

Chapter 1

BORIS YELTSIN: A REVOLUTIONARY WHO PRESERVED TRADITION

Russian history is first and foremost the history of personalized power—of the concentration of all the levers of power and resources in the hands of a leader standing above society, of a succession of leaders and their regimes. It is true that in the new Russian context, political leadership acquires a contradictory nature. Leading Russia out of communism required a leader who could act as a battering ram to destroy the old order. That person had to be an outstanding and charismatic politician with the courage to break with the past and force the political class and state authorities to leave the past behind. This person needed a strong personality and the ability to lead. However, to introduce a system based on political rivalry and competition requires quite a different kind of leader, one prepared to “abdicate the throne” and transfer at least some executive power to other institutions. The criterion of Boris Yeltsin’s success or failure is not only the extent to which he managed to free himself of the communist mentality and his country of communism, but also his ability to prevent the disintegration of Russia, establish friendly relations with the West, and succeed in creating a free market. The crucial question is to what extent he succeeded in overcoming Russia’s underlying tradition of personalized power, which, as recent Russian history has proved, could be

presented as an anticommunist package with pro-Western stripes based on market rules.

Those who are interested in Russia will puzzle for years to come over Yeltsin's personality and rule, trying to decide whether he was a reformer, a revolutionary, a liberal, or a conservative. Did he aspire to lead Russia into the future, or was he more concerned with putting a brake on society's transformation, fearing a potentially dangerous forward momentum? What is the nature of the link between Yeltsin and his successor, Vladimir Putin, and is Putin's period in office a continuation or a negation of the Yeltsin years? Perhaps it is too early to answer all these questions, and the dust must settle before the key trends of Yeltsin's legacy and its impact on Putin's rule become clearer. I will nonetheless risk making some observations on Boris Yeltsin's role and his legacy, viewing it in the context of events following his departure from the Kremlin.¹

Yeltsin's rule was paradoxical and rife with contradictions from the outset.² Despite the hostility between Yeltsin and Mikhail Gorbachev and their seemingly opposing goals, it was to be Yeltsin who completed what Gorbachev had unintentionally begun—the final destruction of an empire, a superpower, and a one-party state. If Gorbachev had never anticipated that destruction, falling victim to *the law of unintended consequences*, Yeltsin consciously set out to finish the demolition of the USSR. For a time he hoped to create a new, anticommunist, and anti-Soviet union under his leadership, but he was soon forced to abandon that aspiration and concentrate on Russia. Although Gorbachev, the architect of perestroika, intended to breathe new life into the Soviet Union, and Yeltsin, the instigator of the Belovezha Accords, which dissolved the USSR in December 1991, pursued opposite goals, they jointly brought the Soviet project to an end. Neither had any wish to go down in history as the gravedigger of the Soviet Union. As regards Yeltsin, his role in the dissolution of the USSR largely determined the nature of his subsequent leadership and influenced how the post-Soviet Russian system would develop. His period in office

shows continuity with Gorbachev's policies, but it also laid the foundation for rejecting the spirit of Gorbachev's perestroika. Russian politics and power have evolved on more than one occasion through this synthesis of incompatible tendencies and steps leading to unintended consequences and ramifications.

During Boris Yeltsin's presidency, the Russian political class was forced to reject, or decided it was in its own interests to reject, basic principles that had governed the perpetuation of power and the state in Russia for centuries. For the first time the regime sought to legitimize itself through elections rather than through ideology, communist totalitarianism, or czarist succession to the throne. Rallying Russia by confronting the West was abandoned. A free market was introduced, weakening the state's control of society. Finally, Russia began learning how to live in an environment of political pluralism. Admittedly, renunciation of some principles was less than final, as Vladimir Putin's presidency was to show.

What remained of the traditional exercise of power at the end of Yeltsin's rule? The elite had preserved some basics of the Russian matrix—the traditional organization both of the regime and of society, with the principle of indivisibility remaining key. Power remained personalized and monolithic. There had been no dispersing of authority among the branches of government. The Russian leader continued to hold the main levers of control. He was elected, but he was not accountable to the electorate. The merging of power and business was just one more manifestation of the principle of indivisibility. State interests retained their primacy over those of the individual and society. The elite and the majority of Russians continued to see Russia's great-power status in world politics as fundamental, which is defined by the Russian term *derzhavnichestvo*: "Russia is a great power or it is nothing"—such was (and continues to be) the overwhelming consensus.

Even when a new society and new institutions began to emerge, the Kremlin played by the old rules. If the fundamental principle of democratic elections is that "the rules are clear,

but the result is uncertain," the Russian elite was determined that the rules should be uncertain and a result favorable to itself guaranteed. Rather than make provisions for an alternative regime and rotation, the elite stressed continuity. Samuel Huntington's observation that two election cycles are sufficient for a country to become democratic proved not to apply to Russia, where regular elections, including Yeltsin's two presidential elections, provided a smokescreen for backsliding from Gorbachev's liberalization.

