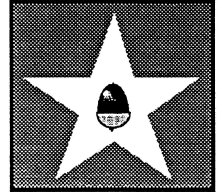


Conflict Studies Research Centre



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Yel'tsin's Last Call

Boris Nikolayevich Yel'tsin resigned on 31 December 1999, after nine years in the Kremlin, as Russia's first ever elected leader. His departure, described by many politicians and commentators as timely and with style, was probably his, and his close family's, last chance to escape a legal onslaught by his political opponents in the years ahead. The charges he would have had to face include:

- His assault on the parliament in 1993, including an investigation into whether he ignored his opponents' preparations for armed resistance to be able to destroy them using military force,
- The legality of the assault on Chechnya in 1994 and his responsibility, as the commander in chief for the chaos and the losses incurred by Russian troops,
- Funding of his political and electoral campaign in the 1996 elections. The case of the two Yel'tsin campaign workers detained carrying a large sum of money would also be reopened,
- His links with various members of the Russian kleptocracy and resulting financial benefits for him and his family. This charge could emerge indirectly as a result of an investigation of some of Yel'tsin's benefactors, who would not hesitate to cooperate with the new authorities to save their own skin,
- Another legal challenge to the Belovez agreement which spelled the end of the USSR in 1991.

Irrespective of the legal merits of such accusations, the investigations would shorten Yel'tsin's life and could have unpredictable consequences for the members of his family. Only the next president could save him, after his retirement, from the ignominy of court appearances, lengthy investigations and possible legal sanctions to some of his family. And the only potential viable candidate willing to protect the Yel'tsins is Vladimir Putin.

Putin is, as a result of a decisive intervention in Chechnya, currently the most popular Russian politician. His hastily organised "presidential" party "Unity" came second in the December parliamentary election largely due to his, not Yel'tsin's, popularity. Vladimir Putin was also lucky that in contrast with his predecessors, Yel'tsin did not meddle in his prime ministerial "business" or, envious of his popularity, fire him unexpectedly at a time when the Russian victory in Chechnya was almost assured. In addition the prices of oil and gas have been going up for the last few months slightly, if only temporarily, slowing down Russia's economic slide.

Yel'tsin's self-preservation instinct, and probably his close entourage, told him that Putin's is his only ticket to a peaceful retirement but that his present popularity would by no means guarantee his victory in full-term presidential elections in June. Unity is still a political Potemkin village

headed by the efficient, non-controversial Minister of Emergency Situations Sergey Kuzhugetovich Shoygu, who has, until recently, stayed out of politics, and a heavy-weight wrestling champion and political light-weight Aleksander Petrovich Karelin. Yel'tsin's increasingly erratic behaviour, rapidly deteriorating health, his family involvement in the decisionmaking process at the highest level and Russia's uncertain economic future could all have reduced Putin's electoral chances. It therefore made sense for Yel'tsin to retire before June, automatically making Putin Acting President, in control of the well funded, large presidential apparatus, with "his" party and also able to count on support from his former party Our Home Is Russia. This puts Putin in a practically unbeatable position in the election, now scheduled for 26 March. His position could be strengthened even further if one of the presidential hopefuls Yevgeniy Primakov, not known for supporting likely losers, in this case himself, pulls out of the race. There are already signs that various politicians who would have been happy to work against Yel'tsin are looking with expectation at Putin's camp.

Vladimir The Secretive

Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin was born on 7 October 1952 in Leningrad. He graduated in 1975 from the University of Leningrad with a Law Degree. His unwillingness to provide any information about his parents may come from wanting to protect them from the world's media but it may also mean that one or both of them may have been linked with the predecessor of the organisation a 23 year old Vladimir Putin joined in 1975, the KGB. He joined the most prestigious First Chief Directorate (FCD) which was responsible for intelligence gathering. Putin's degree was from one of the top Soviet universities and yet by 1975 various Soviet establishments of higher education were producing young men far better prepared for intelligence work than he. What made the KGB recruiters look at young Vladimir Putin in addition to his academic record and extracurricular activities? By 1975 the organisation recruited mainly graduates with various international studies degrees, especially from the Moscow State Institute of International Relations and Eastern Studies Institute, graduates from technical universities such as the Bauman Institute and linguists. Putin most probably spoke German, either because he took the subject seriously during his secondary and university education, or had lived in Germany for a while and was recommended by someone from within the organisation.

After completing courses at the KGB intelligence school he was allocated to the 4th Department in the FCD responsible for both Germanies and Austria. His first and the only known foreign assignment was to the GDR, where he worked on recruiting West German businessmen visiting the GDR and GDR citizens who wanted to leave the country. For his endeavours in 1988 Putin received the East German Order of Merit¹. In total he must have spent 6-8 years in the GDR and the rest of his time in the HQ in Yasenevo.

