



# The Selling Of The Russian President, 1993

*Russia needs rather humdrum political consensus, not another strong-arm leader with flashy public relations campaigns and a cult of personality in tow*

*By John Feffer*

**B**oris Yeltsin is currently being sold to the West as Russia's best hope for democracy. To better peddle the product, commentators have scrambled for the most congenial comparison. George Washington? Alexander Kerensky? Peter the Great? Some of the less historically nimble have fallen back on religion for their references: Yeltsin as an armored St. George, astride the majestic steed of Mother Russia, brandishing the lance of popular support, and attempting to slay the wily and seemingly indestructible dragon of Soviet Communism.

Poor Boris: he cannot possibly live up to these comparisons. Vulgarly manipulative and politically unnuanced, the Russian president is accustomed to rough-and-tumble Kremlin battles, the kind he used to have as junior apparatchik in the Soviet old boys network. Even after establishing his own independent power base, he still managed to excel at games of bluff and dare, as with the raving coupsters in August 1991 and then with the fading Gorbachev. But a consummate politician Yeltsin is not. He lacks the patience—and thus appears genuinely incapable of constructing the political consensus necessary to extract Russia from its current crisis.

Like his partner in petulance Ross Perot, the Russian leader recently went "to the people" in an attempt to bypass existing political institutions. On the face of it, the referendum of April 25 went in Yeltsin's favor. Both he and his economic reform received the support of the majority of voters (though the margins were not overwhelming). The results also indicated, in a non-binding fashion, that Russians are willing to allow

Yeltsin to serve out his term until 1996 but prefer early elections for parliament.

Rather than affirming his democratic tendencies, however, the referendum has only further demonstrated Yeltsin's reluctance to compromise. Moreover, preoccupied with defeating his political rivals and implementing a rapid economic reform, the Russian president has either ignored or unwittingly encouraged the centrifugal forces raging both within and outside the Kremlin walls.

For when the hoopla surrounding the vote dies down, Russia will be left with what it had before. Currently 75 percent of the population lives below the poverty line. The shock therapy introduced at the beginning of 1992 has devastated the economy, as even supporters of Poland's similarly drastic reforms will concede. A system of well-defined political responsibilities has not been created, leaving the president and the parliament to feud over administrative boundaries. Meanwhile, the Russian federation is beginning to break apart, with the different regions of the country disgusted with the center's oscillation between decrees and gridlock. Among Russians, a virulent nationalism is incubating, its growth only encouraged by the perception that Yeltsin is "selling the store" to the West. Often speaking on behalf of the 25-28 million ethnic Russians living outside Russian borders, these nationalists are beginning to sound like the Serbian chauvinists of several years back: increasingly anti-Western and concerned with protecting the interests of an often militant diaspora.

Boris Washington? Yeltsin the Great? No, the Russian president's democratic pedigree is open to chal-

lenge. Moreover, Western leaders are making a grave mistake by giving unqualified support to Yeltsin. By helping to mold him into a liberal autocrat and discouraging political compromise in Russia, the West may nurture neither market nor democracy. Instead, looking into a post-Yeltsin future, we may see the first fascist country in history to combine the resentments of imperial defeat and the shame of widespread poverty with the destructive capability of nuclear weapons.