A free market, though rudimentary, came into being under Yeltsin, but as the state was above the law, it took the form of "oligarchic capitalism," premised on a deal between major property owners appointed by the Kremlin and the ruling team. This meant that the institution of private property was never legitimized in the minds of the public, with the result that Yeltsin's successor was able to set about revising the results of privatization.

In foreign policy, Yeltsin continued Gorbachev's withdrawal from confrontation with the West, but where Gorbachev had broken the mold of international relations, compelling the West also to seek new policies and think in new terms, Yeltsin not only failed to find a new global role for Russia, but also failed to understand new international realities. To the last he was torn between cooperating with the West and fulminating against the nature of that cooperation and Russia's inferior position. His aim was to make Russia an ally of the West, but after his departure, the country moved in the opposite direction.

Yeltsin's presidency gave rise to a hybrid system that regulates relations between the regime and society on the basis of conflicting and irreconcilable principles: state authorities are elected, but candidates to elective office are appointed from above, and elections are manipulated; the rule of law is enshrined in the constitution, but surreptitious deals are the order of the day; although society has a federal structure, the center dictates policy to the regions; there is a free market, but officials constantly meddle in the economy. This system was

not fully established in the Yeltsin period and remained unconsolidated, leaving space for other forces—from orthodox communists to radical liberals—and for movement in any direction. Chameleon-like, the hybrid could assume different colorations, at one moment appearing more authoritarian, at another more democratic. Its mixed nature and lack of ideology enabled it to survive by means of reincarnation, but it was plainly without strategic direction and wholly focused on self-preservation. At some point after 1993, when Yeltsin dismantled the Soviet parliament and edited his own constitution, establishing a hyper-presidency, Yeltsin's hybrid began to evolve into a neo-patrimonial regime that was based on a leader that holds all power and delegates its functions and authority to an entourage and to competing clans.

To understand the nature of Yeltsin's leadership, it may be useful to compare it with that of his predecessor. Mikhail Gorbachev, the last Soviet leader, tried to the end to develop "socialism with a human face." At the same time, lacking the courage to reject socialist views and leave Communist Party ranks, he was the first leader in Russian history to attempt to reform the traditional Russian state, which was symbolized by an omnipotent leader that stood above society. Gorbachev rejected the notion that power was sacrosanct by nature and also abandoned three other major props of the Russian state: militarism, the claim that Russia was doomed to follow a "special path," and its attempt to have its "zones of influence" in the international arena. Yeltsin completely abandoned the socialist ideal and became an anticommunist. It was he who finally destroyed the old state, which allows us to regard him as a revolutionary. However, he also set about restoring what Gorbachev had tried to undermine: autocracy. He began to concentrate power in his hands, and it was Yeltsin, not Putin, who began the move back toward the restoration of the old model of governance, albeit without the trappings of Soviet communism.

Yeltsin's Russia demonstrated the ability to repudiate and restore tradition simultaneously. The fact that the first Russian

president legitimized the authority of the state through elections made it impossible for the regime to resort to the ways of the patriarchal past. It now had to seek popular support using liberal democratic mechanisms hostile to the Russian matrix. Yet the political actors who might have effected and pushed forward the transition to a new form of governance had not yet appeared, new interest groups had yet to take shape, new property relations had not yet taken root, and the leader was not ready or able to move things in that direction. Russia was stranded in a civilizational wasteland, with no wish to return to the past but lacking the resources to embark on a new path of development.

Yeltsin's style of leadership and the regime he created hardly fit any democratic format. It could not be captured by well-known definitions, such as Philippe Schmitter's "democradura," Guillermo O'Donnell's "delegative democracy," Michael McFaul's "electoral democracy," or Fareed Zakaria's "illiberal democracy." These definitions did not convey fully the flavor of Yeltsin's rule and its strange combination of monarchic powers and style with elements of political pluralism and competition. To express this mix of incompatibilities, I use the metaphor of an "electoral monarchy." But, of course, Boris Yeltsin had much more power than another "republican monarch"—Charles de Gaulle, with whom he has often been compared—and much less accountability.

Observers will argue for years to come over whether Yeltsin could have created a genuine democracy in Russia. Let us consider three factors that affected Russia's development in the 1990s: its historical legacy, the institutional obstacles to the transformation process, and the role of the leader and behavior of the elite.

