



Russia's political roulette

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Boris Yeltsin, who passed away April 23 at age 76, was an unlikely revolutionary. A successful member of the Soviet ruling class, he did his utmost to bring down the communist system. In the process he led the dismantlement of the Soviet Union, attempting to create, for the first time in Russia's 1,000-year history, a modern nation state. He almost succeeded.

Mr. Yeltsin, the son and grandson of peasants from the Ural Mountains, who were punished by Josef Stalin, was a loyal apparatchik in the big industrial city of Sverdlovsk, the heart of the Soviet military-industrial complex. He zealously overfulfilled construction quotas and led the effort to destroy the Ipatyev House, where Nicholas Romanov, the last czar, his family and his entourage were held and

brutally executed by the Bolsheviks in 1918.

But when promoted to Moscow under Mikhail Gorbachev to become the country's construction boss and later, Moscow City Communist Party secretary, Mr. Yeltsin became a populist and challenged the ruling Politburo. He was kicked out in 1988, only to return as an elected member of Supreme Soviet and the first competitively elected chairman of the Russian Parliament. In 1991, he convincingly won Russia's presidential election.

Mr. Yeltsin valiantly led the Russian Parliament and the throng of citizens who stood against the Russian tanks of the August 1991 communist hard-liner coup. As the coup failed, Mr. Yeltsin sidelined Mr. Gorbachev and managed the divorce of the So-

viet Union member republics, which became final in December 1991. Shortly thereafter, on Christmas Day 1991, the Soviet Union expired.

The new state Mr. Yeltsin led, the Russian Federation, faced empty coffers, pillaged by communists, no working institutions and runaway inflation. Communists and their nationalist allies wanted revenge. The country was in turmoil.

By firing his leading economic reformer Yegor Gaidar in December 1992 and appointing the former gas minister Victor Chernomyrdin as his prime minister, Mr. Yeltsin slowed the pace of reforms and allowed corruption to flourish. Unlike Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary and the Baltic States, Russian reforms were piecemeal and lacked a serious legislative base, which had to be completed later.

Russia also lacked a constitution, while the anti-reform Supreme Soviet threatened to impeach Mr. Yeltsin and tried to amass power. In autumn, 1993, Mr. Yeltsin took his political reform plan to a popular referendum, which he won, and later ordered the Supreme Soviet disbanded. He sent troops to prevent the legislature from gathering. The Supreme Soviet and its supporters attempted an armed insurrection. Mr. Yeltsin's power hanged by a thread for the second time in two years.

Having put down the insurrection, Mr. Yeltsin failed to disband the Communist Party or purge the system of its supporters. Unlike Soli-

darity leaders in Poland, Vaclav Havel in the Czech Republic, and Baltic anticommunists, Mr. Yeltsin was a part and parcel of the old system, and did not and could not fill the government with anticommunists, who, in Russia, also lacked administrative or security experience.

Mr. Yeltsin failed to complete the legal proceedings against the Communist Party; failed to purge security services (crucial for the future); and launched a war against separatist Chechnya, which would play a key role in Russia's slide back to authoritarianism. He never managed to put together an effective economic reform package, and the brief recovery in 1996-1997 ended with the disastrous financial crisis of August, 1998, which brought in the hard-liner Yevgeny Primakov as prime minister and set the reformers back even further.

Still, Mr. Yeltsin did not use power to suppress opposition parties and allowed an unprecedented freedom of the media. After Mr. Primakov was fired, Mr. Yeltsin briefly tried the former Interior Minister Sergey Stepashin as prime minister, only to replace him with a loyal and tough head of the secret police, the Federal Security Service. The new prime minister, appointed in the summer of 1999, was Vladimir Putin.

By then, Mr. Yeltsin's health has deteriorated. He had suffered a couple of heart attacks - both connected to his political battles, the first in 1988, when he was the first man to oppose the Soviet Politburo and came out on top. The second attack happened

during the touch-and-go presidential election campaign on 1996, where he closed the gap from low single-digit support in February to win the election in summer. In fall, 1996, Mr. Yeltsin underwent a quintuple bypass. The media and acquaintances reported serious problems with alcohol abuse.

Mr. Yeltsin left Russia weak but relatively free. The country has a diffuse power structure, which includes the presidency, the legislative branch, elected regional governors, and outspoken media. The middle class has started to grow; freedom of religion and movement have been enshrined.

Today, Russia is much wealthier, steadily growing about 7 percent annually since 2000. It has a flat 13 percent income tax and a 24 percent corporate income tax. Foreign investment flows in at an unprecedented rate; capital flight all but stopped.

Mr. Yeltsin, however, failed to secure his most precious gain - freedom - beyond his presidency. The constitution he rammed through in

late 1993 granted unprecedented powers to the president. The post-Yeltsin centralization of power includes appointed governors; a pliant parliament; state control of all TV channels and most radio and print media; and the breaking of the oligarchs' political power.

Mass demonstrations that occurred under Messrs. Gorbachev and Yeltsin today are inconceivable, as shown in the recent March of Dissenters, when 9,000 heavily armed riot police broke up 2,000 peaceful demonstrators. While Mr. Yeltsin failed to leave behind a functioning rule of law system, his successors dismantled the little that was left.

Mr. Yeltsin, like his predecessor and successor, is a transitional figure on the long road from Russia's communist empire to some destination we still cannot see.

But we will remember Boris Yeltsin as someone who meant well - and tried to get his country back to the family of nations, to freedom and humanity, so often lacking in Russia's tortured history.

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