

Policy Watch: Yeltsin's troubled legacy

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Boris Yeltsin, Russia's president during the 1990s, passed away earlier this week. It is tempting to point out that Russia was far freer and more democratic under Yeltsin in the 1990s than it has become under his successor, Vladimir Putin.

Yet while some of Yeltsin's accomplishments were positive, others were quite negative. Indeed, Yeltsin did much to lay the groundwork for the revival of authoritarianism under Putin.

Yeltsin, who had disagreed with Mikhail Gorbachev and been dismissed by him, made a stunning political comeback through being popularly elected as president of the Russian Federation. He appeared far more legitimate than Soviet President Gorbachev who refused to allow the voters to pass judgment on him.

Yeltsin's most brilliant moment came in August 1991 when he stood on a tank outside the Russian White House in Moscow and rallied popular support against the coup plotters who were holding Gorbachev under house arrest in his Black Sea dacha. In addition, Yeltsin's presiding over the peaceful breakup of the Soviet Union in December 1991 may have saved millions of lives in the wars for independence that may well have resulted if he had not done so. Yeltsin's tolerance of a free press in Russia stands in stark contrast to Putin's increasing suppression of it.

All of these positive accomplishments were extraordinary. Unfortunately, they have been largely overshadowed by Yeltsin's many negative ones. Although his attempt to make a rapid transition to a free market economy was well-intentioned, the corrupt manner in which he allowed it to occur contributed both to the impoverishment of much of the Russian population as well as to its hostility toward private enterprise.

Yeltsin's October 1993 use of force to resolve his increasingly bitter power struggle with the communist-dominated, albeit elected, Russian parliament called into question Yeltsin's commitment to democratization. The Soviet-era constitutional arrangements that the Russian Federation inherited were indeed unworkable. But instead of holding elections for a constitutional convention or allowing a newly elected parliament to devise a new constitution, he and his staff wrote up one themselves which made the president much more powerful than the legislature. While Yeltsin was for the most part too weak and ill to exercise the powers that the constitution he wrote gave him, Putin has not been.

Yeltsin's decision to use force to end Chechnya's bid for independence from Russia both in 1994 and again in 1999 also led to highly negative consequences that Russia is still living with. Not only have many Chechens and Russians been killed or injured, but the use of forceful instead of democratic means to resolve this problem has not only led to the suppression of democracy in Chechnya, but has also contributed to its suppression throughout Russia.

One of Yeltsin's greatest failings was his refusal to disband the intelligence and internal security services which had been among the most important structures upholding authoritarianism in the Soviet era. It is these organizations -- of which Putin is a product -- that are now ruling Russia.

Perhaps Yeltsin's saddest legacy is that the Russian public believes it tried democracy and free market capitalism under him, but that they proved unsuitable for Russia's "special" circumstances. In truth, however, there was not too much democracy and capitalism under Yeltsin, but too little.

Since it had no experience with them, however, the Russian public did not recognize this. Indeed, many Russians value Putin's authoritarianism because it provides the stability that Yeltsin did not, and mistakenly credit Putin for the relative prosperity resulting from the higher oil prices that have prevailed since he came to power but which were not present under Yeltsin.

It is highly doubtful that Putin, whoever he appoints to succeed him (if anyone), and the security/intelligence apparatus behind them will ever willingly allow democratization in Russia. This may only occur if there is a democratic revolution ousting them. The Kremlin's hysterical fear about this suggests that the prospects for one may be more likely than seems possible when viewed from the outside.

If there ever is one, however, whoever leads it will have to take care not to make the same mistakes that Yeltsin did if democracy and free market capitalism are to gain traction in Russia as they failed to do because of him.

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