

Chernomyrdin Embodies a Better, Freer Era

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The national farewell to former Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin might lead to consequences unforeseen by the authorities — a re-examination of one of post-Soviet Russia's most important periods, what Kremlin propagandists consistently refer to as the "wild 1990s" and a time when Chernomyrdin played a critical role.

Chernomyrdin's death at age 72 last Wednesday evoked a tremendous outpouring from the public. Hundreds of politicians, journalists and political analysts voiced unusually warm and positive comments about his work and his role in modern Russian history. People remembered his unique combination of extraordinary power, kindness and humanity. They point to the key role he played in crucial moments of Russian and international history, his creation of Russia's first market-oriented business — what eventually became Gazprom — during the Soviet period, his leadership and promotion of reforms for more than five years, his success at saving the lives of more than 1,000 hostages in Budyonnovsk in 1995, his bringing the war in Yugoslavia to a halt and his ability to maintain positive relations with Ukraine while the Kremlin was in the throes of "Orange hysteria."

Chernomyrdin left an unforgettable imprint on the popular memory with his unusually rich, precise and graphic language, with his hundreds of top-rate aphorisms that combined humor with an ability to capture the essential. For example, he characterized the era of former President Boris Yeltsin by saying, “Those of us who survive will be the ones to laugh.” Regarding the era of then-President and now Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, Chernomyrdin quipped: “Everyone is arguing about who should be at the top and at the bottom. I think the bottom is the calmer place to be now.”

Thousands of people came to pay their last respects at Chernomyrdin’s coffin. Last week, I talked to numerous people in my native Altai republic, and they all spoke of Chernomyrdin as an unusually personal, straight-talking and good person. The media have dubbed him “the people’s prime minister.” It turns out that after a decade of Putin’s power vertical, monopoly on power, strong-arm tactics against political opponents and “waste the terrorists in the outhouse” rhetoric, a great many people see a humane and political alternative in Chernomyrdin.

The reasons are clear as to why Putin, President Dmitry Medvedev and other current leaders are paying the necessary tribute to the former prime minister. First, most of them worked under him and many are personally indebted to him. Second, they could not ignore the groundswell of popular support for Chernomyrdin. But the problem for them is that Chernomyrdin pursued an entirely different political agenda and adhered to a different value system than that dominating Russia today.

Yeltsin chose Chernomyrdin to replace Yegor Gaidar as prime minister during the fall 1992 crisis because he wanted to stabilize the economic and political situation as soon as possible — both of which Chernomyrdin accomplished brilliantly and quickly. Yeltsin also saw in Chernomyrdin a man who was wholly committed to continuing his policy of democratic and market reforms. In fact, Gaidar himself recommended Chernomyrdin as his successor. Chernomyrdin proceeded to accomplish what many at the time considered impossible. Drawing on his vast economic experience and personal authority, he managed to stabilize and pacify the country. And he simultaneously continued the system of economic reforms. The main reformers continued working after he took office, people such as Gaidar, former Economic Minister Yevgeny Yasin, privatization architect Anatoly Chubais, former Finance Minister Boris Fyodorov and many others.

From the perspective of the present, it is evident just how different Russia was in the 1990s compared with today and what a huge role Chernomyrdin played personally in making that difference.

During that decade, the government placed its bets on the development of the private sector, and it was then that today’s most successful and well-known companies — from VimpelCom to Wimm-Bill-Dann — first appeared. The same is true of businesses in the regions. The 1990s were the most productive period for business — to which any businessperson over 40 will attest. The state sector of the economy fell to about 30 percent of gross domestic product, while today, after a decade of an expanding state bureaucracy, it accounts for more than 50 percent of GDP.

The 1990s witnessed little of what came to define the current era: mass raiding (the illegal

seizure of businesses) carried out by organized criminal groups comprised of government officials, siloviki, prosecutors, judges and business competitors. As strange as it might seem to many people, property rights were significantly safer in the “wild 1990s” than they are today.

Public and government institutions that are effectively dead today — such as the parliament, the court system, multiparty politics, free elections, and federalism and municipal government — were still functioning, however imperfectly, in the 1990s. Chernomyrdin understood all of that quite well and dedicated a great deal of time to working with the State Duma and Federation Council and constantly meeting with governors and mayors (who were then directly elected by the people). Because democratic institutions began functioning and gathered strength during that period, a foundation was laid for the establishment of a modern market economy and long-term social stability.

Chernomyrdin was a product of a different culture and values than those animating today’s leaders. His was a culture of dialogue and compromise. He could never have conceived that his party, Our Home Is Russia, would rely on coercion and electoral fraud or would seek a monopoly on power as Putin’s United Russia does now. He would never have advocated canceling the direct election of governors and mayors, or of limiting the people’s political and social freedoms. He supported a free press, and many still remember how he once hugged the puppet caricaturing him on “Kukly,” the NTV satire program.

Chernomyrdin was a major and constructive figure in Russia’s modern history. He believed in Russia’s future as a free country and that its main wealth lay in its people, their lives and their fates. Even in death, he has found a way to remind us of the enduring values of freedom and human dignity that we so spinelessly and thoughtlessly reject today.

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