### Liberal Authoritarianism

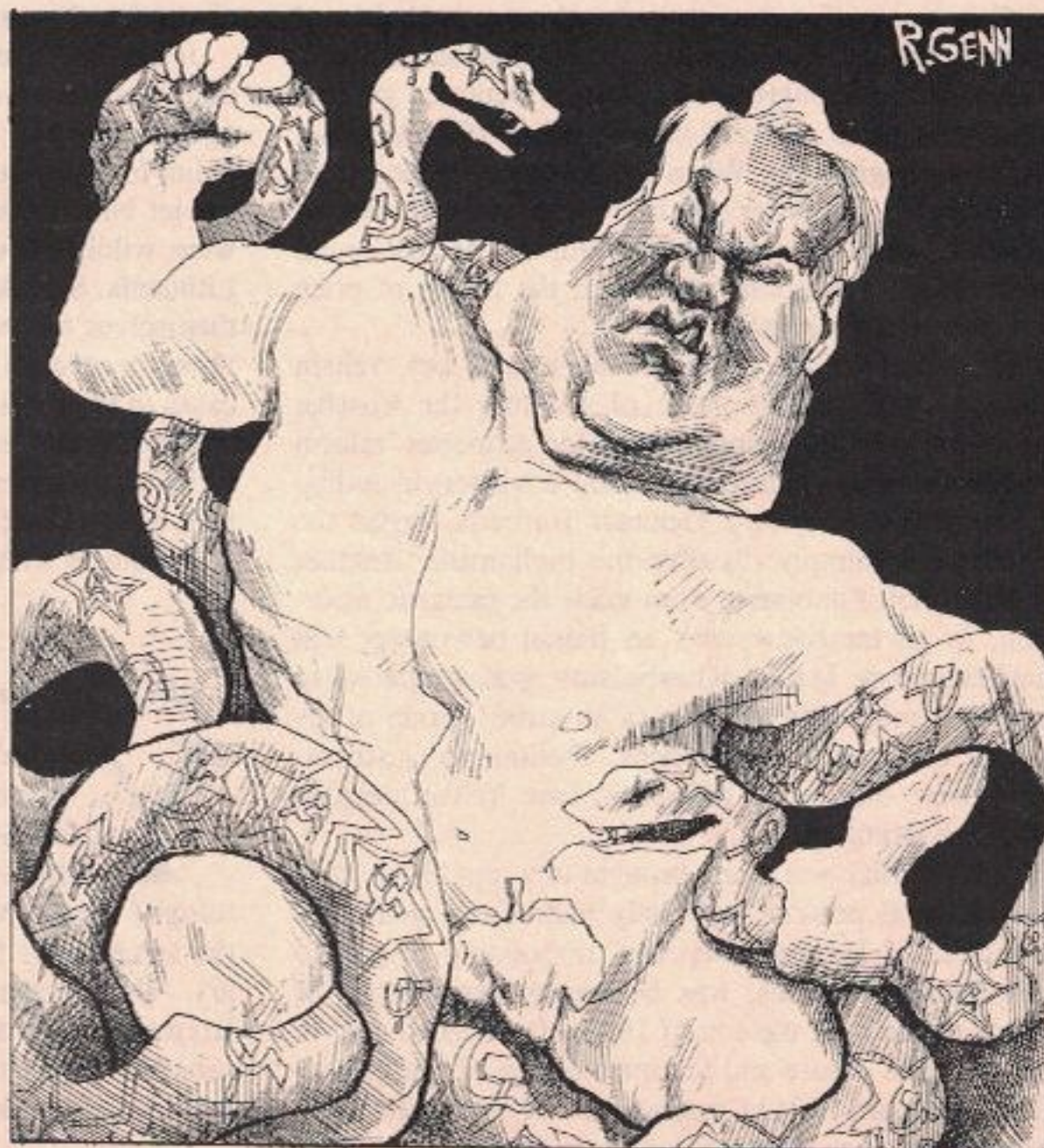
The current Russian conflict has little to do with the tension between democracy and communism. That, as they say in journalism, was yesterday's story. Rather, the Russian dilemma hinges on the problematic relationship between democracy and rapid market reform. No one voluntarily undergoes shock therapy; people have to be forced to take this particularly bitter medicine. No wonder that many neo-liberal leaders in the former Soviet bloc have discovered that decrees, not democracy, are frequently more useful for implementing the laissez-faire model. But how can a liberal in good conscience support rule by decree? Clearly a rethinking of liberalism is required.

Enter Berkeley political science professor Ken Jowitt, perhaps the most eloquent legitimizer of the concept of liberal authoritarianism. Governance by freely elected coalitions in the former Soviet bloc, he has argued, is simply "liberal utopianism." Strong presidents, still reliant on parliamentary support, will likewise fail. Therefore, Jowitt concludes in an essay published in 1992, only an authoritarian committed to pushing through dramatic economic change can prevent the countries of the former Soviet bloc from becoming fascist or militantly nationalist.