The history of the Russian state, which for many centuries was based on a strict centralization of authority and repression of the individual, could only ever be a hindrance to the liberalization of Russian society.³ Before Gorbachev, no one in Russia's history had even attempted to assail the principle of autocracy,

and tentative efforts to liberalize the country invariably ended in failure. Alexander II's nineteenth-century experiment with "constitutional autocracy" was unsuccessful, and Alexander III, recognizing that trying to mitigate autocracy might destroy it, reverted to tradition. Nikita Khrushchev's thaw in the 1960s had to be reversed, and it appeared to confirm the Soviet elite's suspicion that any tempering of the political climate and attempts to liberalize the regime could undermine the foundations of the state. In the postwar period, Russia was not shaken by revolutions like those that affected Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia, countries that had prewar memories of freedom and political pluralism. Their experiences prompted the appearance in those countries of a viable opposition prepared to work against the system and of pragmatists within the ruling class prepared to countenance political pluralism. At the crucial moment, in the late 1980s, when Gorbachev threw open Russia's windows on the world and the country awoke, Russia had neither a credible anti-systemic opposition ready to dismantle the old system and build a new one, nor pragmatists capable of living and functioning in an atmosphere of political pluralism.

No less influential was the fact that Russia missed out on the period in European history when the spirit of constitutionalism was abroad, bringing with it a recognition of the importance of the rule of law. Before European society was democratized, it registered a major achievement in the nineteenth century by establishing the *Rechtsstaat*, which embodied the principle that the state itself had to be subject to the law. Russia missed what Ralf Dahrendorf has called "the hour of the lawyer," in failing to form the basis of a liberal constitutionalism. Without that basis Russian society could not successfully move to the next stages of transformation: "the hour of the economist" and "the hour of the citizen."⁴ That Russia never embraced that principle was reflected in the fact that, after the fall of communism, even the liberals preferred to be guided by political expediency rather than by rules and preferred to rely upon a leader. Neither had

Russia mastered such other fundamentals of liberalism as civil rights, independent institutions, the inalienability of private property, and the full disestablishment of the Church.

In Russia, the interests of the state traditionally took priority over those of the individual and centralization of power was always bolstered by territorial expansionism. Initially, early in Russia's history, the need to protect the population and a weak state from raids by hostile tribes required the creation of a protective buffer of colonial territories. Subsequently, the centralized state, its ideology an amalgam of the Byzantine concept of autocracy (but without any constraints) and of the traditions of the Golden Horde of the Mongols, somewhat updated later by Peter the Great, proved incapable of developing other than extensively, by annexing territories and peoples. This meant constant warfare, with the intervals between wars spent seeking out the next enemy. The centralized state, constantly repressing society in order to survive and perpetuate itself, required a great-power mission and a continual strengthening of its great-power status, compounded by a suspicion of the outside world. Aspirations to great-power status in turn encouraged further centralization, thus creating a vicious cycle. After the fall of communism, Russia's claim to great-power status remains an important means of rallying society and preserving the centralized state. To this day the elite's vision of the Russian state is based on territory, military power, international prestige, and personalized power as the means of attaining them, and, finally, on identifying an enemy to justify that form of governance. Even after the collapse of communism and the dissolution of the USSR, this tradition of a centralized and arbitrarily governed state, quite alien to European principles, holds sway over the political thinking of Russia's ruling class. Thus, its historical legacy does not give much ground for optimism about the country's future.

It would be unfair to overlook the objective difficulties of the process of transformation that Russia faced in the 1990s. Before then no one had democratized an imperial superpower

with messianic pretensions. The Russian elite needed simultaneously to create a new political framework, learning in the process how to legitimize it through elections, and to create a new state. The two tasks of attempting to democratize a regime and form a new state are not easy to reconcile, and trying to accomplish them simultaneously can lead to dramatic events, as the fragmentation of Yugoslavia demonstrated. Dankwart Rustow and Robert Dahl, and later Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan, rightly warned that a precondition of successful democratization is a stable state (“No state—no democracy”), and in the early 1990s Russia was in the midst of state collapse. As if that were not enough, Yeltsin and his team were obliged to attempt *four revolutions* at once: creating a free market, democratizing the political regime, liquidating an empire, and seeking a new geopolitical role for a country that had only recently been a nuclear superpower. The industrially developed world had passed through the phases of nation building, developing capitalism, and political democratization in sequence. Russia had to achieve all three in one leap. Moreover, all successful post-communist transitions began with the establishment of a new political system, whereas in Russia the sequence was different. The Russian transition began with the privatization of property before independent political institutions were introduced.

