



THE YELTSIN PRESIDENCY IN RETROSPECT: MYTHS, REALITIES, AND LESSONS TO BE LEARNED

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Abstract:

The death of the first President of the Russian Federation, Boris Yeltsin, on 23 April 2007 offers an opportunity for a critical reflection on his presidency. This article is a brief attempt at shedding some light on three more or less extended beliefs about Yeltsin's legacy, – his role in the end of the Soviet Union, Russia's transition to democracy, and relations with the West – analyzing the extent to which our perceptions of them include elements of myth and reality. Some lessons for current president Putin are suggested in the conclusions.

Keywords: Russia; USSR; Yeltsin; Putin; domestic politics; foreign policy.

Resumen:

El fallecimiento del primer presidente de la Federación Rusa, Boris Yeltsin, el 23 de abril de ofrece una oportunidad para una reflexión crítica sobre su presidencia. Este artículo es un breve intento de arrojar alguna luz sobre tres creencias más o menos extendidas acerca del legado de Yeltsin —su papel en el fin de la Unión Soviética, la transición de Rusia a la democracia y las relaciones con Occidente—, analizando hasta qué punto nuestras percepciones de los mismos incluyen elementos de mito y de realidad. En las conclusiones se sugieren algunas lecciones para el actual presidente Putin.

Palabras clave: Rusia; URSS; Yeltsin; Putin; política interior; política exterior.

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Introduction

The death of the first president of the Russian Federation, Boris Yeltsin, on 23 April 2007 offers an opportunity for a critical reflection on his presidency. We start from the assumption that Yeltsin's performance should be judged on the basis of the critical historical circumstances that he had to face. On the other hand, although comparisons are unavoidable, a desire of extracting lessons for today's Russia should not make us exaggerate Yeltsin's achievements.

This article is a brief attempt at shedding some light on three more or less extended beliefs about Yeltsin's legacy, – his role in the end of the Soviet Union, Russia's transition to democracy, and relations with the West – analyzing the extent to which our perceptions of them include elements of myth and reality. Some lessons for current president Putin are suggested in the conclusions.

1. Assessing Yeltsin's Legacy

ANTONY:

Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears;
I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him.
The evil that men do lives after them;
The good is oft interred with their bones;
So let it be with Caesar. [...] ²

William Shakespeare: *Julius Caesar*, Act III, Scene 2

One of the main risks when writing an obituary to a political leader – especially a reformist one – is focusing on the successful side of his contribution to history, omitting the undesired consequences that use to come with any significant reform. Sometimes this is intentional, aiming to criticize the current leadership by comparing them with their predecessor; even though the writer may assure that he or she has no intention whatsoever but analyzing the deceased leader's legacy from an objective, impartial point of view. The quotation above from Antony's famous speech in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* is, of course, a clear example of this. Other times there may be simpler causes: for example, the psychological mechanism that selects the best from among our memories, so the past is remembered in a brighter light than it really happened.

Whatever the reason, after Yeltsin's death some analysts³ seem to have chosen two highly successful moments as the most representative of his presidency. The first in August 1991, when – standing on a tank – he addressed the Russian people and asked them to resist the

² http://shakespeare.mit.edu/julius_caesar

³ For example, the interview to Strobe Talbott by Hirsh, Michael: "He Was Like a Wrecking Ball", *Newsweek*, 23 April 2007, at <http://www.msnbc.msn.com>; Lipman, Masha: "Yeltsin the Revolutionary", *The Washington Post*, 25 April 2007, at <http://www.carnegieendowment.org>. A more balanced approach is taken, for instance, by Mendelson, Sarah: "A Hero of Our Time?", *The Guardian*, 23 April 2007, at <http://www.csis.org>; Vanden Heuvel, Katrina: "Yeltsin's Real Legacy", *The Nation*, 2 May 2007, at <http://www.thenation.com>.



conservative coup d'état. The second in December 1991, when he and the presidents of the Ukrainian and Belarusian Soviet Republics signed the Belovezh Agreement declaring the USSR dissolved and establishing a Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).

