

## Boris Yeltsin: The Flawed Hero Who Gave Democracy to Russia

Vol. 13 No. 17 - 3 May 2007

By Anders Åslund

*Heroes are rare, and the greatest I ever saw, Boris Yeltsin, has just passed away. Heroes are outsized personalities who are not always easy to appreciate.*

Yeltsin stormed into our conference room in the White House in Moscow. He was like a bull, beaming with self-confidence, energy and happiness, well outright manic. One of his advisors told me that they came from the Ministry of Defense. He had given a speech to the Soviet general command and convinced them to join Russia. That day, December 11, 1991, Yeltsin salvaged the peaceful dissolution of the Soviet Union. The previous day Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev had tried to persuade the generals to stand up for the Soviet Union, but he failed.

Even more impressively, Yeltsin brought democracy to Russia, where it had never existed before. He did so by winning big against the communist establishment in the first partially democratic parliamentary elections in 1989 and 1990 and in the first Russian presidential elections in June 1991. His rival Gorbachev never dared to stand in any democratic election, which sealed his fate. After having gained power, Yeltsin stood in a free and reasonably fair election in 1996, which he won in hard competition. Democracy in Russia would not have arrived without Yeltsin.

Yeltsin was a party official from the Urals, but he was an intelligent and hard-working man and afraid of nothing. After he gained effective power in August 1991, he understood that he must find the best Russian economists to run the economy. He examined Russian economists and boldly selected as yet unknown stars in their thirties – Yegor Gaidar, Anatoly Chubais and Boris Fedorov, although they came from a different world and were half his age. Incredibly, Yeltsin understood that Russia needed as radical an economic reform as possible. Thanks to him, Russia has irreversibly been privatized and become a dynamic market economy, and who thought that would be easy?

In his democracy building, Yeltsin encountered many problems. One of his basic ideas was that he must not repeat the mistake from February 1917, when the liberal revolutionaries had dissolved the tsarist civil service. He did prohibit the Communist Party, but alas he did not eliminate the KGB. One of the lessons from democracy building is that a “founding” election needs to be held as soon as possible after the democratic breakthrough, but Yeltsin succumbed to those who argued that he should respect the old Soviet constitution. Too late, he dissolved the completely irresponsible, pre-democratic parliament in September 1993. Worse, he was unprepared when some of the deputies joined Russian Nazis in an armed uprising, which Yeltsin quelled with substantial bloodshed. He never quite recovered from that blemish.

In December 1994, Yeltsin unleashed a bloody and unsuccessful war in Chechnya, which cost tens of thousands of lives. The best that can be said about that act is that Yeltsin appears to have been too sick and drunk to be much involved in the decision making.

Yeltsin's greatest shortfall was his appointment of a lieutenant-colonel from the KGB as his heir apparent. This petty secret policeman has systematically eliminated the democracy Yeltsin built, while Putin's popularity benefits from the solid economic base laid by Yeltsin.

The last time I met Yeltsin was three years ago. His health was splendid after he had been relieved of the burdens of government. He did not want to reveal his known antipathy to Putin to me. He lived on his dacha reading one book a day, and he traveled extensively, always together with his wife Naina and usually also with his daughter Tatyana. Richly-deserved, Boris Nikolaevich enjoyed his last years with his family and he died soon after a trip to Jordan.

Yeltsin was a true revolutionary and a great popular leader. Few have done as much as he. He democratized, marketized and privatized Russia, as well as peacefully dissolved the Soviet empire. He belongs to the few greatest men, like Winston Churchill and Charles de Gaulle. Like them, he was a man who could take any crisis, but he could not stand ordinary times.

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