

Russian liberal intelligentsia's view of the Kremlin under Yeltsin and Putin

Tales of a Kremlin Digger, by Elena Tregubova

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The political journalism of post-Soviet Russia has given rise to dozens of books. The majority of them are written in a boring, turgid style. Some are fixated on the latest scandals. Others concentrate on matters known only to a narrow circle of people, with the authors striving not so much to provide a general picture and analysis of events as to successfully “sell” their “insider” information to the public and make the strongest possible impression.

The lifespan of such books is short: as soon as the facts contained in them become known to wide layers of the reading public, they largely lose their value.

For the most part, the book by Moscow journalist Elena Tregubova is no exception to this rule. It is worthy of attention however, inasmuch as it is comparatively lively and straightforward in style, contains certain truthful elements, and is characterised at times by a bold and derisive tone.

From the very moment of its publication last fall, Tregubova's book attained a degree of notoriety reminiscent of the publications of the memoirs of Yeltsin's former bodyguard, Aleksandr Korzhakov.

With the exception of a few episodes, *Tales of a Kremlin Digger* contains little that is new. This book is scandalous not because of shocking exposés, but rather because of its very publication. In the context of the complete demolition of any transparent political process in Russia, the absence of any public debate, and the artificially created mini-cult of personality around President Putin, any more or less truthful utterance seems like a revelation.

Tregubova's book does not give an account of political events. Rather, the work is composed of portraits of figures with whom she had personal contact.

Tregubova notes Sergei Yastrzhembsky's unusual capacity for hypocrisy, which he demonstrated in abundance while serving as Boris Yeltsin's press secretary. The author pointedly describes Yastrzhembsky's ability to alter his facial expression as necessary. We learn additional details about the former vice-premier and Yeltsin's one-time nominal “successor” Boris Nemtsov, and his inclination towards pretentiousness and self-love.

Valentin Yumashev, one of the powerful conspirators of the 1990s and a Yeltsin biographer, appears as a cunning intriguer and at the same time a weak and pitiful man.

We come across Boris Berezovsky's former business partner and the chief of Vladimir Putin's administration, the “Iron” Alexander Voloshin, who smokes constantly and hypnotises many people with his Byzantine bureaucratic zeal. We see the “good guy” of the oligarchs, Vladimir Evtushenkov, as an accessible and sociable conversationalist. Vyacheslav Surkov, who becomes the deputy-chief of the presidential administration, is revealed to have once dabbled in literature.

Tregubova evinces particular affection for Anatoli Chubais, whom she

more than once describes as “my knight in shining armor” and an “absolutely selfless person.” However, by the end of the book, she begins to express doubts about her own glowing appraisal.

These and the many other such sketches in the book confirm the assessment that the Kremlin is by no means inhabited by great figures, but, rather, by little imps characteristic of an epoch of decline.

In this regard, Tregubova's overall conclusion is harsh. “From the very beginning, I approached the study of those inhabiting the Kremlin like a zoologist or a UFO-logist. To be a bit more precise—over the course of all these years in the Kremlin, I felt like a ‘digger’ from a fantasy film, who descends down a sewer hole and in the complete darkness and infernal stench, makes his way through a perplexing labyrinth. And, in the end—the most agonising thing is to come into contact with the inhabitants of the place. Externally, they are somewhat reminiscent of people, but in reality they are not people, but rather something entirely different, something whose biological makeup cannot crossbreed with ours.”

These are the most incriminating words in Tregubova's book. Unfortunately, she does not maintain this level of criticism. She writes a large chunk of the book's episodes with unconcealed pleasure at having been an associate of this “high circle.” In the same preface quoted above, she dilutes the sting of her appraisals with the acknowledgment that she found it very agreeable to be among these “mutants permanently attempting to devour not only each other, but everyone around them.”

Tregubova's position is contradictory because she reveals the dark side of “everyday life” of the Russian elite, while considering herself to be a part of it.

Tregubova allots Vladimir Putin a special place in her work, as the whole book is constructed as a sharp critique of the current Russian president's personality.

Tregubova and Putin's acquaintance dates back to around May 1997, when as head of the president's Central Control Bureau, he assembled journalists in his office in the Old Square district of Moscow for a closed-door press conference. At that time, Putin was unknown to even the Kremlin press corps. The author describes him as a “small, boring, dull man” who “for some reason nervously moved his cheekbones.” Continuing her portrait, Tregubova writes:

“His eyes were not simply colorless and indifferent—they were generally empty. It was even impossible to understand where exactly he was looking, as if his gaze was dissolving into air, spreading across the faces of those surrounding him. Masterfully blending in with the colors of his office, this person gave off the sensation to his fellow conversationalists that he was not there.”

This press conference served as Putin's public debut. He used it to elaborate a political conception that became one of the cornerstones of his subsequent actions as president.

Having described the chaos that reigned in the country and the out-of-control character of the regional elites, Putin advanced a thesis according to which “only the KGB was capable of reforming the putrefaction of the country.”

“Our organs, the FSB [Federal Security Service], or rather its predecessor, the Committee of State Security,” said Putin, “were not directly tied with the criminal world and were occupied with basic intelligence and counter-intelligence. Thanks to this, the structures of the FSB have maintained some integrity.”

As Tregubova notes, everything that Putin said was “very reminiscent of a declaration of war. A war, which the nominal Kremlin government decided to wage against those who really held the power in the country.”

