A political balance sheet of the Yeltsin era

Vladimir Volkov
21 January 2000

On December 31, 1999 Russia's president Boris Yeltsin announced his early departure from office. This put an end to an era that must count as one of the most dramatic and contradictory in Russian and international history, marked above all by the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the introduction of capitalist relations into the territory of the “socialist camp”.

Among the ruling layers in Russia two views prevail regarding the last 10 years. The first, the official ideology of the Kremlin, is shared by its liberal supporters at home and ruling circles in the West. It presents the Yeltsin era as a great step forward from the "dead end of the Bolshevik experiment" towards a "normal" modern civilisation. In place of the total regulation of social life by the state and the suppression of any private initiative, a period of personal liberty and democracy had arrived. Every citizen would now have the possibility of realising his potential.

The second comes from the Russian nationalists of every colour—red, white and brown. In their opinion, Russia under Yeltsin lived through a "time of confusion" (an analogy to the beginning of the seventeenth century, when the Rurik dynasty was replaced by the Romanovs), i.e., a break in the development of the Russian national state.

Truly Russian forms of social life, which took the form of "Soviet people's power" during the time of the USSR, were undermined by the opening up of the country to the influences of western civilisation. Thus a regime developed which did not correspond to the traditional peculiarities of the "Russian character" and the interests of the Russian people, they argue.

Both views are misleading. The real meaning of the Yeltsin era can only be understood in light of the social conflicts that shaped the Soviet Union in the course of its history: the fight between the dominant bureaucracy and the strivings of the mass of the population, which found a conscious expression in the programme of the Trotskyist Left Opposition.

The October Revolution of 1917 was based upon the active support of wide layers of the Russian proletariat and the peasantry. The Soviet Union owed its emergence to a broad mass movement, which aimed at the revolutionary transformation of world society on the basis of social equality and democracy. But this movement soon encountered decisive obstacles.

On the one hand, the Soviet Union was internationally isolated by the defeat of the revolution in Germany and the other European countries. It was cut off from the resources of the world economy, on which it urgently depended. On the other hand, due to generalised destitution, a new privileged layer arose in the form of the bureaucracy, which regarded Stalin as its political leader and was ultimately able to make itself the exclusive ruler over society.

In the 1930s Trotsky made the prognosis that the unstable and deeply contradictory situation of Soviet society meant it could develop in only one of two directions. Either the bureaucracy completed the counterrevolution, reintroduced private property and became the basis of a new ruling class, or the Soviet proletariat carried out a political revolution, established forms of real workers' democracy, revived the international revolutionary perspective of Lenin and Trotsky, and opened the way for a rebirth of socialism in the USSR.

In the great purges of 1937-38 the socialist opposition to Stalinism was to a large extent destroyed, but the ultimate fate of the Soviet Union was not yet decided. Right up to the 1980s, the bureaucracy did not dare to attack the socialised property relations created by the October Revolution. Only during the years of *perestroika*, by which point Stalin's nationalist utopia of building socialism “in a single country" had led the Soviet economy into a dead end and social problems burst into the open, did the bureaucracy succeed in forcing their own program upon the Soviet working class.

Gorbachev emerged as the leader of the bureaucracy who laid the foundations for the beginning of capitalist reforms, while Yeltsin, as an "escapee" from the nomenclature, took over from him the responsibility for implementing the capitalist programme.

Can the 10 years of Yeltsin's rule therefore be described as a triumphant advance of the counterrevolution? In a certain sense, yes. Historically, Yeltsin represents the pinnacle of the policy that had begun under Stalin decades before. On the other hand, much that occurred under Yeltsin hardly resembles a triumph of counterrevolution, since there was no real opposition.

The Soviet Union at the end of the 1980s can hardly be compared to the USSR on the eve of the Second World War. Several generations had passed. They had been cut off intellectually and psychologically from the traditions and spirit of the 1917 Revolution. In the Soviet reality that surrounded them they did not find anything that they could regard as their own achievement, and which they therefore considered worth defending.