At the end of the 80s the large contingent of KGB officers stationed in the Warsaw Pact countries was gradually being recalled to the USSR and it was

not always easy to find them jobs. This was when Vladimir Putin returned to Leningrad, where he worked as assistant to the rector of Leningrad University responsible for foreign relations. The university job was a KGB position. We will probably never know whether his next step into the position of adviser to the Chairman of the Leningrad City Council was a KGB attempt to plant one of their own men near increasingly unruly politicians in the City Hall or, disillusioned with the chaos in the Soviet political leadership, Putin partially opted out when it was possible (KGB officers were not retired prematurely but were allowed to transfer into the reserve).

When in May 1990 Anatoliy Sobchak, lawyer and a new-democrat with good links to the law enforcement agencies, became the Chairman of the City Council Vladimir Putin quickly became Leningrad's foreign affairs man. The city and region, in which 75% of industry worked for the military industrial complex and only a few enterprises would survive the political and economic changes, needed foreign investment. Putin was responsible for, among other things, attracting investment and issuing export licences for local companies. At the time all this was a new experience for everyone in Russia and there were few legal guidelines on which the Soviet enterprises, Soviet/Russian citizens and the foreigners dealing with the USSR could rely. In the new game of supply and demand, inexperienced Soviet partners, contractors, clients and suppliers were frequently coming off worst. In 1990 a group of Leningrad City Councillors led by Marina Salye and Yuriy Gladkov conducted an investigation of export licences issued by Putin. The licences permitted their holders to export raw materials and non ferrous metals. The councillors accused Putin of "ineffective use of his powers". They demanded that Sobchak dismiss Putin. Sobchak refused because the accusers were not able to provide any proof of illegalities committed by Putin, and the accusation was eventually dropped.

In the meantime Putin became the Chairman of the Foreign Liaison Committee of the, by then renamed, St Petersburg Town Hall. In 1993 he also became the head of the mayor's operational commission, which made him Sobchak's chief of staff. Without relinquishing his position as the head of the Foreign Liaison Committee Vladimir Putin became in 1994 the First Deputy Chairman of St Petersburg City Council. Until June 1997 he was also the Chairman of the St Petersburg Regional Council of "Our Home Is Russia".

In the June 1996 local election Anatoliy Sobchak lost his seat and Vladimir Putin was "head hunted" to Moscow, where he was given a job as deputy to the head of the president's private office Pavel Borodin. Putin's performance in the Kremlin must have been highly regarded because on March 26 1997 he was appointed Deputy Head of the Presidential Administration and Chief of the Control Commission of the Presidential Administration. At the beginning of March 1997 Yel'tsin's most trusted supporter, another member of the Leningrad group, Anatoliy Chubays, who until then held the position of Head of the Presidential Administration, had been given the job of First Deputy Prime Minister responsible for Russia's economy. His deputy,

another Leningradian, Aleksey Kudrin, had become the first deputy Minister of Finance. Putin was brought in to take Kudrin's position and de facto to run the administration because its new head was a former journalist Valentin Yumashev, whom Yel'tsin treated a like surrogate son, but who had neither qualifications nor experience to do the job. Putin's legal qualifications and hard work were recognised quickly and three months later he also became a member of the economic security commission of the Security Council of the Russian Federation.

In November 1997 Yel'tsin rewarded Viktoria Mitina, one of his staunchest Moscow electoral campaigners, with a position as the First Deputy Head of the Presidential Administration. The new arrangement did not function effectively and she was replaced at the end of May 1998 by Vladimir Putin. At the same time Putin's position as the Chief of the Control Commission of the Presidential Administration was given to Nikolay Platonovich Patrushev, a professional counterintelligence officer who joined the KGB in Leningrad in 1974. Putin was also nominated as a member of the Presidential Temporary Commission for Reinforcing Fiscal and Budgetary Discipline. At that stage the president more than ever needed well organised, qualified and obedient disciplinarians. Anatoliy Chubays had failed to save Russia's economy. Although in February 1998 he sounded upbeat about Russia's financial situation Yel'tsin publicly demanded a tough tax policy, an investors protection plan and a realistic 1998 budget. By the time Putin became First Deputy Head of the Presidential Administration in May 1998 the financial crash was only three months away. Yet even when on 15 July 1998 he was given yet another function, the head of the presidential commission preparing agreements on separation of jurisdiction and plenipotentiary powers between federal and local authorities, he was still relatively little known.

