

Nowhere to Turn But Yeltsin

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The Russian intelligentsia, dispirited, shorn of influence, and broke, had a colloquium in *Literaturnaya Gazeta* in February on its relationship with power. Led off by the greatest of the surviving 1960s bards, Bulat Okudzhava—who said that Yeltsin had turned away from a group that had represented his staunchest supporters when he was elected five years ago, and now “scorned” it because he and his cronies could not bear criticism—the colloquium was in the main a melancholic series of reflections. Most agreed with Okudzhava by lamenting the loss of a leader who had held out a promise of renewal, yet those who remained reluctantly loyal—and none were robust about being so—fell back on a recognition that speech was now free and that life under the Communists would be worse. Their collective posture was well summed up by the writer Andrei Bitov: The mark of a member of the intelligentsia, he said, was to stand for certain moral and intellectual values, and to *have nothing to do with power*.

Those members of the intelligentsia who had expected more and tried to help Yeltsin achieve it have usually had their fingers burned. Some have resigned, some were sacked, a few cling on for the usual reason that to leave would be to hand their place to someone worse. The most famous defector was the former prisoner of conscience Sergei Kovalev, who served as Yeltsin’s Human Rights Ombudsman, protested loudly and with great courage against the war in Chechnya (he spent many weeks under bombardment in Grozny, the Chechen capital), and finally resigned from the last of his official posts earlier this year. In his resignation letter, a small literary and polemical masterpiece, he laments that Yeltsin was unable to make the break from being a member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union to become . . . a human being.

It was a fine rhetorical flourish, but it was wrong. Yeltsin’s record is, whatever else, that of an all-too-human being; or, as Solzhenitsyn said of him, a man “almost too Russian.” Kovalev’s formulation puts him out of the reach of human moral choice. The problem for the Russian intelligentsia, and for all the Russians choosing a president on 16 June, is that they must make precisely such a choice.

The charge sheet against Yeltsin is an easy one to fill. In five years, he has described a tragic arc from vibrant defender of democracy to a closeted, narrowed man, suspicious of previous allies, enclosed by a circle of people almost none of whom have any links with the democrats and liberals of the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Chechnya leads the charges. It is not clear why he did not move against the rebellious, criminalized state much more quickly after it declared *de facto* independence at the end of 1991: allegations that senior officials and generals

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profited from its arms and drug trading rings may have a purchase on the decision. But when, in late 1994 after the failure of semi-clandestine efforts by the Federal Security Service to overthrow the regime of General Dzhokhar Dudayev in concert with the groups of Chechens opposed to him, he ordered a fullscale military invasion of the republic, it is clear that the decision was the worst of his career—whether as a Communist or an anticommunist. It has claimed some 50,000 lives, destroyed Grozny and other towns and villages in the republic, created hundreds of thousands of refugees, shattered the regional economy—and has not achieved its objective of restoring effective government, nor of defeating Dudayev, and certainly not of ensuring a stable peace.

In the course of the attempt, he has demonstrated the weakness of Russian arms—a weakness that might have been expected, given the shocks to which the

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military have been subjected in the past decade, but that nonetheless was itself shocking to witness: a General Staff openly riven and split on participation in the war, insubordinate officers at all levels, and a soldiery sullen, desperate to avoid the draft, and so poorly fed and provisioned that at times they could not mount simple missions. At times, it seemed

as if their largest activity was selling their weapons to those with whom they were locked in combat.

Ironically, this very demonstration of weakness and incompetence in both the military and in the Interior Ministry troops may—surely, must—stimulate a party of reform within the General Staff to bring about structural changes in a force diminished but largely unreconstructed since Soviet times. Yet even if that happens, it has been a hideous price to pay—the more so since the undoubted threat to the Russian state and to many of its citizens in and out of Chechnya could have been addressed (but was not) by a variety of measures short of war.

That the refusal to face the Caucasian tangle before the violence unleashed in December 1994 should be plausibly ascribed to corruption at the highest levels is an indication of how far the rotteness in the state has gone. Corruption, endemic in Soviet times, is a rule of official and political life in the post-Soviet world; though it is impossible to imagine that the transition from command economy to some form of market could fail to be accompanied by a splurge of criminality, it is also true that the Yeltsin circle has set a bad example and never acted as a pole of relative probity. Instead, the president himself has granted very large tax and other concessions to make his friends rich, has spread state largesse about with a free hand and has tolerated a level of corruption around him that dwarfs anything else in the world. In the past two years in particular, Yeltsin has acquiesced in the grabbing of corporations worth billions of dollars—including Gazprom, the biggest enterprise in the world—by people who are simply unknown.

Yeltsin has adopted great swathes of his nationalist—and now his Communist—opponents’ programs: now celebrating what would be an economically disastrous union with Belarus, then decreeing that the red flag—with a star, but shorn of the hammer and sickle—should again be recognized as a state banner of Russia. Once a campaigner against the power and omnipresence

of the KGB, he has re-created many of the features of a security state; and his closest guide, protector, and friend is General Alexander Korzhakov, the former KGB officer who followed Yeltsin into (and back from) the wilderness in 1987, and who now constitutes a lowering, suspicious presence at every occasion. In the presidential campaign so far he has shown no compunction in mobilizing television behind his campaign—silencing criticism, firing his one-time friend Oleg Potsov from the chairmanship of Russian TV because of the latter's critical spirit. It is, as Kovalev also said in his resignation letter, something of a tragedy. For many, it has become wholly clear that Boris Yeltsin never wished to achieve power in order to build democracy, but merely wished to destroy the

Soviet system to achieve power. It seems clear enough that the only possible reason to vote for him is, indeed, that Gennady Zyuganov, leader of the Communist Party, is likely to be worse—though even that is debated. Yet a case can be made for Yeltsin in more positive terms. For he can still be seen—as President Václav

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Havel of the Czech republic once said—as a man who has the remnants of a vision of a freer Russia in him, and who would still define his life's work as seeking to achieve it. It is a case that has worn threadbare, and it is impossible to tell if it will stand up to the exigencies of a second term, were he to win one in June. But it should be made.

