

News Analysis: Politics Still Dominated by One Man 20 Years On

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Twenty years after a coup in which hard-line Communists made a last, desperate attempt to save the Soviet Union, Russia is traveling a long and bumpy road to democracy.

Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev was seized at his dacha on Aug. 19, 1991, but the putsch collapsed two days later after public resistance led by Russian President Boris Yeltsin and merely hastened the Soviet Union's demise months later.

The end of the Soviet empire inspired dreams of a better life that have been at least partly fulfilled for many, though not all, Russians. But politics is still dominated by one man, Vladimir Putin, under a system that few regard as a panacea.

Many of those who stood for three days outside the White House parliament building, risking their lives to defend it against army tanks, had hoped for more.

"It felt like a new beginning. We felt we could do anything," said Milena Orlova, then a student and now an art critic, who was one of thousands who defended the White House

in Moscow in August 1991.

"Some of our dreams have been realized. We've managed to travel abroad, some of my friends have done very well and artists have tasted freedom. But democracy has gone backwards. I thought we would have got further by now."

Polls suggest that opinion is divided about the coup and the Soviet collapse. Some Russians, mainly older people, still yearn for the predictability and stability of Communist times, and there is little official fanfare to mark the anniversary.

Few remember the names of the coup leaders, and many are hazy about the significance of the putsch. But historians say its failure showed that Russians had finally lost the fear of the party and its power structures on which the Soviet system was based.

"It was the last nail in the coffin of the Soviet Union," said Anton Fedyashin, a historian specializing in Russia at American University in Washington.

"Looking back, it was one of the most astounding examples of historical events where the result achieved was exactly the opposite of what the perpetrators set out to do. It was a historical catalyst for the end of the Soviet Union."

Many historians and political analysts divide the 20 years that have followed into two periods — Yeltsin's chaotic rule until the end of 1999 and the more stable Putin era since then.

They disagree about how successful the transition has been but broadly agree that ordinary Russians still feel they have little impact on how the country is run.

"Russia still has what is just an imitation of democracy," said Olga Kryshstanovskaya, head of the Center for Elites at the Institute of Sociology. "People feel it doesn't matter how they vote, that if Putin goes, someone else will come along who's just like him. They're resigned to it because they think the Russian state has been like this for centuries and it won't change."

Under Yeltsin's "shock therapy" reforms, Soviet assets and raw materials were sold off cheaply to a few businessmen, later known as the oligarchs, who amassed fortunes and political influence while ordinary people struggled to make ends meet.

The media won unprecedented freedom and new political parties grew up, but corruption was rife and the rule of law collapsed. Yeltsin suffered from heart problems and rumors that he drank too much, and his liberal credentials were undermined by the war he launched in Chechnya.

"It's difficult to call the 1990s a successful transition, especially compared with what was happening in Central Europe, where a lot of countries adapted better to democracy," Fedyashin said.

Yeltsin resigned on the last day of 1999 and ceded the presidency to his preferred successor, Putin, who was then elected in March 2000. The former KGB spy is still Russia's dominant politician despite stepping aside in favor of his protege, Dmitry Medvedev, to become prime minister in 2008 because the Constitution forbade a third successive term.

Backers say Putin has overseen economic and political stability, strengthened a state that was in a mess and presided over an increase in private incomes. They underline that the economy managed to withstand the 2008 financial crisis.

But critics say Putin was lucky because of an economic boom in the first years of his presidency that was more to do with a surge in global energy prices than his own policies. They say he has resisted economic reforms and built an authoritarian political system that has little semblance of democracy.

"We can blame both Yeltsin and Putin for not using their opportunities better," said Nikolai Petrov, a political analyst at the Carnegie Moscow Center. "Yeltsin had huge support to carry things out, and Putin benefited from sudden prosperity in Russia that he could have made better use of. Great expectations have for many become great disappointment."

Political analysts say Russia's road to democracy was always going to be long and tough and that its achievements should not be underestimated. They also say it should not necessarily be judged by comparisons with Western-style democracy.

"While Yeltsin's Russia was inclined to imitate Western models, the Russia of Putin and Medvedev is trying to come up with a model of its own," analysts Ivan Krastev, Mark Leonard and Andrew Wilson wrote in an essay.

Just what that model is, or will be, is not yet clear. The Kremlin has talked about "sovereign democracy," which allows for the domination of a single party, and the current buzzword is "modernization."

A former Yeltsin aide, Gennady Burbulis, said Russia risks the same fate as the Soviet Union if reforms are not carried out soon and more investment is not made into Russia's creaking infrastructure.

"The threat is huge if this regime is unable to transform itself. The threat eventually is the disintegration of Russia," Burbulis said.

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