

# The Future That Never Was

by Alexei Pimenov

Russia has always done the unexpected. The Soviet system emerged suddenly after 1917. When it seemed fragile, it thrived. When it seemed invincible, it collapsed. After the demise of communism in 1991, Russia was supposed to go to the opposite extreme. Communism would give way to Western-style capitalism and parliamentarianism; dogmatic party apparatchiks would be replaced by open-minded liberal intellectuals. An epoch of liberal democracy would begin, just as a person cured of a disease becomes healthy.

Instead, surprising changes have come from surprising directions. It was not the Communists but the democrats who launched a shamelessly chauvinistic campaign against Chechens in Russia and then last autumn unleashed the war in Chechnya. The Westernizer Anatoly Chubais and the fascist Aleksandr Prokhanov used the same vocabulary of militant nationalism in an effort to rally the Russian elite. And their “new deal” worked. With their patriotic demagoguery, they easily eclipsed their pro-Communist opponents. Have the actors forgotten their parts, or are they enacting a different play altogether?

Westerners trying to understand events in Russia are like the Japanese readers who encountered the first translation of Alexandre Dumas’s *Three Musketeers* in the mid-19th century. Unfamiliar with European culture, the Japanese read Dumas’s adventure tale—with a queen who gives her beautiful diamond pendants to a foreign prime minister—as a political pamphlet attacking government corruption. Westerners run similar risks in trying to read contemporary Russian politics.

The Russian political system today, while different from the Soviet system, still has little in common with the Western democracies. The parties in Russia’s new “multiparty system” are not built on political or ideological principles. Politicians adopt their opponents’ slogans and even programs, altering their approach to the nation’s fundamental problems in an instant. Alliances form and dissolve depending on political circumstances. The most powerful parties and coalitions grow out of corporate-bureaucratic relationships. Viktor Chernomyrdin’s Our Home—Russia movement attracted

enthusiastic support from Russia's bureaucrats when he was prime minister, but when Chernomyrdin left office in 1998, his political influence evaporated. Yet a party that does have a significant ideological foundation will become no more than a political sect if it lacks such a foothold in the Russian power structure. This has been the fate of Yabloko, the party that represents Russia's small liberal intelligentsia.

The Russian Communists play an extremely important role in this political show. Constantly demonized by opponents, and expressing the most reactionary tendencies (extreme nationalism in particular), they represent the interests of the least successful segments of the former Communist elite. They are numerous but badly organized in the struggle for the presidency. But the office is not essential for them. Indeed, the Communist Party seems satisfied with its current status, assembling resources that can be placed behind other political forces in return for concessions.

As for the two most powerful political coalitions—Unity (the party of the current government) and its defeated rival, Fatherland—All Russia, the Yuri Luzhkov—Yevgeny Primakov coalition—no important ideological distinctions separate them. Both coalitions hold similar doctrines and employ similar political vocabularies. Both are very heterogeneous, mingling democrats, liberals, statist, nationalists, and others.

**B**ut party politics is only the tip of the iceberg. The real conflict in Russia, occurring beneath the surface, is a struggle among different financial and industrial oligarchs. The oligarchs use and sometimes manipulate the parties and movements. It is no exaggeration to say that they determine what happens on the Russian political scene. There are perhaps a dozen major oligarchies, each encompassing a variety of different enterprises and employing thousands, even millions, of employees (though all remain, officially, employees of the state). The oligarchs occupying the top rungs of these amalgamations are the true successors to the former Communist Party elite—and, indeed, some of them once belonged to the Communist nomenklatura.

The new system differs from classical Soviet totalitarianism in many respects, yet it has more in common with the old system than it does with Western capitalism. The fundamental difference from the West is structural. In Russian big business, no real boundaries separate private ownership from state ownership, because no real boundaries separate business power from administrative power. In the United States this would be seen as corruption. It exists in Russia for a very simple reason:

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Portrait of Gorbachev (1990), by Valery and Natasha Cherkashin

In the transition from communism, bureaucrats became capitalists while remaining bureaucrats, even as they were released from any form of hierarchical control. This blending of political and corporate power can be found everywhere, irrespective of political labels. The national airline is controlled by members of former President Boris Yeltsin's inner circle; former Deputy Prime Minister Anatoly Chubais controls Unified Energy Systems of Russia; Moscow's Mayor Yuri Luzhkov controls a financial-industrial group called Systema.