Too bad that these sentiments aren't confined to the cloistered offices of Berkeley. Instead, this analysis of the pitfalls of democracy has become rather common among certain Russian intellectuals. "An idle talking shop" is how supporters of a Yeltsin takeover frequently characterize the Congress of People's Deputies and its chief policy making organ, the Supreme Soviet. Gavriil Popov, the former

mayor of Moscow, has called those championing the principle of strong political participation "the new Communists" and warns of the dangers of mob rule. Elena Bonner, a prominent dissident and widow of Andrei Sakharov, has complained of the Congress's "excessive, almost fanatical adherence to democratic institutions and procedures in an undemocratic society." In a recent *New York Review of Books* piece, she called for a "democratic minority" to seize control of the country, presumably to bypass the excesses of the fanatically democratic.

Whatever his long-term intentions, Yeltsin did not start out angling to become Russia's first liberal authoritarian. After becoming Russian president in June 1991, he tried to construct an anti-conservative consensus out of neo-liberals, populists, authentic leftists, Russophiles, and reform Communists: in short, anyone who wanted to shake up the status quo. Nationalist-oriented Alexander Rutskoi became vice-president; Ruslan Khasbulatov, less a nationalist than a populist, became chair of the Russian Supreme Soviet and retained the authority Yeltsin had brought to the office; radical democrat Sergei Stankevich was persuasively wooed; former Soviet officials such as Ivan Silayev were brought into top government posts.







A coalition government? What an odd proposal. The vulgar pundits all insist that compromise is impossible because democrats cannot be reconciled with Communists. Yeltsin himself has maintained that *apres il, le deluge Communiste*, for they are "the strongest, most unrestrained, and best organized" of political factions (*The Economist* depicted this specter-of-Communism scenario in graphic shorthand on a recent cover as a calm, forceful Yeltsin postured in front of an indistinct portrait in relief of Lenin). But as the above descriptions indicate, the Yeltsin crowd's commitment to democracy is instrumental at best. Equally important to understand is that the opposition to Yeltsin is by no means exclusively "nationalist-Bolshevik," as the neo-communist hard-liners are called.

In June 1992, the Civic Union (CU) was formed as a coalition of disparate groups: former members of Yeltsin's Democratic Russia movement, activists in the Social Democratic party, representatives of the military-industrial complex, some reform Communists. It does not advocate a return to Communism. The CU has merely suggested that the political style and the economic content of Yeltsin's program should be modified—eminently reasonable suggestions. In the Congress of People's Deputies, it is a swing group between the hard-line liberals (curious that one never sees this expression in the media) and the nationalist-Bolsheviks. It is the movement closest to Vice President Rutskoi and Prime Minister Viktor Cher-

nomyrdin. If any consensus is to be forged in Russia, this group will play the key role.

One of the CU's chief accomplishments is its elaboration of an economic alternative, dubbed the "anti-crisis program." Of the scores of economic alternatives floating around parliament these days, the CU plan is best situated to replace shock therapy. It calls for, among other things, the reestablishing of partial state control over pricing and state orders, the extension of social guarantees, a state campaign to build up competitive industries, and greater worker participation in the privatization process. The architects of the plan correctly fear the deindustrialization of Russia, with its accompanying mass unemployment and social upheaval. When pressed, even some pro-shock therapy economists have gone on the record saying that, should the Russian citizenry reject the fast-track to the market, the Civic Union's alternative is credible.

The Civic Union has certainly not advanced the ideal left program. It is top-heavy, doesn't adequately address the rampant corruption spreading through Russia, and has some potentially tricky notions of privatization (that might, for instance, encourage insider deals favoring the managerial elite). As a compromise, however, it might just be the best alternative around.

There are further gaps between the Yeltsin and Civic Union position. Strong in the CU is the "Eurasian lobby," which regrets the loss of superpower status, sees Russia's future as a bridge between Europe

and Asia, desires a stronger Commonwealth of Independent States, doesn't entirely trust the West's motives, and champions the rights of the Russian diaspora. These are moderate nationalists, to distinguish them from the authentic xenophobes that lurk at the margins of contemporary Russian politics. The West would do well to reach out to the Eurasian lobby and demonstrate a real commitment to Russia that transcends economic greed and mistaken notions of stability.

