

Prophets await Yeltsin's downfall

By Vladimir Orlov

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MOSCOW - Just one year after Boris Yeltsin became the most powerful man in Moscow, fulfilling prophecies surrounding the breakup of the Soviet Union, some new prophecies are making the rounds - this time about the downfall of Yeltsin himself. Some of the prophets even name the month for the Russian President's exit from the political scene: September, October, December. For the last five years, Yeltsin has confounded the prophets of doom: His election from the Politburo and the party leadership in 1987 was followed by a political comeback in 1989, crowned by his resistance to last year's inept Kremlin coup.

He has taken a similar zigzag course through economic reforms: making dramatic and painful changes under pressure from abroad, then easing up on those changes under pressure from the homefront.

The present situation is ideal for authors of alarmist theories. The media are longing for some thrilling development in Russia's politics. The "putsch complex" is showing, particularly considering that sensational news generate more interest than the forecasts of a quite spell.

Is Yeltsin facing a real threat or is this a false alarm? Here are some of the questions Russians are asking themselves:

Why does Yeltsin seem so nervous?

Boris Yeltsin was raised to the democratic throne on the crest of revolution. His program - "the good of the working people" - didn't differ much in its ultimate objectives from the program of the late Communist Party. True, he suggested different means of reaching those objectives, but how many Russians understood those means? For most Russians, privatization, liberalization and business were merely mysterious code words for "justice and the good life for all."

Russia's first post-communist president could not have any support other than the love and trust of the people, which gave him the strength to begin radical reforms.

But reforms can hurt as well as help, slapping that popular support. Yeltsin was thus doomed to difficult compromises, however alien they might be to his character. His top economic side, Yegor Gaidar, put together ambitious programs but Yeltsin often seemed to be thinking of ways to retreat. He hasn't kept men of fundamentally different school of thought in his entourage for nothing.

We are now approaching the point where a thin line separates Russia's leaders from popular hatred, rather than popular support. It is primarily this

threat, rather than all the political machinations, that makes Yeltsin nervous, unpredictable and difficult to understand.

Who could threaten Yeltsin?

So far, Yeltsin has struck a fine balance between the reformers and those allied with the old military-industrial complex in forming his team.

Knowing full well the laws of the old "nomenclatura" system, he has selected politicians from different factions who cannot unite forces against their boss. Indeed, the team members owe their rise to Yeltsin and are vitally interested in protecting him.

Nevertheless, various politicians have correctly noted the strengthening of the role of the government's National Security Council, which has been given vast powers and no longer confines its agenda to a narrow field. It discusses everything from developments in the Trans-Dniester region to the shortage of cash in the country. The council's functions are becoming reminiscent of the role of the Politburo,

Gaidar himself can participate only in the discussions of issues during these sessions of the "new Politburo." Who actually takes the decisions? A simple majority from among these men: Yeltsin, Vice-President Alexander Rutskoi; Yuri Skokov, the council's secretary, and Sergei Filatov, the first deputy speaker of the Parliament.

Rutskoi says he "laughs at the forecasts" of a quiet coup. But how sincere is he? He has also said, "Critical situations calling for radical steps are possible."

What will Yeltsin do?

The power of democratic institutions in Russia could be reduced, end an authoritarian regime created, led by "the father of the nation," "Superpresident" Yeltsin.

Yeltsin would use the structures of the National Security Council and the government to legitimize authoritarian rule. Nowadays, people would even vote for a Yeltsin dictatorship. Russians are tired of anarchy in all spheres of life. They are tired of the slow development and the few results of economic reform.

"Democracy" - the word that symbolized Yeltsin's triumph a year ago - is not popular at all today. For ordinary Russians it has become a synonym for instability. And their slogan now is, 'Back to Stability', 'Back to Normalcy.'

Yeltsin feels the new winds keenly. He is ready. The direct question - "Isn't it time to exercise power?" - is answered by his direct response: "I think it is. Now our actions are going to be more purposeful. It is time the executive acts a bit tougher."

I wouldn't want to get into a discussion about the "good" or "bad" of this turn. It doesn't matter. The final question is not, "What is desirable for Russia?" but rather, "What will happen in Russia?"

This reference to acting "a bit tougher in Yeltsin's manner of speaking may well mean only one turn: toward authoritarianism.

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