Yeltsin is therefore presented as “the man who ended the Soviet Union”, – which, it is generally agreed in the West, made the world more stable and secure – pushing Russia into a transition to a Western-style democracy. This could imply that such an accomplishment justifies a milder judgement of his later performance as Russian president; however, the images on which this argument is based are not as accurate as they may seem when set into their broader context, as we will see below.

2. Was Yeltsin Responsible for the End of the Soviet Union?

The end of the USSR would be more realistically described as an unintended result of Gorbachev's policies, the August 1991 coup attempt and the system's underlying weaknesses, rather than Yeltsin's own achievement. Although Gorbachev's efforts were aimed at preserving the Soviet Union, new hopes had been created by *perestroika*, *glasnost*, and the “new thinking” on international affairs; last but not least, the popular revolutions in Eastern Europe against the Communist regimes would not have been possible without his reversal of the “Brezhnev Doctrine”⁴.

Secondly, the case of Russia was very different from other parts of the Soviet Union, like the Baltic republics. Russians did not want independence for its own sake: as they were the leading nation in the federal state, they were naturally the most reluctant to break it up⁵. It was only a major crisis such as the coup attempt – with the Soviet president hostage in his Black Sea *dacha*, and Yeltsin as the real leader of the country in many people's eyes – what convinced Russians that their future would be better outside the Soviet Union than inside it.

The Yeltsin depicted by these events is, therefore, not just the responsible politician that resisted the coup, but also – contradictory as it may seem – an ambitious one who used the circumstances for his own aims: becoming the ruler of an independent state, which allowed him to control all federal resources on Russian territory⁶ and at the same time get rid of his main rival, Gorbachev. Prioritizing personal interests over national interests is of course a feature of many politicians in different countries; however, in Yeltsin's case, the importance of the decisions he had to take would have required a more responsible approach and a greater attention to the consequences of his decisions.

⁴ The “Brezhnev Doctrine” stated that the USSR would intervene if any member of the Communist bloc left the Warsaw Pact or abandoned Communism. This was applied to Czechoslovakia in 1968, when the “Prague Spring” was ended by the Soviet army.

⁵ This was clearly shown by the 1991 referendum on the preservation of the Soviet Union, with most Russians voting in favour. “March 1991 referendum on the preservation of the Soviet Union”, at <http://www.nupi.no>.

⁶ Nuclear weapons stationed in other former Soviet republics were transferred to Russia's arsenal after a period of negotiation.



3. Did Yeltsin Put Russia on the Way to Democracy?

Yeltsin should be remembered as the leader who managed to emerge from the 1991 crisis as the main political figure, attracting public support in those critical moments; but also as the one who was not up to the task of leading the newly independent Russia in subsequent years.

While he formally adhered to democracy and presented himself to the world as the only alternative to the restoration of Communism, many of his actions – first and foremost, the armed resolution of the conflict with Parliament in 1993 and the start of the war in Chechnya in 1996 – were the product of the authoritarian system in which he had been brought up. Yeltsin preferred to use the power resources at his disposal rather than negotiation in order to solve conflicts, making Russian politics even more unstable during the critical post-Soviet years.

Although there were certainly important advances towards democracy under Yeltsin, – some of which, like free speech, have been partially reversed since then – his leadership style cannot be described as fully democratic, grounded on the values of accountability of the government and separation of powers. On the contrary, the 1993 Constitution was designed to reduce the role of the opposition to a minimum by privileging the president over the legislative power, without a real system of checks and balances. Nevertheless, it was probably a combination of Yeltsin's insecurity and his political weakness, rather than genuine authoritarianism, what made him elude political competition with his adversaries.