Decrying Russia's "wild capitalism," many critics today blame the 1992 "shock therapy" implemented by Yeltsin's "young reformers" for the failures and excesses of the economy. The Russian economy is wild in many respects. But capitalist? It differs in fundamental ways from the market economies of the United States and Western Europe. With its closely interwoven political and corporate leaderships, the Russian pattern can more plausibly be compared with the pre-1945 zaibatsu system of imperial Japan or the "crony capitalism" of the modern Philippines.

**T**o understand the new Russian system, one must go back to its roots in the totalitarian Soviet past. The Soviet system admitted no distinctions among the social, economic, and political realms. The nomenklatura that ran the state machinery

constituted the entire ruling class. The only way to achieve high social and economic status was to achieve a high rank in the Soviet state hierarchy. It was a system, in other words, with many *archaic* elements and social patterns built in. It used the archaic method of state slavery (the Gulag), for example, to solve the extremely modern problem of industrializing agrarian Russia.

The terror practiced by the state was not only a way to deal with political opponents, it was the main tool for maintaining social discipline. In this respect, the Soviet system had much in common with the Nazi regime as well as with archaic chiefdoms and kingdoms. Thus, in the Soviet Union under Stalin, as in 19th-century Buganda, the elites oversaw mass killings of innocent people, accusing their victims of absolutely impossible crimes, or not even bothering to accuse them of anything.

Ideology determined every facet of Soviet social life. But the ideology was syncretic. The Communist elite used different ideological constructions at different times, like an actor changing masks. Communist leaders could announce astonishing political and ideological changes that seemed to contradict the most important principles of their political faith, as Stalin did in forging an alliance with Nazi Germany in 1939, without suffering any serious ideological qualms.

The collapse of a state built upon archaic foundations does not necessarily mean the disappearance of the system. The history of such archaic societies, particularly Asiatic ones, from the Middle East to India, offers many examples of empires and societies that disintegrated and were later restored, perhaps around another center and by different people but according to the same basic scheme.

**T**oday's "new" Russia can be seen as a new set of answers to some very old questions. Every society in which there is no separation between the ruling class and the state machinery faces two questions: How is the stability of the elite to be maintained? How is social status to be passed on to the next generation?

Under Stalin, the hierarchical order was maintained by terror. Everybody, irrespective of rank, could become a victim of the secret police. The system remained highly centralized, and party officials were rotated to new posts every three or four years. The privileged had few opportunities to ensure the status of their children. Taking power in 1953, Nikita Khrushchev ended both the terror and the constant reshuffling. The local party secretaries—the leaders of the Soviet Union's hundreds of republics, oblasts, and regions—gained still more independent authority after 1964, under Leonid Brezhnev. The party hierarchy swelled in size and, in effect, different nomenklaturas emerged, as elites in the party, the military, industry, the scientific establishment, and other sectors pursued their different interests.

The decisive transformation of the nomenklatura occurred under Mikhail Gorbachev. He gave this new turn its first expression at the Central Committee plenum in December 1987. "Our socialist property of the common people has become an ownership without owner," he declared. This was absurd—and not entirely clear even in the original Russian—but it turned out to be extremely important politically. Amid endless theoretical debates about the social and economic shape of the Soviet future, something of much greater significance happened: the gradual division of the "socialist property of the common people" among different ministries and organizations.

This unofficial bureaucratic "privatization" was never openly declared, and only later did it become clear what had happened. Gorbachev had proposed that state-owned business enterprises become self-governing. The most important result, however, was that the bureaucratic-industrial elites became independent. This period saw the creation of huge enterprises—such as Gazprom in energy, ANT in military goods (which proved a failure), and Logovaz in autos. Officially, the assets remained state property, but practically speaking they were not controlled by any central authority. Revenues increasingly went to those who ran the enterprises rather than to the central party bureaucracy.

This transformation was accompanied by remarkable changes in the life of the bureaucracy. In the past, party officials were expected to be discreet about their privileges. But the larger and more emancipated elite of the perestroika era did not feel compelled to keep its wealth under wraps. Flaunting their money and power, Russia's new rich provoked a strong popular reaction. Attacks on bureaucratic privilege became the common theme of democrats and many nationalists. Local authorities in the ethnic republics took up a similar cry against the tyranny and privileges of the central ministries, which eventually developed into the key element of their secessionist efforts.

