

THE MOSCOW TIMES

Something Yeltsin Didn't Need to See

By Konstantin Sonin

Tuesday, April 24, 2007. Issue 3643. Page 10.

My political consciousness was first seriously awoken in January 1982, when I was 9 years old. The occasion was the state funeral of Mikhail Suslov, who was second only to General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev in the Communist Party hierarchy and was 79 when he died. The funeral was broadcast live on state television and I started to worry about the health of other Soviet leaders. As it turned out my concerns were warranted. Brezhnev died in November of the same year and I was witness, via television, to another four such funerals over the next three years.

Then, in 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev, looking very young compared with those who had preceded him, was named the new leader of the Communist Party. It took most of us by surprise.

But it was only in 1987 that the country and I found a hero. Given how refreshing his arrival was for me at the age of 14, it is hard to imagine the impression he must have made on older generations. It is unlikely that any leader in Russia's history has ever been as popular as Yeltsin was in Moscow in the late 1980s. Mikhail Gorbachev never enjoyed that kind of support.

Taking over the country in the middle of one of the most dramatic peacetime economic collapses of the 20th century, Yeltsin never really stood a chance of leaving office as popular as he came in. His tenure was characterized by a constant search for political coalitions, but his main drive was always forward, away from the history of a Communist dictatorship and toward the future of a normal country that could truly consider itself European.

For political scientists, he was most reminiscent of Nikita Khrushchev, both as a patient coalition builder at the regional level and as a charismatic, sometimes mercurial national leader who relied more on political instinct than rational calculation.

As the country's first democratically elected president, Yeltsin established numerous precedents. The inclusive nature of his government, for example, seemed more natural than even that of his U.S. counterpart, Bill Clinton. How Yeltsin managed to make his way to the top of the party hierarchy, in which anti-Semitism and other prejudices were widespread, yet seemed never to notice the ethnic or religious background of the members of his Cabinet, was a mystery to me.

In 1996, faced with the choice of clinging to power by means of force or winning a second term in office in elections, he opted for the polls.

The last precedent he established was to remain mum about the policies and performance of his successor. We can only try to guess what Yeltsin thought of the giant "Back to the U.S.S.R." project that has been overseen tacitly by his hand-picked successor. Vladimir Putin seems to have everything Yeltsin lacked during his time in office: unbelievably favorable conditions on global markets in the form of near-record-high energy prices, and immense popular support.

It is unlikely that Yeltsin approved of the return to tight state control over the media during Putin's tenure. Even in the tense conditions of martial law following the October 1993 dissolution of the last Soviet parliament -- using tanks -- journalists had more freedom than they do now.

He probably was also not happy with the renationalization of much of what was privatized so painfully a mere 12 years earlier. And if restrictions on the media and increased state involvement in the economy

had been as popular as they are today, it's unlikely that would have stopped him: In a sense, his rule was always a kind of minority rule.

All of this, of course, is only a guess. But if Russia does, indeed, slip into dictatorship, then it is only right that its first president died before he had to watch his country pass the point of no return.

Konstantin Sonin is professor at New Economic School/CEFIR.