Russia was out of luck not only in terms of its history and systemic constraints, which seemed to rule out a liberal transformation before it had even begun, but there was also the leadership factor and the role of the political class. Although when Yeltsin came to power Russian society as a whole and the political class in particular accepted that the old system was unsustainable, it was not yet ready to unite in building a new one. The events of 1990–1992 showed that even the most liberal politicians were not really up to introducing a liberal political system. A mixture of naïveté, neuroses, brashness, and social insensitivity were typical of the political class and did little to help Russia find its way to new values. In the 1990s, Russian liberals envisioned democracy as consisting mainly of elections,

but only for the purpose of guaranteeing their power. They never conceded the possibility that their rivals might win, which from the beginning created the danger of election manipulation. An elite with such a mind-set was incapable of making the compromises and the pacts that were the basis of a successful transition to democracy. Embarking on the project of constructing a new Russia, the elite had no consensus regarding either the country's past or its future. The fall of communism was not on the whole seen as having discredited the Russian tradition of autocracy, with the result that there was no total repudiation of the former rules of the game and the political stereotypes. Responsibility for the fact that Russia never subjected its history to critical scrutiny lies primarily with Yeltsin and his ruling team. Not only did they not try to establish a new national consensus on democratic reforms, their egocentrism deepened the divisions within society, goading elites into warring among themselves over who was to get their hands on property and power.

In the early 1990s there was no "subject of transformation," that is, there was no political force or group capable of transforming Russia. The intelligentsia had been the driving force behind the thrust to democratization during Gorbachev's *perestroika*, but with Yeltsin's coming to power, it lost out. It reaped neither political nor economic benefit from the collapse of communism. On the contrary, the prestige of intellectuals declined. They found themselves collectively excluded from politics, both because of the collapse of financing for science, education, and the arts in which they were employed and because the new authorities had no further need for them. Regrettably, those intellectuals who did find a niche in the apparatus of government agreed to play by the bureaucracy's rules. No middle class with a corporate interest in liberal democratic reform emerged in the 1990s. Indeed, quasi-middle class groups serviced the bureaucratic oligarchic stratum. The elite that rose to the top after the collapse of the USSR was split into competing groups, each claiming a monopoly on power. As no alternative elite

appeared, worldly-wise Soviet party officials, admitting a little fresh blood to their ranks, succeeded in providing the basis of a new ruling class. They not only restored their power but also gained control over property, which made them more powerful than they had been under the communist regime.

Society was too inexperienced to develop independently into a civil society under Yeltsin. The Kremlin's new occupants had come to power on a wave of democratic enthusiasm, but not only had they no intention of promoting the development of civil rights and liberties, they systematically obstructed the process, turning their backs on the democratic forces that had helped their rise to power, most notably the "Democratic Russia" movement that had helped Yeltsin to power in 1991. Society was compelled to hand power to a single individual on trust. Yeltsin was given the Kremlin's omnipotence on condition that he would not revoke the freedoms that had been granted. This bestowal signified a new social contract between Russia and its leader, although admittedly not formalized in any institutions and hence vulnerable.

Part of the trouble came from the Marxist assumptions of the technocrats who formed the first Yeltsin government. They supposed that introducing a capitalist economy would be enough, and they ignored the need for new institutions and the crucial importance of subordinating the state to the rule of law. As a result, they reconfirmed Adam Przeworski's conclusion, based on the interaction of democracy and capitalism in Latin America, that without stable liberal institutions, a sustainable liberal economy is impossible.⁵ Indeed, in the absence of viable independent institutions and rule of law, economic reforms can become a destabilizing factor that pushes the ruling class toward authoritarianism in order to defend its interests and its property.

The second and third waves of democratization in Europe showed that integrating transitional societies into the European community was a crucial factor in ensuring the success of their democratic reforms. Unfortunately this proved impossible in the case of Russia. Europe was having difficulty digesting East

Germany and was not willing to engage in further self-sacrifice. Russia for its part, having begun the building of a new state, could not surrender sovereignty to supranational institutions.

In short, Russia lacked the full complement of prerequisites for a successful transition. Admittedly, a number of successful transitions to democracy have shown that effective leadership and political engineering can compensate for the absence of some prerequisites, provided the elite is ready to break with the past. "We cannot exclude the possibility of transcending those conditioning factors by political leadership and political engineering," wrote Juan Linz.⁶ India, Taiwan, and South Korea have proved that democracy can take root both in non-European, non-Christian, and even (in the case of India) economically problematical societies if the leaders and the elite see democracy as best serving national interests. The leadership of Adolfo Suárez in Spain, F. W. de Klerk in South Africa, and Václav Havel in Czechoslovakia eased the democratic transition in their countries, which lacked certain prerequisites for democracy. In Poland, a democratic-minded elite was able to counteract the authoritarian tendencies of its leader, Lech Walesa, and build a pluralistic society. Even a lack of democratically inclined leaders and elites need not exclude a successful transition, as Giuseppe Di Palma and Albert Hirschmann have shown, because democracy can be built by pragmatists who appreciate the ruinous nature, not least for themselves, of an autocratic system. "In any discussion of the importance of a democratic political culture and traditions, it should not be forgotten that many new democracies were not made by democrats but by people who had more or less passively supported nondemocratic regimes. The nondemocrats of yesterday can become democrats, even convinced democrats," wrote Di Palma.⁷ It is difficult to say how far a reform-minded leadership and socially responsible elite in Russia might have compensated for the lack of some preconditions of democratic transition. Indeed, the transformation of a communist state, empire, and superpower would differ from transformations in Latin America, Southern Europe,

