

# Who's in charge around here? (Soviet Union)

By Vladimir Kvint

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THE FIGHT FOR POWER between Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin is almost over. Yeltsin and his team will define the future of Russia. Gorbachev will end up in a largely ceremonial role.

Americans have been slow to understand this. They tend still to think of Boris Yeltsin, chairman of the Russian parliament, as simply the opposition to the Communist Party. No. Mikhail Gorbachev is president of the U.S.S.R., but Yeltsin has more real power in Russia.

In the long sweep of Russian history—from the 12th century, the time of Novgorod, the Free City, to today—Boris Yeltsin is the first leader, with the possible exception of Aleksandr Kerensky, ever elected by the people. By the people, not by some gang, not by birth or by the knife. Yeltsin started a real revolution, a breakthrough to the lost future, lost in October 1917 when Russia last had a chance for democracy and for real economic development.

Fourteen days after he had been elected chairman of the Russian parliament, he managed to unite the divided Russian parliament for the declaration of sovereignty. Today the U.S.S.R. parliament, headed by Gorbachev, is powerless against the fine-tuned Russian parliament.

Gorbachev, afraid to antagonize extremist groups like Pamyat, has failed to speak out against anti-Semitism. Yeltsin has already talked of creating a special commission to safeguard the rights of Russian Jews.

With such moves, 76% of the U.S.S.R.'s territory has gone out of Gorbachev's control. Russia becomes the biggest new country in the world. It has 92% of the oil and gas condensate resources of the U.S.S.R., 85% of the coal, 78% of the gas, 92% of the lumber, the majority of nonferrous metals. As for platinum and diamonds, Russia is the only producer in the Eastern European countries. Russia has powerful chemical, automotive and machine-building production, and the productivity of its labor is higher than that elsewhere in the U.S.S.R.

In one and a half to two years Russia will achieve complete independence—quicker than Lithuania—because, unlike Lithuania, Russia has an economic basis for freedom; it can stand on its own.

Yeltsin is already acting to implement that freedom. He has cut the number of ministries from 51 to 28; in 8 of these ministries the staff numbers only 20 people, and their direct task is not to interfere in the economy but to cut back on the powers of the old ministries.

Aiming for financial sovereignty, the Russian parliament has authorized all Russian banks to withdraw from the U.S.S.R. banking system, which would deprive the government of financial management levers. Yeltsin clearly intends, for the first time in U.S.S.R. history, to break the monopoly of the central government on foreign trade and currency transactions. The Bank for Foreign Economic Affairs of Russia was created. He has created a TV network for Russia independent of the U.S.S.R. network.

Russian oil fields pumped out 115 million tons of the oil that was exported by the U.S.S.R. in 1989; 88 billion cubic meters of gas, 88,000 tons of copper, 17 million tons of pulp, 400,000 cars and trucks, 17 million watches exported by the U.S.S.R. were produced in Russia. Export of part of the petroleum production generates hard currency, all of which will go to this new bank, to remain in Russia, rather than to the government of the U.S.S.R.

Why is Yeltsin so popular? In part because he defied a basic rule for political careers in the Soviet system. The rule says there is no comeback for a fallen politician. This terrible totalitarian machine first produced bosses, then utilized them as fuel for itself to further its horrendous movement. At best, it just threw people away, reduced them to ashes, letting them live and die in obscurity. At its worst, it killed them.

But Yeltsin didn't disappear into obscurity. He came back and became so popular that it is in the best interests of Gorbachev to protect him rather than try to edge him out. For if anything were to happen to Yeltsin, it could cause a civil war. Yeltsin, however, has already freed himself from

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“protection” by the KGB: His personal guards-up to ten people-do not work in the KGB and are responsible to the parliament of Russia.

In reemerging from obscurity, Yeltsin not only became immensely popular, he helped make obsolete the very notion of the U.S.S.R. as a whole. This kind of makes Gorbachev a king without a kingdom. Soon Yeltsin may become the chairman of a Council of Presidents of Independent Republics, where there will be no place for Gorbachev. Remaining president of the U.S.S.R., Gorbachev will have purely nominal and ceremonial functions, not unlike those of the Queen of England in the British Commonwealth.

