

INTRODUCTION

This book examines the main events of Boris Yeltsin's time in power as president of Russia from the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Communist Party in 1991 to the beginning of 1999, when Russia entered a turbulent election year suffering a severe economic crisis that threatened to undermine its major reform achievements. My aim in this book is not to offer definitive or final answers to the questions of where Russia is heading and what its future will look like. This would be impossible, and any attempt would only oversimplify the true picture. My goal, instead, is to show the contradictions in Russia's political development, the nature of the dramatic challenges facing the country, and some of the trends that will affect its future.

Post-communist Russia is a country of paradoxes. On the one hand, it is a model of endless movement. On the other, there is evidence all around of inertia and continuity. Although the scope and speed of change in Moscow are truly astonishing, little has changed beyond the city limits; the signs of decay deep in the country contrast sharply with the visible new amenities of Moscow. Russia resembles a patchwork quilt. Within the diversity of its social, political, and economic life, there are areas of dynamism and success, areas of crisis and collapse, and, increasingly, areas of stagnation.

Russia's political scene features unrestrained struggle and fierce, open skirmishes. The level of aggression in the confrontations often appears boundless. Constant conflicts--between the executive and the parliament, between the center and the regions, among the "oligarchs" or financial clans, and within the presidential entourage--create an atmosphere of perpetual tension. Those involved in these conflicts battle furiously with one another, but usually no one really wants to rock the boat. Moreover, all political actors watch the rest of Russian society with fear and apprehension that, if their clashes involve major social groups, events may spin out of control. Wages of Russian workers often go unpaid for months and even years, and discontent has become a constant factor in Russian life. The post-communist transformation has been much more painful than expected, and most of those who hoped for a better life feel that they have lost out and have no chance to succeed in the future.

Yet Russia has experienced no social uprisings, and stability has been astonishingly--although sometimes precariously--preserved. Moreover, the current political regime appears ever more entrenched in power, and no one poses a serious challenge to it, at least not in the near future. This calm is deceptive. It is in many ways the consequence of disillusionment, as well as of a perceived lack of alternatives. For the time being, people's efforts just to survive take precedence. Few believe that the most painful economic and social problems will be solved in their lifetimes. This hopelessness breeds frustration, despair, and violence.

How strong can a government be that is built on the disenchantment of the population? There is a group of people who consider themselves fortunate, but they account for only some 5-15 percent of the population. Moreover, most of these "winners" are also unhappy with the government, although for another reason--they fault it for its impotence and failure to guarantee their security. The current regime survives mainly because it is considered the lesser of evils. The question of how long Russia can preserve this "unstable stability" remains open. Who can guarantee that at some moment the desire for violent revenge will not overtake those who feel they have been betrayed? Russia has a long and tragic history of attempts to find justice, and history shows us how they ended.

Another paradox of post-communist Russia is the communist opposition. Despite years of anti-communist reforms, it is still the major organized political force in Russia. The Communist Party seems to have done everything it could to avoid coming to power. The communists are now much more comfortable in the role of the opposition, where they need not bear any real responsibility. Ironically, the communist opposition is the force that helps Yeltsin's regime stay in power. Through its influence over a significant fraction of the dissatisfied population, the Communist Party prevents those people from becoming more radicalized or engaging in open protest against the regime. Meanwhile, it presents a distasteful alternative to the current ruling elite, which helps the latter keep its hold on power.

An even more telling example of Russia's paradoxical nature is Yeltsin himself. With one foot in the grave, he was still able to win the 1996 presidential elections. In March 1997, just as everyone had again begun writing his political obituary, he made a sudden comeback and shook up the government. In March 1998, Yeltsin staged another "revolution," proving that it was still too early to write him off. In August 1998, he

executed another "presidential coup," firing his new government. Again and again, the whole country follows Yeltsin's ups and downs. Russia dreads its leader, but it dreads the alternatives to Yeltsin even more.

With all his passions, emotions, and complexes, Yeltsin is the person who has most influenced Russia's development. He is a controversial personality. Many in the West see him as a democrat and reformer. It is true that he helped to bring down the communist system and that, at crucial moments, he has taken the side of reform and tried hard to continue a liberal course. But more often, he has behaved like a demagogue thinking mainly about his own survival. His worst mistake, both for Russia and for himself, has been his failure to establish strong political institutions and stable rules of the game. He has displayed little respect for the law. More often than not, he has obeyed only his sense of political expedience, apparently placing the highest priority on his own political ambitions. Many people, even in Russia, at first hoped that the "superpresidency" that Yeltsin established was only temporary. But this structure, designed to overcome deadlocks and to serve as a major reform force, has now become the main source of political disarray. Thus Russia is involved in a drama as its aging and failing patriarch constantly delays his political exit in the absence of a strong and predictable successor.

Seven years after his meteoric rise to prominence, however, Yeltsin still towers above all others. His leading political role is recognized by all of Russia's political forces. At the beginning of 1999, Yeltsin--in his retreat outside Moscow and seemingly weaker than ever before--still appeared able to influence the balance of forces, or at least defiantly to resist any attempt to force him out. The most crucial test he faces (whether or not he makes it to the end of his presidential term in 2000 or solves some of Russia's most pressing problems) is to guarantee a peaceful transition to the post-Yeltsin period. This task, however, is one that he may not be willing to undertake, and Russia has no structure, apart from Yeltsin and his superpresidency, to manage this transition.

This raises a troubling question: Why were Yeltsin and his team unable to use the opportunities that history gave them to build a solid base for a liberal democracy in Russia? Many of the government's mistakes, failures, and retreats could have been avoided, especially when Russia was first distancing itself from communism. At that time, society was willing to tolerate adversity and hardships, hoping for a better life. Now, however, the possibilities for further reform are slight. Many people are disillusioned with politics and politicians; clan-like ties have formed within the ruling class; the economy is collapsing; members of the ruling elite are busy increasing their own personal wealth; criminal groups have appeared on the scene; and the bureaucracy is demoralized.

One of the most painful issues explored in this book is the sorry fate of reformers in contemporary Russia. To their credit, the reformers were able to disassemble the old political and economic mechanisms and to clear the ground for new ones. But the price that Russia paid for this liberal transformation was disillusion with liberalism itself. The reformers are not national heroes in Russia, and to a great extent they have themselves to blame. They were insensitive to the social consequences of the sudden break with the past. They often displayed a lack of concern with the costs of their decisions, showing the same neglect and contempt for "the masses" as their communist predecessors. Not having considered it necessary to win the support of the public, they have become an isolated group and have increasingly lost power and influence to the conservatives, regional groups, and industrial lobbies that have proven to be more experienced fighters.

The future of Russia's transformation depends on whether its ruling class learns to temper its selfishness and to rectify its moral and political behavior. Is it prepared to make fresh efforts at reform? What will be the price of long-term stagnation and mass discontent? These questions have yet to be answered. Meanwhile Russian society is developing independently and spontaneously, often with disregard for the actions of its government. A new generation of politicians is gradually coming to the fore that will determine Russia's destiny and its development in the new millennium. May they learn from the painful failures of the past and be successful in their attempt to build a more democratic and prosperous Russia.