Central Europe, and Eastern Europe. There is no doubt, however, that had Russia had leaders willing to build independent institutions and who were aware of the importance of the rule of law, they could have eased Russia's transformation into a law-governed state. Alas, Yeltsin was no Russian Suárez, and the Russian liberals and democrats were ill prepared for the role played by their colleagues in Eastern Europe in the 1980s and 1990s. Nor had Russia in the early 1990s pragmatists prepared to think along new lines. As a result, the country was unable to accelerate its maturation as a civilization, which proves that history, culture, and tradition do matter.

This does not, however, mean that Russia had none of the conditions that might have set it on the road to freedom and political pluralism. I firmly believe that the decisive moment for postcommunist Russia was the autumn of 1991. At that moment, after the defeat of the August putsch attempt by Communist Party apparatchiks desperate to prevent the dissolution of the USSR, Boris Yeltsin had a huge mandate for change from the Russian public. About 70 percent of Russians were prepared to see Russia move toward a liberal democracy. Many were unsure what exactly democracy was, but they accepted it as both an ideal and as a way of life. Moreover, in post-Soviet society, people were attracted by individual freedom, Western standards of prosperity, and the Western way of life. Russian society had not been ready in 1917 to insist on its freedom and therefore handed victory to the Bolsheviks. In 1991, however, society was no longer an obstacle to breaking with the old Russian system. This society had given Yeltsin its support: he could have used it to build a new, pluralistic Russia. He could have introduced a constitution with checks and balances to constrain the power of the state and its leader's omnipotence. There could have been new elections for both the presidency and parliament on the basis of a new constitution. In autumn 1991 Russia would unquestionably have supported those reforms and even the Soviet parliament, which remained on the scene, would have voted them into law, just as the Spanish *cortes* and the commu-

nist parliaments of East European countries had authorized a transition to a competitive political system. The revolutionary experience of Central and Eastern Europe and the West's very existence could have helped Russia at least to weaken its dependence on its history and traditions.

Yeltsin went in the opposite direction. He set about consolidating his personal power. In the process, he retained elements of the Soviet state, which meant that the old parliament was preserved as the main focus of power. That could only lead to a confrontation between executive and representative authorities, which was the situation from 1991 to 1993. Yeltsin's decision to embark on economic reforms while refusing to introduce independent institutions inevitably reduced reform to a mechanism for delivering privatized state property into the hands of the "old new" ruling class. In Yeltsin's defense, note that at that time not even the liberals and democrats saw a need to repudiate such vestiges of the USSR as the old parliament and constitution and to initiate political reform. Yegor Gaidar's team believed it could simply rely on a strong leader. It never occurred to those who considered themselves liberals and democrats that there was a need to establish a system of checks and balances. Government liberals had to wait only until 1992 to see how misplaced their trust in Yeltsin had been, when he sacked their government and formed a new one under bureaucrat Victor Chernomyrdin. The first team of Russian liberal technocrats overestimated the potential of the first Russian president. The team itself also appeared unready for the challenge. The Gaidar team's concept of liberalism went little further than privatization, which it implemented so that, no doubt without realizing it, it laid the foundation for an authoritarian oligarchic regime. In the absence of independent institutions, and given the regime's disregard for the rule of law, this outcome was inevitable.

In this way Yeltsin, his team, and the Russian political class, which at that time wanted to appear liberal and pro-Western, let slip a chance to lay the basis for a system that would guarantee

liberal freedoms and competition. Even given the obstacles that there undoubtedly were, a leader and a team resolved to move beyond the confines of autocracy could have enabled Russia to progress much further along the path to a new way of life.

Could this leader and this elite, given their origins and ignorance of anything other than the Soviet system, have behaved differently? Gorbachev, who belonged body and soul to the Communist Party apparatus, managed to begin dismantling the Russian tradition without external prompting. He did not foresee the consequences of his endeavor, but all reformers start by shaking the foundations of the status quo without knowing where their actions will lead. If they could see into the future, no doubt many would have second thoughts. Yet the still-communist Gorbachev began dismantling a system that could have survived for some time, proving that leadership could become the key factor of the breakthrough. Looking back at Yeltsin's presidency, we can conclude that for a short time in the autumn of 1991, Russia, at least theoretically, had a chance to escape from the burden of its history and traditions and to outflank its national mentality and habitual ways of thinking and behaving. That Yeltsin and his liberals did not even attempt to do so tells us that tradition and history were stronger than the courage and vision of Yeltsin's team, and they made a window of opportunity irrelevant.

