovereign authority over each other. Tragically, this standoff only ended after the military conquest of one side by the other. Rutskoi and his allies initiated the violent phase of this contest when they seized control of the mayor's building and then stormed Ostankino, the national television building. Yeltsin responded with a tank assault on the White

House, without question one of the lowest points in his political career. Political inaction in the autumn of 1991 had led to military action in the fall of 1993.

The same constitutional vacuum that fueled conflict between Yeltsin and the Congress allowed federal conflicts to fester. Eventually, one of them—Chechnya—exploded into a full-scale war. Federal problems arose before the executive-legislative standoff. Right after the August 1991 coup attempt, Chechnya declared its independence. In March of the following year, Tatarstan held a successful referendum for full independence. The first of several federal treaties was signed then, but negotiations over a new federal arrangement embedded within a constitution dragged on without resolution into the summer of 1993, prompting several other republics as well as oblasts (smaller territorial units) to make their own declarations of independence complete with their own flags, customs agents, and threats to mint new currencies.

For two years after independence, Yeltsin failed to focus on these federal dilemmas. Consumed with market reform and then distracted by the power struggle with the Congress, he chose not to devote time or resources to reconstructing the Russian federal order. In particular, he ignored Chechnya, which acted increasingly as an independent political entity, if still economically dependent on Moscow. After the October 1993 standoff, Yeltsin did put before the people a new constitution, ratified that December, which formally spelled out a solution to Russia's federal ambiguities.



The price of putting economic reform first? The White House burns after Yeltsin's 1993 attack.

The new constitution specified that all constituent elements were to enjoy equal rights vis-à-vis the center. Absent from the document, however, was any mention of a mechanism for secession.

The formal rules of a new constitution did not resolve the conflicts between the center and the regions. Negotiation over the distribution of power between the central and subnational governments has continued, and it will continue as long as Russia maintains a federal structure. Nonetheless, all subnational governments except one—Chechnya—did acquiesce to minimal maintenance of a federal order. Eventually, in December 1994, Yeltsin decided to use force to deal with this single exception. The results were disastrous. Almost two years later, after a loss of 100,000 lives, Russian soldiers went home in defeat. Yeltsin's envoy, Aleksandr Lebed, negotiated an end to the war in the summer of 1996, but did not resolve Chechnya's sovereign status. Not surprisingly, war began again, in the summer of 1999. The failure to deal effectively with the problem of Chechnya will haunt Yeltsin's legacy forever.

So, perhaps, will the dramatic—and ironic—final fallout from Yeltsin's irresolution in the fall of 1991: Economic reform, the very cause for which he had neglected political reform, was derailed. As soon as Gaidar's Big Bang program began to meet public resistance—as everyone expected that it would and should—Yeltsin began having doubts about his choice. Having foolishly promised an economic turnaround within a matter of months, he lost his resolve when the miracle did not occur. Sustaining support for Gaidar's reforms was complicated by conflict between the president and the parliament. Who ultimately had responsibility for selecting the government or charting the course of economic reform? The constitution in place at the time did not provide a definitive answer. Yeltsin felt compelled to negotiate with the Congress over the composition of his government, diluting the Gaidar team with enterprise managers—the so-called red directors—whose aim was not real reform but the preservation of the incredible moneymaking opportunities that partial reform afforded them and their allies. By December 1992, these Soviet-era managers were back in control of the Russian government under the leadership of Viktor Chernomyrdin.

Thus, shock reform in Russia failed in part because it was never attempted. Instead, Yeltsin allowed Chernomyrdin and his government to creep along with partial reforms—reforms that included big budget deficits, insider privatization, and partial price and trade liberalization, which in turn combined to create amazing opportunities for corruption and spawned a decade of oligarchic capitalism. In this economy, capital has been concentrated in only a few sectors. For most of the 1990s, dynamic economic activity was located in trade and services, banking, and the export of raw materials, particularly oil and gas. Production of manufactured goods of

any sort decreased, first dramatically during 1990–91 and then steadily throughout the decade. Small-enterprise development, after a boom in the late Gorbachev era, has decreased gradually as a share of gross national product.