The *Literaturnaya Gazeta* intellectuals were not wrong: speech has been relatively free in Yeltsin's Russia. Journalists have been harried to the point of being murdered, newspapers at the regional level effectively censored, television controlled, but the contrast with the Soviet era, even with much of the Gorbachev period, is still vast. The Chechen war has been *reported*, and in some media—notably the NTV network, in a number of central newspapers, and on radio stations—with a great deal of accompanying criticism. Russians have seen the shambles of their military for themselves, seen the carnage inflicted in their name.

They have also seen their leaders ridiculed, satirized, and frontally attacked. They have become used to both the press and the broadcast media acting as platforms for the opposition. Journalists and producers have very rapidly evolved a media culture that exists in relative freedom. It is not secure from counterattack, but none of any force has been mounted by the Yeltsin administration.

The country has the institutions of a law-governed state. The Constitution (of December 1993) may have been adopted through large-scale falsification: written in the aftermath of the shelling of the Russian parliament, it is heavily pro-presidential, giving Russia's fledgling parties little formal scope for development. The Constitutional Court was unconstitutionally abolished by the president in the aftermath of the October 1993 events, and was slow to be recreated (though it now is): it has so far not played a very active role in adjudicating abuses.

But the institutions are there, and they have tended to strengthen themselves. The Duma (lower house) and Federation Council (upper house) have reflected the new majorities produced by the December elections. They have the power of

influence, of legislative initiative, and of denial of agreement to the budget and other legislation; and though the presidential administration is swollen and powerful, it has not mounted a challenge. The two and a half years since the shelling of the White House has not been a time of steadily tightening authoritarianism, as many thought it would be at the time. Instead, it has been a time of contradictions, of retreats here and advances there.

There have been advances, most of all, in the economy—though few have benefited the mass of people. After nearly four years of plans that partly worked, then wholly failed, a series of policies were adopted at the beginning of 1995, backed by the International Monetary Fund, which have seen inflation brought down to 25 to 30 percent on an annual basis (it was at that level each month two years ago), the budget deficit lowered to 6 percent and the rouble strengthening against the hard currencies. Russia has instituted a unique form of “slow shock therapy”—the result of unremitting struggle between liberal and conservative politicians and economists, which the liberals seem slowly to have been winning.

The slowness has been bad for the people, who have had to endure the effects of the transition much longer than those in other former Communist states. The fall in living standards for the majority, the fall in production, and the constant interruptions to services have produced an insecure and harried population, whose male death rate—at an astonishing average of fifty-seven years old—reflects the arduousness of the times. Russia (and its neighbors) could not escape a hard landing—so distorted was its economy, so much in thrall to military production, so overstaffed and uncompetitive. The only saving grace was to make the shock sharp—a strategy Yeltsin backed, but then backed away from when political support for it collapsed. But he has appeared to realize he cannot return to command economics—and thus Russia has lurched toward a “normal” economy, though without any certainty of succeeding in it.

Yeltsin has rarely been an inspirational leader, except at the beginning of his run for power; more frequently, in recent years, he has been a disgraceful one, appearing drunk on several public occasions (or, in the case of his “visit” to Ireland in 1994, not appearing). He has claimed parity with the main Western states for a country manifestly not at their economic level. He has been dismissive of or threatening to many of the leaders of the former Soviet states all about him.

But he has confined his “imperialism” to vague threats and growlings. The “union” between Belarus and Russia is a mess, but it is a mess produced most of all by Alyxander Lukashenka, the genuinely authoritarian president of Belarus: Yeltsin grasped at a treaty of union because it was an election ploy, not because Russia had forced Belarus back into an empire. Ukraine shows every sign of wishing to remain a separate state, and though Yeltsin has snubbed the Ukrainian leaders, he has not threatened the state’s independence. The record of Russia toward these states has not been uniformly bad: where Georgia was reduced to acquiescence with the assistance of Russian arms, the Baltics have been left alone.

Why talk only of Yeltsin and Zyuganov? Because, two months before the vote, it seems as if they will be the two contestants in the final round. As this is written, a “third force” is trying to coalesce round General Alexander Lebed, and Grigory Yavlinsky and Vladimir Zhirinovskiy are also candidates—as is Mikhail Gorbachev. None—it seems, presently—will be able to match the leads that Zyuganov and Yeltsin are building up.

For the democrats, the failure to produce a strong candidate around whom they could unite is particularly bitter. Yavlinsky has the best claims on that. He has, in four years of opposition, continued to represent a centrist-liberal position. He has been strongly against the Chechen war, supported freedoms, supported a liberal economy. But jealousies among the democrats have been at least as strong as those among the nationalists (and much stronger than among the Communists and their allies, where habits of discipline appear to have lingered). Yavlinsky, too, has been abrasive and apparently uninterested in agreements. The result has been that Yeltsin, against the odds, has retained the reluctant support of a large number of those whose consciences he has outraged.

This is not a pre-election scene to bring joy to any hearts, Russian or foreign. But it may not produce despair. We must hope Václav Havel is right.