The limitations of Yeltsin's leadership resulted from more than his career and mentality as a Soviet functionary. They were also the result of the way in which the USSR was dissolved, which can be described as a coup d'état carried out against Gorbachev in December 1991 by the leaders of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus, that is, Boris Yeltsin, Leonid Kravchuk, and Stanislav Shushkevich. With the disappearance of the USSR, the vast majority of the Russian population was cut off from the support of a paternalistic state controlling their lives and from their roots and previous identity as well. They were totally disoriented and had no idea what they were to face in the future. Millions of ex-Soviet citizens were never to find a place for

themselves in the new circumstances. Many sank to the bottom of the social scale, fell into poverty, and lost all hope of being able to return to a normal life. For millions of Soviet citizens, the sudden collapse of the USSR was a tragedy. As one of those who had destroyed the USSR, Yeltsin could not afford to let an opposition come to power that would hold him responsible for the act. Even today, most Russians look nostalgically to the days of the USSR, which they remember as a time of stability, and forget the experience of living in a totalitarian and, later, an authoritarian state. In a 2006 public opinion survey, 71 percent of respondents regretted the dissolution of the USSR, while 22 percent did not. Twenty-four percent considered that its dissolution had been inevitable, against 65 percent who considered it could have been avoided.⁸ Of course, that does not mean that these people are ready to restore it; it demonstrates the extent of their dissatisfaction with a new reality. Nonetheless, their complicity in the destruction of the Soviet Union was a factor that obliged Yeltsin and his team to do everything they could to cling to power. Soon, events occurred that precluded any chance that Yeltsin might create conditions for genuine political competition.

On October 3, 1993, Yeltsin shelled parliament. After the demise of the USSR, parliament became the focus of a national populist opposition. Destroying it by force, however, with the spilling of blood, meant the end of any hope of governance by national consensus and a return to fist-fighting to resolve conflicts. In 2006, 60 percent of those surveyed blamed Yeltsin for his action against parliament and considered his use of force to be unjustified. (At the time, only 30 percent held that view.) From today's perspective there are hardly any doubts that the use of force to dismantle parliament in 1993—despite its having become a reactionary symbol—pushed Russia in an authoritarian direction. At the time, however, many liberals and democrats saw no other exit, demonstrating how difficult it is for the Russian political class to learn the art of finding peaceful solutions to conflict and clashes of interests. In the end,

Boris Yeltsin, together with the political elite—the part that supported parliament as well as the part that supported the president—drove Russia into a trap, forcing society to make a choice between two forms of undemocratic government: returning to a new version of the Soviet system or opting for anticommunist authoritarianism. The destruction of a parliament left over from the Soviet era narrowed, and perhaps even ended, any prospect that Russia might see an expansion of political freedoms and political competitiveness for the time being, not least because a pluralistic democracy can hardly be introduced through force and bloodshed. For only a short time in 1991 Russia had a chance to choose liberal democracy, but by violently putting down the opposition in 1993, Yeltsin signaled that he was no longer prepared to countenance political struggle and free elections.

The superpresidency that ensued after the forced resolution of the conflict between the executive and representative powers was enshrined in a new constitution adopted in December 1993. Yeltsin amended that constitution personally and was instrumental in pointing it toward authoritarianism. The shape of the new regime bore the hallmark of the victory of a particular political force and had the nature of that victory stamped all over it. Individuals who fight to the death are hardly likely, after destroying their opponents, to start fostering political competition. The new constitution proclaimed the power and freedom of the people but set superpresidential power in stone, which undermined both the people's power and their freedoms. Under this constitution the president is not one branch of power but is above all branches. It is he who "determines the basic direction of the state's domestic and foreign policy" and who is "the guarantor of the constitution of the Russian Federation, and of the rights and freedoms of individuals and citizens." In reality, the powers of the Russian president are much the same as the powers of the Russian monarch were in 1906–1917. It was the Yeltsin constitution that established the institutional framework for an authoritarian, neo-patrimonial

regime, as even Yeltsin aides freely admit. Yeltsin's assistant for legal issues, Mikhail Krasnov, says, "This constitution prevents any development of democracy.... It liquidated a system of checks and balances, making the president omnipotent; and that is a tragedy."⁹

When analyzing Russia's transformation we would do well to recall Joseph A. Schumpeter's five requirements for democracy, of which he stressed the importance of "the human material of politics—the people who man the party machines—are elected to serve in parliament, rise to cabinet office," emphasizing that they "should be of sufficiently high quality."¹⁰ The quality of the human material of the Russian elite was insufficient for it to strive to expand civil freedoms. This applies also to the liberal technocrats summoned by the regime to implement reforms. All of them, from Yeltsin economic ministers Yegor Gaidar and Anatoly Chubais to Putin's economic ministers, German Gref and Alexei Kudrin, accepted the logic of authoritarianism.

