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Boris Yeltsin: Autocrat or Narodnik?

The picture that symbolizes the defeat of the August 1991 Soviet Coup is firmly etched on everyone's mind — Boris Yeltsin atop a tank, defiantly challenging the authority of the coup plotters and demanding the restoration of the legitimate constitutional order. In the confused aftermath of the coup, however, some observers have seen a different Yeltsin emerging: not the democratic hero of August, but an autocratic reminder of Russia's past. Which is the real Boris Yeltsin? Bill Keller, former Moscow bureau chief for *The New York Times* and longtime Yeltsin observer, examined this issue in a talk at the Harriman Institute on September 30, 1991.

Yeltsin's image in the West, according to Keller, and his image at home differ tremendously. Abroad, Yeltsin's bold and brash personality clashes with Mikhail Gorbachev's smoother style. Compared to Gorbachev, Keller finds Yeltsin to be "very much a Urals-Russian *muzhik* — he's not the sort of person who charms French parliaments or American intellectuals."

Gorbachev and Yeltsin also differ on the type of people they surround themselves with. While Gorbachev gathers people of his own generation with similar life experiences around him, and then proceeds to do most of the talking, Keller noted that Yeltsin has "an ability to surround himself with young people, young advisors, who don't necessarily share his upbringing or think the way he does, and to listen to them."

The importance of this influence on Yeltsin's thinking was evident during the recent peace talks between Armenia and Azerbaijan, which Yeltsin mediated. On the first day of the talks, Yeltsin proposed the establishment of a military-style censorship in Nagorno-Karabakh to prevent the broadcast or publication of anything provoking inter-ethnic conflict. Predictably, many saw little difference between this and earlier forms of Soviet censorship. By the next day, however, Yeltsin had backtracked on the issue, proposing instead the setting up of what Keller

characterized as a "truth squad" that would function the way the National News Council in the U.S. does: disputed articles could be presented to the squad, which would then render a verdict on their veracity. Yeltsin, however, stressed that no prior censorship would be involved, and that there would be no repercussions against writers. As Keller pointed out, "The first speech was Boris Yeltsin the *apparatchik*, for whom freedom of the press is at best an abstract concept. The second speech was the Boris Yeltsin who listens to the people around him."

The Yeltsin Files

Apart from the issue of style, Keller believes that the conventional wisdom on Yeltsin is wrong on four important points. The first concerns the importance of Yeltsin's background as a party *apparatchik*. Yeltsin's detractors argue that his past history as a party boss makes him little different from Gorbachev or others who made it to the top of the Party's hierarchy. In Keller's view, however, other differences between Gorbachev and Yeltsin are more telling; for instance, their intellectual backgrounds, or lack thereof. Thus, while "Gorbachev has spent much of his life rationalizing his socialist choice . . . Yeltsin, who was trained as a construction engineer, sees his task as getting a concrete thing built or a concrete problem solved . . . he was never particularly passionate about the ideology." The differences explain why it has taken so long for Gorbachev to abandon many of his long-held beliefs, while for Yeltsin, abandoning communist ideology and embracing the hitherto taboo concepts of private property, political pluralism, and Baltic independence have come relatively quickly.

The second aspect of the conventional wisdom argues that Yeltsin is a latent Russian nationalist. Keller, however, sees a much different Yeltsin. "One of the things that struck me [about Yeltsin] is how carefully he has



avoided catering to the seamier side of Russian nationalism, particularly the anti-semitism and the more extreme xenophobic groups like *Pamyat'*. Once, when he was city party boss in Moscow, he received a group of *Pamyat'* members . . . [Yeltsin] was clearly in the role of the local party boss who was curious about a phenomenon and wanted to get his own personal sense of who these people were. But there was nothing in the meeting that constituted sympathy for them."

Yeltsin's sensitivity to the multiethnic structure of Russia shows through in his choice of words to describe citizens of Russia: Yeltsin generally uses the ethnically neutral term *rossyanin* rather than the word *russkiy*, which connotes ethnic Russian nationality. As Keller noted, "Yeltsin's gone to great lengths to avoid Russian versus non-Russian formulations. The word *russkiy* rarely passes his lips. He didn't invent the word *rossyanin*, but he has made it the vernacular to refer to citizens of Russia regardless of nationality."

The third part of the Yeltsin conventional wisdom maintains that he is a populist. While such a description may have been appropriate in the past, Keller avoids using it now. Instead of labelling Yeltsin a populist, Keller prefers to think of him as "a politician of extraordinary political intuition, at least when he is playing within the boundaries of his own country."

Keller saw an example of Yeltsin's political intuition firsthand in the summer of 1990, when he travelled with Yeltsin to Tataria, Bashkiria, and Vorkuta. His message was consistent throughout the trip: the importance of local autonomy, and the need to end excessive reliance on Moscow. The response to the message was predictable. "When someone would ask him to help them disband the local party committee, he would turn on them and say, 'No, do it yourself. You disband the local party committee.'"

Part four of the conventional wisdom contends that Yeltsin is an autocrat at heart. Since the demise of the coup, "Yeltsin has begun to behave, to put it mildly, in a forceful fashion." Typical of this forceful behavior is Yeltsin's current practice of sending personal representatives to serve as pro-consuls in the various oblasts. Keller sees this not as an assertion of personal power, however, but as an attempt to inject some dynamism in the stagnant reform process. A recent trip to Vladimir gave Keller the impression that the local pro-consul was "not a dictator on the spot who's been sent out to override local authorities, but someone who really is a legitimate representative of executive power, in a region where the supposedly legitimate authorities have done nothing but obstruct attempts to establish private farms and open private businesses."

A Looming Demokratura?

Keller concluded that it is still too early to tell if Yeltsin is an autocrat or a narodnik. The word currently in vogue in Moscow to describe the political atmosphere is *demokratura*, i.e., the combination of democracy and dictatorship that seems to be evolving under the so-called democrats. Such a judgement, in Keller's opinion, is still premature. "At the moment, what [Yeltsin] is essentially trying to do is apply executive power, which is probably unavoidable given the failure of legislative power over the last couple of years. My instinct is that Yeltsin is a narodnik . . . He's certainly done some things that didn't strike me as democratic, and it's hard for me to imagine how anybody raised the way he was raised, and the way Gorbachev was raised, could be in his heart and soul a democrat. It requires too much of a transformation of consciousness . . . [but] he's gone a lot farther in that direction than Gorbachev has."

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