The hardliners' attempted putsch of August 1991 might have ended very differently if this unofficial privatization of 1987 had not occurred. The conservative Communists leading the putsch against Gorbachev represented the parts of the political elite that had lost out after 1987 and stood to lose even more. For obvious reasons, the more successful groups did not take their side. What began as an effort to turn back the clock thus ended that December in the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the ascension of Russian President Boris Yeltsin.

**I**t has become commonplace to interpret Yeltsin's long rise as a triumph of the democratic movement. But if Yeltsin had been nothing more than a representative of the intelligentsia's democratic movement, he would not have been able to climb the ladder to Russia's presidency in the June 1991 election, much less to successfully lead the opposition to the putsch in Moscow that August.

Yeltsin's original decision to join the democrats did have important consequences. Remaining a representative of the party elite yet also possessing the charisma of a victim after Gorbachev cast him out of the party's top ranks in 1987, he used his unique influence to channel popular anger in a democratic-anti-Communist direction rather than a populist-chauvinistic one. Yeltsin's decision, however, was a great surprise. Not only did he lack any earlier ties to the liberal intelligentsia, but one of the most controversial moments of his career had been a highly publicized appearance only a few years earlier before Pamyat, an extreme nationalist and anti-Semitic group.

But Yeltsin recognized that despite the popularity of democratic rhetoric, the democratic forces alone were not strong enough to bring him to power in 1991. At that moment, the former party boss demonstrated again a surprising capacity for exact political calculations and maneuvers. He formed an alliance with the bureaucracy of the Russian Federation.

**T**he bureaucrats desperately needed someone like Yeltsin. In the great grab for assets, ironically, they were losing out badly. To understand why, one must take an excursion into Russian and Soviet history. Before the Bolshevik Revolution, Russian national identity was rooted both in familiar notions of ethnic identity and blood and in a peculiarly Russian sense of universalism — what Dostoevski called “world openness” — that grew out of the Russian Orthodox Church. Under this somewhat contradictory principle, identity grew not out of ethnic origin but confessional belonging.

The new Soviet identity that took shape after the revolution of 1917 was essentially a new form of traditional Russian identity. Universalism remained, but it changed from a Christian universalism to a Marxist one. Chauvinistic attention to “blood” remained as well. The Soviet Union was proudly “internationalist,” but every citizen's passport nevertheless specified his or her ethnic origin in what was called the “fifth column.” And ethnicity was determined not by cultural choice but by the origin of one's parents.

Russia itself held a peculiar status in the Soviet system. On the one hand, Russia was unmistakably its dominant element. For example, while each of the ethnic republics had its own Communist party with its own party secretary, each also had a “second secretary,” almost always an ethnic Russian, sent directly from Moscow to control the first. On the other hand, Russia was expected to embody Soviet universalism. So while each republic had its institutions, notably its own Communist party, Russia itself had few. There was no Russian Communist Party, nor even a Russian Academy of Sciences.

Under Gorbachev, all of these contradictions began to be discussed openly. The central idea of perestroika was a return to “real” Leninist socialism. This appeal to communist ideology was sounded



*“New Russians” enjoy the good life. One estimate suggests that 10 percent of Russians have greatly benefited from economic and political change, while 40 percent have greatly suffered.*

too late to be effective. But the idea of revival was powerful. It is not surprising that in a multiethnic country it assumed the form of a national, or ethnic, revival. The more people were drawn into the democratic process, the more the slogans of perestroika were transformed into a program for restoring each republic’s own ethnic-national golden age.

**T**he only exception was Russia. At first, the idea of Russian ethnic revival was used by the conservative bureaucratic opponents of perestroika rather than by its supporters. Yeltsin changed this situation in a moment. To the struggle against bureaucratic privilege he added a second appeal to mobilize the Russian nomenklatura: sovereignty for the Russian Federation. It was an enormously successful move because the bureaucracy of the Russian Federation had grown deeply dissatisfied with the results of Gorbachev’s unofficial privatization. Why? Because the largely decorative character of Russian republican institutions prevented them from following the example of the central bureaucracy and those of the Soviet Union’s republics.

That is where the clue to Yeltsin’s surprising success can be found. The liberal ideas of the democratic intelligentsia became the third component of this quickly created combination. The results were extremely effective. Yeltsin’s opponents tried to play the same game, hastily organizing the Communist Party of the Russian Federation. Their attempt was not only belated but politically absurd. By violating the old taboo against openly demonstrating the

overwhelmingly Russian character of Communist rule, they triggered the immediate collapse of the Soviet Communist Party.