The key responsibility for Russia's trajectory has to be shared by Yeltsin's close entourage and ruling team, which included quite a few people who had been viewed, and even now are viewed, as liberals. Under the banner of fighting communists, they ended up together with other political and business-class factions that were protecting their vested interests, newly acquired property, and self-perpetuation. For Yeltsin's entourage his political regime became an instrument not to achieve noble goals, but an end in itself. That is why they so desperately tried to keep in the Kremlin a man who was barely alive. During the presidential elections in 1996 they miraculously succeeded in having a sick man elected president of Russia. But at what a price! The election accelerated Russia's slide toward a fake democracy that includes the mechanisms of presidential succession and electoral manipulation.

Ironically, the Communist Party proved a much stancher supporter of political competition and learned more rapidly how to behave as parliamentarians and in the cut-and-thrust of politics than those who professed to be liberals and democrats.

Finally, no new Wittes or Stolypins, who had been the staunch supporters of reform in the Russian political class in czarist days, emerged in postcommunist Russia because the system does not allow modernizers the independence that czarism felt able to live with.

The great responsibility for the missed opportunity to democratize Russia lies fairly and squarely with Boris Yeltsin. A leader's quality is seen in his capacity to rise above pressures from society and the political class and to offer a new vision. Yeltsin showed no such ability, preferring to react to events that he did not always foresee or manage to control. Beginning in 1995, he became increasingly physically incapable of carrying out his functions and even of fully understanding what was happening. The power of the presidency was usurped by the Kremlin "court," a few members of the Yeltsin family, and its favorites. Yeltsin's second presidency not only made a farce of national politics, it managed to discredit those elements of liberal democracy that Yeltsin himself had helped to introduce.

In 1995–1996 Russia faced the dilemma of whether to hold free and fair elections and risk the return to power of the communists, or keep the ruling clique in power by "managing" the elections. The experience of Eastern Europe showed that the genuine election of communist governments by no means consigned those countries back to the past. Communists found themselves obliged to implement liberal reforms. In Moldova the Communist Party included among its goals joining the European Community and respecting the norms of democracy. These, of course, were communist parties that had successfully evolved in the direction of social democracy. How Gennadi Zyuganov's Communist Party in Russia might have evolved had he been given the opportunity of winning the election is difficult to say. It is worth remembering, however, that Yevgeny Primakov's government, which the communists supported in 1999, did not reject free-market principles and democracy and even led Russia out of a deep economic crisis without undermining market rules. The consequences of keeping an ailing

Yeltsin in the Kremlin by reneging on free elections are obvious: it provided a basis for the return of authoritarianism, albeit in an anticommunist incarnation.

In this connection we must also recall the role played by the West at the beginning of the Russian transformation. Was it crucial and important, or insignificant? In the 1990s Russia was dependent on international financial institutions and on the economic assistance of the Western community and beyond—on the West's help in forming a new civilizational agenda. That is, it needed advice on how to build the market, how to introduce the rule of law, and how to form independent institutions. In addition, Yeltsin and his team were seeking integration with the West, which made them particularly responsive to Western advice and Western influence. Most of the Western leaders, however, were not only unprepared for an ambitious program of assisting Russia's transformation, they failed to see how much was at stake as the new Russian state took shape or to appreciate its potential impact on the world whether it succeeded or failed. Watching the Western reaction to Russia at that time, one got the impression that a small part of the West looked on with curiosity as its once-mighty but now pathetic opponent thrashed about in the water, not knowing which way to swim. Would it sink or swim? they wondered. Another part genuinely tried to help Russia adapt to the new realities, but even those who recognized the scale of Russia's challenge were unable to find effective means to support its reforms. U.S. president Bill Clinton was the only Western leader who made Russia's integration into the West and its transition to democracy a foreign-policy priority and saw Russia's reforms as an important guarantee of international stability and America's security. He argued that Russia "must be a first-order concern" because "the world cannot afford the strife of the former Yugoslavia replicated in a nation as big as Russia, spanning eleven time zones with an armed arsenal of nuclear weapons that is still very vast."¹¹ Clinton called for a "strategic alliance with Russian reform," and his administration adopted the view that the United States should become involved

in Russia's development. The chief architect of the administration's Russia policy, Strobe Talbott, outlined the U.S.'s "Strategic Alliance with Russian Reform" in the following way:

Russia is on the path toward becoming a modern state, at peace with itself and the world, productively and prosperously integrated into the international economy, a source for raw materials and manufactured products, a market for American goods and services, and a partner for American diplomacy. It should be the U.S. policy not just to prevent the worst but also to nurture the best that might happen in the former Soviet Union.¹²

In fact, this was the third Western attempt to push forward democratic transformation in the twentieth century. The first was American assistance for the democratization of defeated Germany and Japan after the Second World War; the second was the transformation of the former communist states in Central and Eastern Europe and the Baltics. Both times, independent U.S. efforts and joint efforts with Europe were successful, proving how much the outcomes of transition depend on the integration of the transition societies with the structures of the West. The third attempt, this time to embrace Russia, had mixed and, in some cases, counterproductive results.¹³ In the matter of security, the United States succeeded in helping Russia to sort out the Soviet nuclear legacy, and created a new security framework for the West, filling the niche left by the collapsed USSR. The Russian elite, however, now has other thoughts about this process, blaming Washington for using Russian weakness in its own interest. In the economic area, the Clinton administration helped to forge the Washington Consensus, which focused on macroeconomic stabilization and high-speed privatization, that became the key instruments of Russian reform and that at least partially contributed to the emergence of oligarchic capitalism. Analyzing the U.S. factor in Russia's transformation at that time, Arnold Horelick and Thomas Graham wrote:

The United States squandered the reservoir of goodwill Russia had for it at the time of the Soviet breakup.... Russians came to understand that the U.S. was prepared to deliver much less assistance to Russia ... than they had expected. The close identification with an increasingly feeble Yeltsin; strong support for radical reformers, with their thinning popular support base; public insistence on reform programs most Russians believe led their country to ruin ... have caused increasingly more Russians to question the wisdom, judgment, and benevolence of the United States.¹⁴

In terms of the U.S. impact on Russia's reforms, both its supporters and its opponents have overestimated American influence on the Russian trajectory, and the Americans themselves underestimated the complexity of the challenge at the time.

In truth, all Western leaders made a double mistake, first, by relying on Yeltsin and believing that he would guarantee a Russian transition, and, second, by emphasizing the economy and neglecting the role of political reform. They would have been more instrumental in helping a democratic- and market-oriented Russia if in 1991 they had advised Boris Yeltsin and his team to organize new elections, adopt a democratic constitution, and build a new state based on the rule of law, and then move gradually to privatization, premissing it on the development of new institutions.

Instead, Western leaders adopted policies that were convenient and politically conducive to great photo-ops. Western advisers of near-celebrity status, like Harvard's Jeffrey Sachs, together with Russian technocrats, promoted what turned out to be disastrous advice about "big bang" privatization in the absence of an adequate legal structure and workable financial institutions. It took years, however, for failure to manifest itself, and in the meantime, the West was happy with Russia's anticommunist thrust and its unproblematic foreign policy. It continued to believe that Russia was moving toward democracy. It was not

difficult to see why Western political circles did not insist on the strengthening of political pluralism in Russia and why the West silently accepted Yeltsin's manipulations of presidential elections in 1996. It feared that the communists might return to power, or the nationalists. Those anxieties were vigorously encouraged by Russia's liberal technocrats. No wonder the resultant oligarchic capitalism and *electoral monarchy*, masquerading as democracy, came to be associated in the Russian popular imagination with Western influence and gave rise to a deep-rooted mistrust of both liberal democracy and the West.

In the end the West failed to contribute effectively to the Russian transformation also because it lacked a common strategy, supported by both Europe and America, to induct Russia into its civilization; it failed to understand the complexities of Russian politics and was often naïve in its assessment of Russia's political players and their intentions. Only in the autumn of 1991 was there a real opportunity to include Russia in Western institutions, even if only as an associate member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union. Neither the West nor Russia saw this. It was not only the Russian elite, but the Western elites too, that were caught out by the collapse of the USSR and failed to see the historic nature of the choice they could have made. The first NATO enlargement was a sign that the West had made its goal the integration of Eastern and Central Europe, though at the expense of its relationship with Yeltsin's Russia, which meant that the leading Western political circles had reconciled themselves with the idea that Russia could not be embraced. It would have to swim alone.

The lack of success of Russia's reforms did not particularly alarm the West, where many had already written Russia off both as an adversary and as a spoiler. They saw its stagnation either as inevitable or as a temporary step before democratization, and as posing no great threat to the West. The resurgence of a self-possessed Russia under Putin took Western political circles by surprise. There had been no expectation of such a turnaround, let alone the reappearance of a potential adversary. To

this day quite a few Western politicians are evidently unaware of the role, even if it has been marginal, they played in Russia's evolution by strengthening its mistrust of them, in particular by bombing Serbia, expanding NATO, initiating the Iraqi war, and in general applying double standards in their policies.