However, it quickly became apparent that Putin’s brash proclamations amounted to nothing. The main object of his criticisms, the thoroughly corrupt governor of the Primorsky region, Evgeny Nazdratenko, was not punished. Instead, he received a highly regarded ministerial post in the Kremlin as the result of a behind-the-scenes deal worked out in exchange for relinquishing his governorship. Tregubova admits that this “entirely criminal ethic, graphically demonstrated” by the would-be new Russian president, amazed her. Putin personally ordered the FSB to block all criminal investigations against Nazdratenko.

In May 1998, Putin was named first deputy of the head of the presidential administration and, in July of the same year, director of the FSB. Putin’s elevation occurred for several reasons, some of which are noted by the author.

At the time, the Yeltsin leadership was colliding with defiant regional elites and aggressive oligarchs. While the governments in Russia’s various regions gave tax breaks to big business and delayed the payment of wages, pensions and stipends, the oligarchs, in an attempt to compel the government to tailor its policies to their interests, began to provoke strikes by workers and demonstrations by miners.

Putin promoted himself as someone capable of utilising the methods and apparatus of the secret service to put pressure on the opponents of the Kremlin’s power. He thus emerged as a prime candidate among Yeltsin’s potential successors. To ensure his election to the presidency in March 2000, Putin used these same openly anti-democratic methods to defeat his rivals in what was a bitter political struggle. The more these anti-democratic policies and methods began to predominate in the new Kremlin administration, the more dissatisfied a significant section of the liberal-democratic intelligentsia became.

The post-Soviet regime demanded unquestioning servility on the part of the mass media. The defence of the rights of journalists became the starting point for Tregubova’s conflict with the Kremlin.

Tregubova condemns Putin’s regime for its authoritarian tendencies and attacks on free speech, while dismissing many of her colleagues as pitiful and spineless conformists.

What is the basis for these criticisms?

Many of the episodes related in the book indicate that Tregubova’s primary antagonist towards Putin stemmed from her view that he failed to pursue capitalist “reforms” with sufficient vigor. She emerges in her book as a market fundamentalist, for whom the new business elite’s profit interests are paramount. For her, society and the country are merely the backdrop against which the sacred process of enriching the elect unfolds.

“There is only one way to reform our country—blow up all the Soviet factories,” she writes.

Elena Tregubova is a typical representative of Moscow’s elite journalists, an embodiment of the middle class believed by some to be emerging in Russia. She was accredited by the presidential administration as a Kremlin reporter and worked over the course of four years for the most prestigious newspapers in the country—*Kommersant*, *Russkii Telegraf*, and *Izvestia*. A relatively young woman (she was only 30 when her book was published), Tregubova absorbed the “spirit of the 1990s,” a

time when liberal-democratic conceptions and illusions took their firmest root.

Tregubova’s book surveys the entire period of Russia’s post-Soviet history, in which the Kremlin was considered by a wide layer of the liberal-democratic intelligentsia to be the bearer of all their hopes—that Russia’s transformation would unfold in the spirit of a Western market democracy. For a long time, this layer endured Yeltsin’s absurd antics, his personal incompetence and ignorance, and the nastiness of his political methods. It did not think that the president’s methods interfered with the forward movement of the transition process, regarding them as of little significance and at times even amusing.

Having identified itself with the Kremlin, the liberal intelligentsia closed its eyes to the many frightful things occurring in the country. However, eventually a split emerged between the expectations of this layer and the actual course of the Kremlin’s policies. The result was a cooling in their attitude towards Yeltsin.

A deepening conflict between the liberal intelligentsia and the government has developed over the last several years. In addition to freedom of the press, the war in Chechnya was a catalysing factor in this process. Tregubova, says relatively little about this war in her book, but expresses her dissatisfaction with the consequences brought on by the policy of “blood and iron” in the Northern Caucasuses and describes events in Chechnya as “the war that Putin needed for a victorious election.”

Based upon the liberal intelligentsia’s disappointment and social alienation, a peculiar new phenomenon has emerged—nostalgia for the Yeltsin period. This is a remarkable development. All layers of society have been tossed overboard by the dramatic events of the past 15 years—the collapse of the country, the implementation of “shock therapy,” the dramatic growth in social inequality. The ground has been pulled out from under them, and they have been stripped of any sense of a secure future. Because of this, there is a strong psychological desire for the “golden years” that preceded the subsequent catastrophe.

Longing for the era of the 1970s, the last period in which the Soviet working class was able to perceive a bettering of their living conditions, has become widespread. Others have nostalgia for the time of Gorbachev’s “Perestroika.” Just as the memory of the 1970s evokes feelings of general well-being, the end of the 1980s is remembered to a large degree as a time of growing social and political aspirations.

In the 1990s, the liberal intelligentsia haughtily treated such views as the remnants of “Sovkovost” (a disparaging term for a person who supposedly did not understand recent historical developments in Russia and was living psychologically in the past), considering themselves safeguarded against the manifestation of such contemptible weaknesses.

Today however, a significant section of this layer feels, if not tossed overboard, then, at the very least, rudderless. History, it found, neither stopped in 1991 (the “failure of communism”) nor in 1996 (“the victory of democracy”), but instead continued moving forward according to its own inexorable logic. Disappointed by the policies and methods of the Putin regime, a substantial section of the liberal intelligentsia is nostalgic for the Yeltsin era.

Tregubova is uncomfortable with the new period in Russian history, but is unable to grasp how it arose logically and inevitably out of the general tendencies of the Yeltsin era.

For Tregubova, authoritarianism began with Putin. Not understanding the real reasons behind this development, she is forced to attribute it to the Russian president’s personality. But if everything depends on the will and decisions of one man, then merely redirecting the perspective of this person can rectify the situation. In the end, Elena Tregubova’s perspective boils down to the simple wish that the “good Putin” will be victorious over the “bad Putin.” This is the historical dead end of the new Russian liberalism.



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