The stakes are high should compromise on political, economic, and foreign policy issues fail in Russia. Elsewhere in the former Soviet Union the inability of adversaries to confine their disagreements to the political realm has cost innumerable lives. In Tajikistan, 50,000 have been killed in a pitched battle between government loyalists and opposition forces. Armenia has seized one-tenth of Azerbaijan, and 2,500 people have been killed in five years of fighting over Nagorno-Karabakh. A tense cease-fire holds in the virtually partitioned Moldova, Russia and Ukraine still trade accusations over Crimea and the Black Sea fleet, and several civil wars have nearly gutted Georgia.

This culture of conflict is working its way in from the margins to the heart of Russia itself. The Don Cossaks recently proclaimed self-rule. The republic of Chechnya has already announced its independence. Since claiming that its own rules supersede the Russian constitution, Tatarstan has achieved *de facto* autonomy. Other regions, particularly the Tuva and Sakha parts of Siberia, have shown increasing independence and will certainly take advantage of any major political instability to separate themselves from Moscow. Russia's Federal Treaty, signed by all the republics minus Chechnya and Tatarstan a year ago, may have only a slightly longer life than Gorbachev's 1991 Union Treaty.

It might seem, from the Kremlocentric point of view, that the only way for Yeltsin to handle these manifold problems is to seize the bear by its ears and rule from above. But that strategy would generate further centrifugal forces, causing the Russian house of cards to collapse, taking its first liberal authoritarian with it. The proof lies in Russia's neighboring states.

### Prospects

At the beginning of 1992, Estonian prime minister Edgar Savisaar asked the country's Supreme Soviet to declare an economic state of emergency and grant him special powers. After the defection of his political allies, Savisaar was forced to resign. In Georgia, Zviad Gamsakhurdia tried naked repression before being ousted by anti-government rebels. In Belarus, Vyacheslau Kebich is warring with parliament over executive powers, pri-

marily to deal with the economy. In Uzbekistan, president Islam Karimov has cracked down on internal dissent, claiming that liberalization provides an opening for religious fundamentalism.

Many post-Soviet leaders have flirted with liberal authoritarianism and have paid (or will pay) a heavy political price. Even movements that once commanded virtually unanimous public support, such as Sajudis in Lithuania, have seen that support deteriorate because of perceived authoritarian measures. Sajudis was recently voted out of both the parliament and the presidency as the economic misery caused by rapid market reform led Lithuanians to embrace the former Communist moderates.

Liberal authoritarianism has not been terribly successful in any of these countries. Rapid economic reform has proven too socially disruptive. Russia would be lucky if popular resentment led to the Lithuanian scenario: a return of the former reform Communists and an economic plan that seeks to prevent the complete deindustrialization of the country. But the Georgian or Tajik scenarios are perhaps more likely, given Russia's ethnic heterogeneity and geographic expanse.

The West continues to concentrate not on preventing the dissolution of Russian society but on encouraging rapid privatization and the economic carving up of the country. Buried in the agreements at the Vancouver summit that provided \$1.6 billion in aid, most of it in agricultural credits, were two key elements reflecting U.S. policy: \$82 million in export-import credits for Caterpillar tractors and \$150 million for Conoco to explore Siberia for raw materials. Is the West really helping Russia, or preparing to buy it wholesale?

Simply at the level of *realpolitik*, the United States should change its policy from unequivocal support of an increasingly autocratic Yeltsin to pushing for a political compromise with the Civic Union forces. The West worries about neo-Stalinists and resurgent Leninists. By encouraging Yeltsin to move simultaneously toward greater economic liberalism and political illiberalism, the West will more likely end up buoying the popularity of a Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, leader of the Liberal Democratic Party. An unabashed fascist despite the name of his party, Zhirinovskiy received nearly 8 percent of the vote in the June 1991 presidential elections. He is now campaigning to be the next mayor of Moscow. One of his opponents is the rock star "Spider" who is canvassing support from angry youth on behalf of the right-wing Radical Party.

If the international community doesn't want such illiberal authoritarians to succeed Yeltsin, then it should push the Russian president to compromise with his rivals. At this critical stage of reform, when democratic culture is so fragile, Russia needs rather humdrum political consensus, not another strong-arm leader with flashy public relations campaigns and a cult of personality in tow.

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