

The misunderstood Boris Yeltsin

By Séamus Martin,
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"The dissidents and the democrats both tried to fool the people for too long into believing that Yeltsin, of all people, was a real democrat. There came a time when that fairy tale became unsustainable and 'democrat' became literally a dirty word..."

The words are those of [Anna Politkovskaya](#) [1] in her final book, *A Russian Diary*.

Western politicians and commentators wholeheartedly backed the views of those Russian dissidents and democrats.

Perhaps the most dramatic illustration of this was the support of western governments for Russia's entry to the Council of Europe (the continent's most important human-rights organisation). [Russia](#) [2] was admitted in 1996, at a time when the [first Chechen war](#) [3] was at its height and Russian citizens on both sides were being deprived in their thousands of that most basic of human rights: their lives.

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I say "both sides" because in those early days many of the victims were Russian soldiers. Young conscripts, many had never used a rifle, were sent into action with woefully sub-standard equipment against Chechen rebels who were better trained and under far more professional leadership. One young lad, wounded in hospital, told me of his armoured vehicle being towed into battle after it had broken down.

The Council of Europe was silent. The message to the Kremlin was clear: "You can do what you like and we will still support you." The reason for this and for other instances of the West's tolerance was the mistaken belief that the only alternative to [Yeltsin](#) [4] was the communists. The very dangerous principle that "my enemy's enemy is my friend" applied.

Now that Boris Nikolayevich has passed on, some [obituary writers](#) [5] and analysts have hailed him as the man who brought democratic freedoms to Russia.

Admittedly the media was entirely free in the early part of his [presidency](#) [6] but as time went on there was a gradual rowing back on *glasnost*. In what democratic society, for example, could a presidential candidate have a massive heart attack in the week before an [election](#) [7] without it being reported in a single Russian newspaper, magazine, and radio or TV station? It may have been due to self-censorship but it was censorship all the same.

Yeltsin's achievement

I have a particularly vivid memory of talking to Yegor Yakovlev [8], the former editor of *Moscow News* and eminent proponent of *glasnost* in communist days, when he ran his own paper (*Obshchaya Gazeta*) late in the Yeltsin era.

On the wall behind him in his office hung, on one side, a photograph of Andrei Sakharov [9] and on the other a bullet-proof vest, the fashion accessory *de rigueur* for the courageous journalist of his day. In this context it should be remembered that (according to figures from the Committee to Protect Journalists [10]) thirteen journalists have been killed in the line of duty during Vladimir Putin's presidency - but thirty-one lost their lives in similar circumstances on Yeltsin's watch.

Anna Politkovskaya's [10] judgment was echoed in Yakovlev's words:

"I think there were two things that were catastrophic for him, and for the first one the whole crowd of us, the democrats, myself included, are to blame. We made a deal with our consciences and decided not to notice it for the sake of democracy. You know his moral behaviour and his mentality do not correspond with the role he has to play. His mentality level is that of a (Communist Party) regional secretary. I never blame any official who is doing his best but is unable to achieve much, because when I curse him, it's not going to make him any cleverer. The second thing is his animal, his beastly desire for power and from this stems his savage hatred of Gorbachev, who was the main obstacle to his coming to power in the first place."

Yakovlev also referred to Yeltsin's serious problem with alcohol and the willingness of his associates to take advantage of it. Frequently Yeltsin's policies were those of the last person he drank with.

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Zygmunt Dzieciolowski, "Boris Yeltsin, history man [11]" (24 April 2007)

The economic reforms introduced with Bolshevik ruthlessness by Yegor Gaidar [12] on Yeltsin's behalf devastated the lives of the poor and the elderly while the young products of the communist *nomenklatura*, including Gaidar himself, did quite nicely thank you.

Some obituarists have described the Gaidar reforms as an unavoidable policy that paved the way [12] for the relative prosperity that Russia currently enjoys. The enforced devaluation of the rouble after the economic collapse of August 1998 and the rise in world oil prices may have been more important in this respect. It is significant, in any event, that those early reforms have now been disowned by one of their authors, the United States economist Jeffrey Sachs [13].

All of Yeltsin's positive contributions [14] came early in his presidency when he was effectively and enthusiastically demolishing the worst of the Soviet system. He was an efficient and successful revolutionary but no statesman.

Those who praise Yeltsin and denounce Vladimir Putin [15] should remember that on 31 December 1999 it was Boris Nikolayevich, immunity from prosecution for himself and his family safely tucked away in his pocket, who introduced Vladimir Vladimirovich [16] to us as his successor.

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