In addition, the economic backwardness of the Soviet economy and its dependency on the world market had become so obvious that for many people any form of integration into the world economy appeared preferable, even under capitalist conditions and regardless of its negative impact.

Under these circumstances, Yeltsin could ascend to the peak of the Russian state and temporarily enjoy even a certain popularity. In the long run, however, he is a transitional figure, like Gorbachev before him. Both functioned to sell the masses a policy that exclusively serves the interests of a privileged layer.

Under the banner of the "renewal of socialism" Gorbachev led the country to the introduction of “shock therapy”, while in the name of the "introduction of democracy" Yeltsin took everything the majority of the population possessed and cast them into a fight for sheer survival.

At the beginning of 1992 the first government appointed by President Yeltsin, led by Yegor Gaidar, began its policy of “shock therapy”—a ruthless attack on the living standards and rights of most working people. Viktor Chernomyrdin, who replaced Gaidar at the end of 1992, strove to stabilise the financial system and attract foreign investors. To this end he increased the pressure on the working class. His successor in 1998, Sergei Kiryenko, attempted a new version of "shock therapy" and organised the financial collapse that affected, above all, the most vulnerable layers of society. Afterwards, Chernomyrdin was recalled to office, but his appointment was not approved by the Duma (parliament).

From that point on Yeltsin only appointed prime ministers who had started their careers in the security or secret services: Yevgeny Primakov

in September 1998, Sergei Stepachin in May 1999 and finally Vladimir Putin in August 1999.

In the meantime, the "democratic" programme has disappeared from the Kremlin's rhetoric. Official propaganda concentrates on the stabilisation of the state and the pursuance of "national interests". Putin's role in this regard is predictable. He will use any dirty trick against those who oppose the interests of the new dominant class in Russia.

The objective meaning of Yeltsin's resignation is that in order to carry out further capitalist "reforms," a reorganisation of the state apparatus is necessary, one which will enable it to act with police violence against the growing protests of the working class. This requires a figure who is not burdened with yesterday's promises or the reputation of a "democrat".

What are the results of Yeltsin's 10-year rule? A short response would read: disasters, poverty, the destruction of the foundations of life and any perspective for the future.

Despite the profound crisis, at the end of Gorbachev's five-years of *perestroika* the Soviet Union still possessed a certain economic foundation. The Soviet education and social systems had left a possibility for development and a cultural potential, which could have helped the social organism make a relatively fast recovery and revival. This was the case even if everything to do with the "Soviet way of life" evinced a certain grey dullness and a general low level of quality.

This was how Yeltsin found Russia when he entered the Kremlin. But what did he leave as he departed on the threshold of the twenty-first century?

The Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), which was called into life as a replacement for the USSR, is disintegrating on all sides. According to cautious estimates, Russian industrial production has shrunk by at least half. Gross domestic product is on the same level as the Netherlands, a country with a substantially smaller population, smaller territory and without the same supplies of raw materials. Millions of Russian citizens live on a miserable income, which does not even satisfy the minimum needs of modern life. Millions have been forced to leave their homes in order to save themselves from ethnic and regional conflicts, or to seek a better life.

Average life expectancy has sunk dramatically and young people have been robbed of any chance to find a reasonable job. All the organs of power have been consumed by the cancer of corruption, and are bound to the criminal world by invisible threads. The power and influence of criminal elements have reached a level previously unknown.

Above the ocean of tragedy confronting ordinary Russians, an extremely thin, ruthless, infinitely greedy and extremely egoistic layer of nouveaux riches has arisen, who live for the moment and for whom it is unimportant what price is paid for their wealth or what will follow them.

Yeltsin has become the symbol for this era of decline and this narrow layer of rich social climbers. In his farewell speech on television, he tried to present himself as a figure who had fulfilled a great historical role and who could now withdraw because the country and society could expect increasing success. However, he was not able to avoid mentioning the real situation in Russia, at least in the form of a cheap apology.