Most disturbingly, big business is closely tied to the state. Through the financing of state transfers, privatization, and the loans-for-shares program, Russian bankers have made fortunes as a result of political connections, not market moves. The intimate relationship between the state and the so-called private sector has served to sustain rent-seeking, not profit-seeking, behavior. The August 1998 financial collapse dealt a major blow to these tycoons and may, in the long run, provide new opportunities for the development of small profit-seekers at the expense of these large rent-seekers. But even those optimistic about this reversal believe the process will take several years, if not decades.

Yeltsin's nondecisions during 1991–92 also have meant a mixed record on the consolidation of democracy. That Russia today is an electoral democracy is Yeltsin's doing. Political leaders come to power through the ballot box and not through the Communist Party appointment process. They do not take office by force. Most elites in Russia and the vast majority of the Russian population now recognize elections as the only legitimate means to power. Leaders and parties that espouse authoritarian practices—whether fascists or neocommunists—have moved to the margins of Russia's political stage. Given Russia's thousand-year history of autocratic rule, the emergence of electoral democracy must be recognized as a revolutionary achievement of the last decade.

Yet Russia is not a liberal democracy. The political system lacks many of the supporting institutions that ensure the health of democracy. Russia's party system, civil society, and rule of law are weak and underdeveloped. Wealthy businessmen and executives, at the national and regional level, have too much power. Crime and corruption, forces that corrode democracy, are rampant. Over the last several years, Russia's news media, while still independent of the government and pluralistic, have become increasingly dependent on oligarchic business empires. In a society where basic public goods are lacking and the economy at best sputters along, democratic institutions and habits have had trouble taking root.

Yeltsin deserves partial blame. Had he pushed for adoption of a new constitution in the fall of 1991, the balance of power between executives and legislators would have been more equally distributed. By failing to call elections at that time, Yeltsin robbed Russia's democratic parties of their ripe opportunity for emergence and expansion. Instead, he convened the first post-Communist Russian election in December 1993. By that time, most parties created during the heyday of democratic mobilization in 1990–91 had disappeared. Liberal parties especially were hurt by the postponement of

elections, because many voters associated the painful economic decline from 1991 to 1993 with these parties' leaders and their policies. An underdeveloped party system and weak legislative institutions have hampered the growth of civil society.

What if Yeltsin had pushed for ratification of a new constitution in the fall of 1991, held new elections, and then had his new party compete in this vote? Would the military confrontation in October 1993 have been avoided? Would the Chechen wars never have happened? Would economic reform be further along today? Of course, we will never know. In comparing the case of Russia with other, more successful transitions from communism, we do know that the countries that moved the fastest to adopt democracy are the same ones that have avoided internal conflicts and wars, and have enjoyed the fastest material progress. Big-bang democracy helps to produce big-bang economic growth.

Yet Russia is not Poland or Czechoslovakia. Yeltsin faced revolution on an unmatched scale. He had to tackle the end of empire, the specter of Russian federal dissolution, the construction of a new polity, and the introduction of market principles all at once. And Russia's "democrats," unlike the democrats in Poland, Hungary, or Czechoslovakia, did not have overwhelming support within the elite or among the population at large when they suddenly came to power in the fall of 1991. Russian leaders might have been able to manage the array of changes facing them had they all agreed on a common strategy. But they did not agree. This guaranteed a troubled transition.

The revolution is not complete, but it also has not been reversed. The Soviet Union is gone and will never be resurrected. Communism will never return to Russia. Russia has not gone to war with Ukraine, Latvia, or Kazakhstan to defend Russians living there and is less likely to do so today than when Yeltsin took office. Though neofascists and neocommunists have threatened with periodic electoral splashes, neither succeeded in coming to power in the 1990s, nor do they seem likely to do so in the near future. The Russian Communist Party has lagged behind its counterparts in Eastern Europe, unable to recapture the Kremlin. Individual freedoms in Russia have never been greater.

By resisting the temptation of dictatorship, Yeltsin established an important democratic precedent that will raise the costs for future authoritarian aspirants. Defying the predictions of his critics, he did not cancel elections in 1996, he did not suspend the constitution after the August 1998 financial crisis, and he did not stay in power by any means necessary. On the contrary, he won reelection in 1996, abided by the constitution, and even invited communists into his government in the fall of 1998. And then he stepped down willingly, peacefully, and constitutionally. If dissolving the Soviet Union was Yeltsin's most important destructive deed, his surrender of power through democratic means may be his most important constructive act. □