Meanwhile, Gorbachev, although a historic and definitely positive figure, still tries to solder the old saucepan of socialism. His efforts are wasted, because this saucepan never did hold water. People in the U.S.S.R. have a saying: “Soviet paralysis is the most progressive in the world.”

Yeltsin's past shouldn't be idealized. He was the almighty party boss of the huge Sverdlovsk territory. I am quite sure that in 1985 Gorbachev was closer to understanding democracy than Yeltsin, but in 1986, when Yeltsin was appointed Moscow party boss, he started to leave Gorbachev behind.

Yeltsin worked from 8 in the morning until 12 at night and slept in a small room next to his office. He really tried to improve the quality of life for people. Suddenly Moscow started to look more human, there were more vegetables in the shops, the ruined transportation system was improving. He kicked out the entrenched Moscow apparatchiks. Corrupted and lazy, they tried to stop him. In 1987 he made a critical speech at the closed plenary meeting of the Party. Gorbachev had called for self-criticism within the party, but this was going too far. Within the Politburo, Yeltsin was abandoned by everybody.

Badly hit by heart disease and “burnt out,” Yeltsin was pushed out of the way, to the joy of bureaucrats. But Gorbachev did not destroy Yeltsin entirely, instead giving him an insignificant job. That was Gorbachev's way of getting rid of Yeltsin and at the same time persuading the West that people could dissent and still hold top jobs.

But at home it made Yeltsin a martyr. He was thrown from the top, he “suffered for truth,” he became more human and, at the same time, a symbol. Sakharov was a bigger martyr, a real martyr, but for the bulk of the nation he was too much of an intellectual, too much a “citizen of the world,” while Yeltsin is flesh of the flesh, blood of blood.

Thus whatever was said against him by Gorbachev immediately worked for Yeltsin. His modest “Moskvich” car, in which he used to drive to the meetings of parliament, contrasted sharply with the huge black party limousines, baptized by the people as “coffins.” At the 19th party conference, when Yeltsin asked for political rehabilitation, Yegor Ligachev assailed Yeltsin with all the rhetoric at his command: “Thou art not right, Boris.” After that the cooperatives manufactured millions of badges with the words: “Thou art not right, Yegor.” In 1989 92% of Moscovites elected Yeltsin to the U.S.S.R. parliament.

In 1990, before leaving for the summit, Gorbachev gathered the Russian parliament deputies, asking them not to vote for Yeltsin. That virtually guaranteed Yeltsin's election.

Although power has moved from Gorbachev to Yeltsin, the critical moves still lie in the future. The first move will be the conversion of state enterprises into rented, private, stockholding companies. This process will start widely at the end of 1990. The second will be abolition of a centralized distribution and supply system. Here the first critical point will be reached sometime between February and June 1991, the second not earlier than the winter of 1991-92. These are problems, but the problems of growth, not stagnation.

What is the near future? The economic privatization program is already laid out-far ahead of Gorbachev's timid moves to allow private property. When the Russian parliament meets again on Sept. 3, I'm sure foreign economic activity will be a top-priority question.

Some of the most far-reaching consequences of Yeltsin's accession to power will be in the area of foreign relations. This year the decisions will be made whether to cut supplies from Russia to such hot points as Cuba, Libya and Syria. Can Yeltsin and the Russian parliament overrule the

# Free the ruble!

## (Currency convertibility in the Soviet Union)

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U.S.S.R. government on foreign relations? Yes. And Russia will demand hard currency for its oil rather than almost giving it away to Cuba. Soldiers from Russia will no longer be sent to interfere in ethnic conflicts beyond Russia's borders.

If Saddam Hussein has any hopes of help from Russia, he is only fooling himself. On the contrary, Russia can help relieve any shortages Saddam Hussein tries to create. It can do so by stepping up its own oil production. All it needs is Western geophysical technology and equipment. For this it will make its own deals, bypassing Gorbachev's government.

The question of Russia's participation in the United Nations and the European Community will soon be on the agenda. Membership won't come overnight, but things are moving in that direction.

In all this, for the real initiatives, look to Boris Yeltsin and not to Mikhail Gorbachev. Yeltsin is the leader. A poll of public opinion has shown that 84% of the U.S.S.R. population supports Yeltsin, while only 12% supports Gorbachev.

And, for perhaps the first time in Russian history, what the population really wants really matters.