He hit the headlines on 26 July, the day after Yel'tsin nominated him Director of the Federal Security Service (FSS), the largest restructured component of the old KGB. The Russian and foreign media knew very little about the new boss of the FSS and latched on to his past in the KGB and his less than cuddly media image, relying largely on comments by Moscow's and St Petersburg's chattering classes and the reputation of the organisation for which Putin officially worked for 14 years. The KGB was regarded as one of the principal villains of the communist period and those working for it were usually tarred with the same brush, irrespective of the directorate they worked for. Vladimir Putin kept his FSS job until 9 August 1999 when Boris Yel'tsin made him Acting Prime Minister. (His FSS position was given to N P Patrushev.) In the meantime he became a permanent member of the Security Council at the beginning of October 1998, and at the end of March 1999 the Secretary of the Council. His position as the head as the FSS gave him also a seat on the Interdepartmental State Defence Orders Commission. In December 1998 he also joined the Board of trustees of the International Antidiscrimination Fund.

From Acting Prime Minister to Acting President

In contrast with some of his predecessors, Putin showed no signs of eager enthusiasm or servility during his first televised meeting with Boris Yel'tsin.² He leaned slightly back in his armchair with both his feet and the palms of his hands turned inwards, which looked like a modified version of judo post-training relaxation technique³. With Yel'tsin's track record of hiring and firing his prime ministers at will this looked almost like insolence.

No-nonsense, quietly spoken, with the certainty of a man who could carry a big stick if he wanted to, Putin was almost immediately popular in Russia and much less so abroad. His predecessor, Sergey Stepashin, trained in the Military Political Academy and was an impressive public speaker. Putin is not an inspiring public speaker but he is very impressive at smaller meetings where he shows attention to detail, a good memory and gets straight to the point. He is also a polite host and an attentive listener⁴. The PR-obsessed "Western" media commented frequently about the new Russian prime minister's lack of charisma. And yet Russian and other TV (often voiceless) broadcasts showed Putin's immediate underlings listening to him very attentively, visibly concerned and sometimes worried. He did nothing to upset Yel'tsin's sensitive political nature, paying his boss occasional lip service and even during official visits around Russia and abroad keeping a low profile. Had he not been supported publicly by Yel'tsin he would probably have been given less friendly treatment by world politicians and the media. The industrial democracies felt apprehensive about his past and lack of electoral grin but on the other hand they were prepared to support him, for the time being at least, for the same reason they supported Yel'tsin: because all his opponents look less attractive and with the exception of Yevgeniy Primakov far less efficient.

What can we expect from Vladimir Putin?

As far as the Russian voters are concerned, Putin's past is an advantage and not an impediment in his political career. Yuriy Andropov, the former head of the KGB and briefly the General Secretary of the CPSU, is probably still the most popular leader of the communist period⁵. The democratic credentials of Russia's greatest national hero Peter the Great are very modest and those who in the last decade briefly threatened Boris Yel'tsin's rule, Zhirinovskiy, Zyuganov and Lebed', became popular thanks to their radical if somewhat imprecisely stated programmes.

Those wishing to accuse Putin of collaboration with communism will face a difficult task. There are no indications that Vladimir Putin worked for any other KGB branch than the 1st Chief Directorate responsible for intelligence. He did not take part in suppression of dissent, he was responsible for getting other nations' secrets: that is OK by the average Russian voter. He spent his career in the most efficient and the most prosperous Warsaw Pact member, the GDR. For many Russians the GDR was what communism should have been like. Putin also had to cooperate with the East German intelligence and security services, among the world's most effective.

All this must have left a psychological imprint on the new Acting President. He witnessed not only the disappearance of the whole partner security service and his working environment, but the fragmentation and decimation of his own service and the whole USSR. Then he saw Anatoliy Sobchak trying to build his own mini-empire in St Petersburg and Yel'tsin desperately hanging to the imperial chaos of his own creation. He witnessed from close quarters how a country should not be run⁶ and probably has his own idea how it should be done.

One of the issues which will complicate relations between Western leaders and Putin is a generally held, naïve belief, among democratic nations, that Russia's problems can be solved democratically. That is not a view shared by most Russians. Putin will have to use drastic measures to deal with some of these problems quickly and official criticism from foreign capitals could provoke strong reactions in Moscow. The period in which Russia listens to foreigners telling it how to behave is probably over.

Before and after the March election

Having control of the vote counting machinery through the Federal Agency of Government Communication (FAPSI) Vladimir Putin has no reason to fear any irregularities in the vote counting in the March election. However, he does depend on the average Russian voter. He can afford to lose Moscow, although St Petersburg will probably vote for him. His pre-electoral task is to convince all the other voters that he means business. And the average voter will care very little whether he is popular abroad (near or far) or whether he has unblemished democratic credentials. What the average voter expects him to do is:

- To win decisively the Chechen conflict,
- To establish law and order around the country,
- To deal with the most glaring cases of corruption,
- To control the kleptocrats and limit their political influence,
- To pay, on time, salaries with realistic purchasing powers,
- To make Russia a power which other countries would respect, and if they are not willing to respect it they must fear it.