What is clear is that Yeltsin's performance was instrumental in discrediting the idea of democracy among ordinary Russians, identifying it with inefficiency, corruption, and the radical economic reforms – a “shock therapy” that had more from the first word than from the second – that left a huge majority impoverished and a new elite of billionaires, the oligarchs, in charge of the former state-owned enterprises. This, and not any fundamental incompatibility between the Russian culture and democracy, is what really explains the widely shared idea among Russians that the end of the Soviet Union was a catastrophe rather than a liberation⁷, as well as Putin's genuine popularity nowadays.

4. Was Yeltsin a Reliable Partner for the West?

There is no doubt that one of the main reasons for Russia's incoherent foreign policy under Yeltsin was the president's own personality, especially his impulsiveness and lack of coordination with other governmental actors. The excessive importance attached by him to personal relations⁸ with foreign leaders often made him change or contradict his country's long-standing positions after an international meeting. An example of this conduct was his declaration in Warsaw in 1993 that he was not against NATO expansion. On the other hand, his distrust of his aides and high officials caused frequent personnel changes, as well as a fierce competition among state bodies for the president's favour; what Jensen calls “the culture of the imperial court”⁹.

⁷ This was acknowledged by Putin in his 2005 Address to Parliament, which is a consequence of him trying to distance himself from the Yeltsin period rather than him being a real nostalgic of the Soviet Union. See “Annual Address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation”, 25 April 2005, at <http://www.kremlin.ru>.

⁸ See his memoirs: Yeltsin, Boris (2001): *Midnight Diaries*, London, Phoenix.

⁹ Jensen, Donald N.: “How Russia is Ruled – 1998”, *Conflict Studies Research Centre Russia Series* (January 1999), p. 4, at <http://www.defac.ac.uk/colleges/csrfc>.



In addition to that, Yeltsin's recurrent health problems were determinant in making Russia's foreign policy even more unstable and unpredictable in crucial moments: for instance, in October 1998 – during the Kosovo crisis – he had to step down temporarily, with Prime Minister Viktor Chernomirdin becoming acting president. Moreover, in Yeltsin's final years it was widely believed that actual decisions were not made by the president himself but by his inner circle of political advisors, oligarchs like Boris Berezovsky and even relatives like his daughter Tatyana – a group which came to be known as “the Family”.

This plurality of actors in foreign policy-making, with their functions unclearly determined and informal actors replacing the official institutions for the most important decisions, prevented a real cooperation with the West to be achieved. Unable to assert his authority over competing state bodies, Yeltsin alternatively pursued “nationalistic” and “pro-Western” policies for reasons that had more to do with increasing his popularity in order to keep power than with any coherent vision of Russia's role in the world.

Conclusions

I believed in myself. It seemed that if we could just make one jump, we would overcome everything. But the one jump didn't work. I was too naïve about some things.¹⁰

Although Yeltsin's presidency cannot be considered generally successful, as the roots of many of today's problems – like public distrust of democracy and the West, or the never-ending violence in the North Caucasus – can be traced to some decisions made by him, the final result could certainly have been worse. The Soviet Union collapsed without starting a major conflict, a multi-party system was created, and a certain *modus vivendi* with the West was established, which prevented the disagreements over NATO enlargement or the Kosovo War to escalate. However, his own personality and the absence of a culture of consensus and negotiation among Russian politicians – so important in other transitions, like Spain after Franco's dictatorship – made it difficult for a real democracy to be established.

The perils of a weak presidency seem to have been well learned by Putin, who after taking office made reasserting the “power vertical” his first priority. As a consequence, Russia is undoubtedly more stable and predictable under Putin than under his predecessor, which – in spite of the official nationalistic rhetoric – makes crises easier to control and compromises easier to reach. That said, one should ask for what aims the current president is using this more favourable political and economic environment: consolidating his power seems to have become an end in itself, rather than a preparation for implementing the reforms that Russia needs. Putin has set out to correct the worst of his predecessor's failures, by strengthening the state and making it more efficient. However, the best of Yeltsin's legacy is being suffocated in the process.

¹⁰ Yeltsin's last speech as Russian president, on 31 December 1999. Yeltsin, *op. cit.*, p. 387.