"I would like to ask you for forgiveness," he said. "Forgiveness for the fact that many of your expectations were disappointed. What appeared simple to us turned out to be painful and difficult. I ask for forgiveness for the fact that I was not able to fulfil people's hopes, who believed that we could suddenly break out of the grey, totalitarian deadlock of the past into a light, wealthy and civilised future. Even I believed in it. It seemed that one more push and we'd manage it. But we did not manage it with just one push. Partly, I was too naive. Partly, the problems were too difficult. We fought our way forwards through errors and failures. During this difficult time many people experienced great shocks."

That was all he had to say in justification.

The Yeltsin era actually came to an end with the financial collapse of August 1998. This breakdown buried all hopes that Russian capitalism would pull the country out of its economic backwardness and poverty in the foreseeable future. Yeltsin found himself at the centre of a massive international money laundering scandal and emerged as a man surrounded by venal courtiers and semi-criminal oligarchs.

The Chechnya war served the Kremlin as a means to suppress the criticisms of dissatisfied sections of the elite and to absorb the social protest of the masses. Yeltsin used the opportunity it provided and disappeared from the scene at the most favourable instant through a back exit he had prepared—without forgetting to pocket the silver before he left.

He leaves the stage not as hero but as a charlatan, accompanied by boos and cries. This is shown by the presidential decree of his successor Putin, granting Yeltsin and his family special state protection as well as a lifetime bodyguard. The former president is declared inviolable.

"Neither in criminal nor in civil legal proceedings can he be called to account, detained, arrested, searched or cross-examined," reads the text of Putin's decree. Similar warranties were granted for his personal fortune: "the inviolability of the president ... extends to his living and working accommodation, his means of transport and communication, documents and luggage and to his correspondence".

Against this background, the words in his television speech addressed to millions of Russians sound deeply hypocritical: "I felt the pain of every one of you as a pain in my own heart. I endured sleepless nights when I painfully considered what could be done, so that people might live more easily and better. I did not have any more important tasks than this."

It is significant that in his television speech Yeltsin hardly mentioned the key term which Kremlin propaganda employed throughout the recent past—"democracy". In fact, this phrase always served propaganda purposes. The highlights of his rule—the dissolution of the Soviet Union in December 1991, the beginning of "shock therapy" in January 1992, the bombarding of the parliament building with tanks in the autumn of 1993, the collapse of the financial markets in August 1998 and the bloody Chechnya wars of 1994-96 and 1999—were all stages in the construction of an authoritarian police regime.

As a politician and a personality, Yeltsin did not embody democracy and justice. He was a typical Soviet authority figure of the Stalinist type. He was a Boyar, a "master", for whom everything beyond the framework of his own career and constricted life was of little importance. He was and is of little intelligence, limited and arrogant; a social climber who was temporarily washed to the social surface by a complex historical process, but who actually changed very little.

This did not prevent American President Bill Clinton from calling Yeltsin the "father of democracy" in a recent *Times* article. In Russia, however, this formulation is used as rarely as possible. It arouses too many strong associations with the well-known novel *The Twelve Chairs* by I. Ilf and E. Petrov. This work, written at the end of the 1920s, makes merry about the attempt in pre-revolutionary Russia to create a myth regarding the great scale of "Russian democracy".

Viewed historically, today's endeavours to construct a viable democracy in Russia on the basis of capitalism have a far smaller chance of realisation than at the beginning of the century. If Russian capitalism is to exist, it can do so only by means of the most ruthless methods of authoritarian oppression.

At the beginning of his political career, Yeltsin understood the need to associate vague hopes for social equality and justice with his name. As long as such hopes continued he played an important role for the new ruling class in formation, filling the abyss between the privileged layer of private property owners and the millions of ordinary citizens. With his departure this abyss will become much more obvious.

The period of the masses' romantic faith in the miraculous strength of capitalism will finally be consigned to the past. The ruling elite are regrouping themselves and preparing for the use of force to suppress all

resistance on the part of working people. This is the objective social role of the new president, Vladimir Putin.

See Also:

The political and historical issues in Russia's assault on Chechnya
[17 January 2000]

The transfer of power in Moscow: what it means for Russia's political trajectory
[8 January 2000]