By 1992, when Yegor Gaidar and other young reformers, aided by Western advisers such as Jeffrey Sachs, launched the first official privatization, the underlying rules of the game had changed in ways that were not yet widely perceived. The "Chicago boys" won favor in the Yeltsin administration not because they prevailed over their opponents in grand theoretical debates between economic gurus, but for a quite prosaic reason: The nomenklatura found a lot to its liking in the reformers' plans to free Russian big business from centralized control.

The young reformers themselves played a very important role, not by making crucial decisions but rather by serving as political decoration that made the new Russian elite more attractive to the Western democracies. Soviet history is full of such "useful idiots." As many in the West pinned their hopes on the market-oriented reformers, the real and far more important conflict continued behind the scenes, as it does to this day. As a saying in Russia puts it, it is a conflict between those who have been grabbing and those who have not been grabbing enough.

**A** Russian general once conceded that many clashes in the war in Chechnya were little more than mock battles, with the outcome determined by mutual consent of the two sides. Russian politics can be seen in much the same way, as a sequence of bargains struck by opponents who then quietly become partners.

Their bargains are driven by several imperatives. One is the growing economic stratification of the population. Ordinary Russians chafe at the gaudy prosperity of the "New Russians," whose wealth is widely seen as illicit and immoral. At the same time, the collapse of the Soviet Union has deprived Russian statehood of its larger universalist purposes, creating fertile soil for ethnic chauvinism. Twenty-five million Russians now live outside Russia's borders, in the former Soviet republics. They loom in the Russian imagination much as the 10 million Germans detached from Germany did in the German mind during the years after World War I.

Russia's ruling clique has continued to follow the traditional strategy of changing programs and using the slogans of others. To distract ordinary Russians from the real social conflict, the new elite needs to create a convincing enemy. First it was the Russian Communist Party. Then, when the extreme nationalist supporters of Vladimir Zhirinovskiy scored unexpected victories in the State Duma elections of 1993, winning nearly a quarter of the vote, the Yeltsin clique created a new enemy. It promptly borrowed the ideas of its opponents, unleashing the first war in Chechnya in late 1994.

As Yeltsin slipped into physical and political decline in the fol-



lowing years, the new elite became increasingly torn by internal conflicts over the division of state property. The emergence of Yuri Luzhkov as a leader of the opposition and the creation of the Luzhkov-Primakov coalition gave political form to this oligarchic rivalry. But Yeltsin's "party of order" staked everything on creating a new dictatorship in order to secure its power and prevent any new redivision of state property. It used "continuity" as a slogan and the secret service as a main means.

Once again, the Russian elite is playing an old game to solve domestic problems. Waging a second war in Chechnya is the best way to mobilize support among a population that has nothing in common with the oligarchs—and to prevent the hungry, oppressed army from attacking the Kremlin. Vladimir Putin's measures as acting president, including the militarization (or re-militarization) of the economy and the restoration of military education in the schools, speak for themselves. The ruling clique needs to be at war. At the same time, it no longer needs to cast the Communists as the enemy. Indeed it needs the Communists' support and has courted them in the Duma more openly than before. Yeltsin was probably pushed out precisely because he was an obstacle to this new coalition.

Do all of these dark trends presage a return to the totalitarian past? Because of the oligarchic nature of the current elite, any new dictatorship in Russia will differ from the Soviet system. But three features of the past remain. First, there are no real boundaries between ownership and state power. Second, terrorist means will be used to resolve fundamental social problems. And third, as shown by Putin's ability to pay honor in almost the same breath to the dissident Andrei Sakharov and the KGB chief Yuri Andropov, the tradition of changing ideologies like masks is very much alive.

A period of dangerous instability is beginning in Russia. A nationalist and anti-Islamic campaign is a dubious way to unite a multiethnic country. In order to consolidate Russian society Moscow also needs the support of the local authorities, which, little by little, are becoming the only real power beyond Moscow. But the price for this support is always the same: more independence. Paradoxically, further disintegration will be the only long-term result of this effort to consolidate.

We have arrived at the end of a long and skillful political masquerade. Now we see the real face of the Russian political elite. In making sense of what is happening in Russia, it is important above all to be realistic, rejecting romantic interpretations of the country's reforms and recognizing the archaic nature of many of its political institutions and practices. As the great Russian poet Aleksandr Blok said in his despair over the false promise of change nearly a century ago, "We must not be lulled by the calendar." □