

# Can Yeltsin Be Trusted?

By Dmitri N. Shalin

**B**oris Yeltsin is about to plunge Russia into radical economic reforms by privatizing land, liberalizing prices, slashing state subsidies and denationalizing state enterprises. His commitment to a market economy is no longer in question.

What is less clear is how fully Yeltsin is committed to political democracy. His Philippic against the country's totalitarian past seem at odds with his recent attempt to strongarm the Chechen-Ingush republic, as well as his decision to suspend for a year all elections and reserve for himself the right to dismiss and appoint officials.

The rationale for subordinating legislative power to executive fiat in present-day Russia isn't hard to fathom. The economy is in ruins; labor is restive and largely unsympathetic to market reforms; Russia's neighbors are increasingly turning to economic warfare while ethnic fissures inside the Russian federation begin to undermine its integrity. The country is spinning out of control, and strong executive power seems like the only way out for the besieged reformers.

But then, we know how fickle executive power unfettered by a democratically elected legislature and an independent judiciary can be. Germans once chose a strong executive to rid themselves of the Weimar Republic's disarray. We know what happened next.

Can Yeltsin be trusted to use his newly acquired powers wisely? He has proven himself a courageous man who faced down the putschists. He is a politician who picks his advisers carefully. His readiness to admit that he made a mistake when he proclaimed an emergency decree in Chechen-Ingushetia is also reassuring. Still, a look at Yeltsin's past leaves room for doubt.

Consider Yeltsin's decision to ban the conservative press after the failed August coup. In essence, it differed little from the junta's ban on the liberal press. An anecdote making the rounds at the time had Yeltsin boasting to the West, "Only the free press is now tolerated in Russia, the rest is banned." Now, there is a distinct possibility that as economic woes multiply and the opposition to market reforms gathers force, Yeltsin might



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be tempted to silence dissent under the pretext that critics undermine his reforms and play into the hands of communist sympathizers.

Or take Yeltsin's directive to suspend the Communist Party and seize its property. It seemed like a popular decree, but the manner in which it was carried out reminded one of the old nomenklatura's greedy ways. The unseemly spectacle of Yeltsin's aides and ministers squabbling over the cars that once belonged to the party central committee offended his supporters. True, the spoils go to the victors, and every government is a form of organized racket operating under the protection of the state, but if Yeltsin doesn't curb his underlings' appetite, his credibility will suffer.

Yeltsin's approach to policy-making has undergone some unwelcome changes, too. In his early career as a reformer, he earned a lot of credit for attracting first-rate aides, but after the coup his relationship with the Cabinet and the Parliament leaders became strained, as once-trusted allies found themselves shunned by the president. Nowadays, the Russian president increasingly relies on the old-boy network from Sverdlovsk, where he started his career as a party boss. It is on the advice

of his old buddies that Yeltsin issued the ill-conceived emergency decree on the Chechen-Ingush republic.

The Russian president's ability to follow through is also a cause for concern. The case in point is Yeltsin's decision to take time off for a vacation when the country was rapidly sliding into chaos. Another example is the cease-fire in Nagorno-Karabakh that Yeltsin helped to negotiate. Hopes were riding high after a settlement was reached, but with little follow-up from the president's office, violence in the region has climbed back to the old levels. Now the danger is that without a follow-through, Yeltsin's reforms will dissipate before they can show positive results.

Whether Yeltsin is the man to lead Russia from its present morass is debatable. The job may well defy any human efforts. But if he is to measure up to it, he needs to understand his limitations and learn from mistakes.

Yeltsin's commitment to democracy will be severely tested by his attitude toward the press. With the legislature hampered by the president's power to issue decrees and oust elected officials, the free press becomes the ultimate bulwark against executive abuse.

The integrity of Yeltsin's government will be threatened unless he spreads the spoils of victory more equitably. Schools and hospitals, not state bureaucrats, should have first take on cars, buildings, sanitoriums and other property seized from the Communist Party and the now-defunct Soviet state.

Yeltsin needs to rein in his lieutenants who act as gate-keepers and drive a wedge between the president and the Russian Republic's elected officials. To get good advice, he must keep recruiting the best and the brightest for his team.

Finally, he has to remember that while political democracy cannot flourish outside a market economy, capitalism can coexist with oppression. The problem is how to accomplish one without sacrificing the other. It remains to be seen whether Yeltsin has an answer to this question.

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