Putin will not be judged by the methods used to achieve these goals as long as he is seen going reasonably quickly in the right direction.

He could lose the election only in the unlikely event that the losses at the end of the conflict in Chechnya, which he must win decisively before the end of March, grow dramatically; if at the same time the rich media owners who are bound to be the target of his unwelcome attention after the election unite against him, projecting an unfavourable image of him throughout the electoral campaign; if they temporarily undermine the economy of Russia only to blame Putin for it; and finally were Putin to lose control over the power structures. All these factors would have to work simultaneously. Sniping at the Acting President is already taking place and will continue, as it does in every country with a political opposition and free media. The attacks on Putin will be amplified abroad by foreign media looking for catchy

stories in a country riddled with controversies. At the moment, however, Putin is politically bullet-proof and even large calibre controversies should not dent his political armour.

Fortunately for the Acting President the modern Russian boyars are preoccupied with backstabbing and undermining each other. With the considerable powers at his disposal Putin should have no difficulty in keeping them at it until March. All he has to do until then is to punish swiftly those of his direct and indirect subordinates who make mistakes implementing his orders or commit any transgressions. The transfers of Generals Troshev and Shamanov suggest that he intends to do just that. He will also have to show a convincing plan to deal with low and medium level crime, especially its violent version. He can be expected to bring more discipline and more effective control at every administrative level in the country. This would be similar to measures introduced by Yuriy Andropov during his brief tenure as General Secretary of the CPSU.

Coming out from the shadow

As Prime Minister, Vladimir Putin was not expected to air his views about Russia's future or how the country should be run because this would sound like criticism of Yel'tsin, earn him an instant dismissal and end his political career. After eleven days as Acting President Putin came out with a clear vision of his country's future⁷. He is thus now a much larger target for his opponents, who for the first time have the opportunity to argue with him, but will find it difficult to criticise any specific aspect of his vision before he attempts to implement his plans. He excludes a return to communism⁸, supports freedoms currently enjoyed by the Russians⁹, calls for economic growth, wants to integrate the Russian economy into the world economic structures and stresses the necessity for foreign investment¹⁰. But Putin also advocates strong state powers, a war against crime, forcing out the shadow economy and warns against mechanically copying "abstract models" from "foreign textbooks".¹¹ Absent from his statement are any forms of posturing on the international arena and calls for development of Russia's military war-waging potential. Barring major political disaster, this programme should help him to win the March election.

If Putin wins, the industrialised democracies and especially the USA and Europe will have to accept that after 15 years of Gorbachev and Yel'tsin's generally friendly pro-Western foreign policy, things may become much colder on the international arena. Changes among Putin's foreign policy advisers, in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Defence may indicate which direction Putin is going to choose.

Moscow will also want to keep the momentum of developing its armed forces. If oil and gas prices continue to rise Russia might even be able to afford some modest reforms. This may be done partly by resubordination of some of the MVD units to the Ministry of Defence. Pampered and well financed by Yel'tsin, the Ministry of Interior had its own alternative army which could find itself reformed and reduced at various levels after the Chechen conflict

is over. Putin may also attempt to merge some of the special services such as the FSS and FAPSI and his own Security Directorate. It is doubtful whether he wants to bring back the old system, but some of the measures he is likely to take might look like it.

¹Spokesman of the German “Gauck” institute responsible for the Stasi archives quoted by “Antenne 2” on 8 January 2000 14.31.

²ORT 10 August 1999.

³ Vladimir Putin’s black belt in judo proves his considerable perseverance. Both the USSR and the GDR represented the highest world standard in that sport and the grades, in contrast with many other countries, were given after winning many combats and passing a technical exam.

⁴ The author took part in a meeting with Vladimir Putin in the mid 90s.

⁵ Putin and Andropov differ in that the former is a KGB professional who became a politician and the latter was a CPSU politician who became the head of the KGB.

⁶ During an interview on BBC World (Hard Talk, Nov. 1999) the Chairman of the Russian Reserve Bank Aleksander Lebedev quoted Vladimir Putin as saying the Russia has plenty of calamities of Chechen conflict proportions: crime, poverty and suchlike.

⁷ Russian Government Website 11.01.2000.

⁸ Ibid. “Current Situation in Russia”.

⁹ Ibid. 3A and 3B.

¹⁰ Ibid. 3.1 and 3.6.

¹¹ Ibid. 3B, 3.5 and 3.

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