

Critically evaluate the weaknesses and strengths of Yeltsin as a reforming political leader

With the collapse of communism in Russia at the turn of the 1990's, so fell all of the institutions that were vital to the survival of the Soviet state. As Sakwa (2008) observed; the disintegration of the USSR meant that Russia's political and economic institutions had to be completely rebuilt, a new constitution created, and the basic framework for a democratic polity established. It is important to recognise this era of disarray and turmoil that Yeltsin inherited when evaluating the weaknesses and strengths of his reforms.

By analysing the political, economic and social aspects of Yeltsin's reforms this essay will argue that despite some of the clear mistakes and failures of Yeltsin as a reforming political leader, he was able to successfully lay the foundations for a permanent break from the former Soviet model, consequently creating the conditions for a move to a more democratic Russia based on the principles of a market economy.

The first area of Yeltsin's reforms I will consider is his strengths and weaknesses as a political reformer. As Chubarov (2001) states, his first significant political act lay in his decision to hold a presidential election for the Russian Federation in 1991. Although his reasoning for holding this election lay predominantly in his long-standing rivalry with the former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, the election signalled the first time in history that the Russian people had been given the opportunity to freely elect their president. This was a profound moment in Russian history and clearly illustrates Yeltsin's determination to move to a more democratic system with free elections.

After an era of continued conflict and hostility with the Supreme Soviet, Yeltsin took the decision to dissolve the Russian parliament in 1993 and began to rule by decree until new parliamentary elections could be held later in the year. Sakwa (2008) discusses how the decree issued by Yeltsin in September 1993 dissolved the Congress of People's Deputies and the Supreme Soviet, transferring the powers they once held into a new Federal Assembly. The upper chamber of the assembly would be formed using the existing Federation Council and the lower chamber, known as the Duma, would be elected in the parliamentary elections of December 1993.

Even though the reformists failed to gain a majority in the December elections, they were now presented with an opportunity to implement Russia's first ever constitution following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Sakwa (2008) details some of the basic principles that the 1993 constitution entails: it forbids censorship, guarantees freedom of the press, guarantees the right to private property and guarantees the freedom of speech and religion. Moreover, the constitution upholds the basic principles of a democratic state; recognising the need for the separation of powers, defining the duties of the various levels of government and acknowledging the independence of law.

Here we can see the strengths of Yeltsin as a reforming political leader. The conditions of the constitution shown above emphasise his desire to modernize the Russian state and to achieve his goal of ensuring the former Soviet model could never return.

However, Sakwa (2008) also goes on to highlight the potential abuses of power that the constitution provided, issuing the president with certain powers to act as 'guarantor of the constitution'.

Smith (1999) refers to claims that Yeltsin was creating an 'imperial presidency' as the Russian presidency became the most powerful decision-making institution. Following the constitution, the president was given powers to veto acts of parliament, enact decrees, or under certain circumstances even disband the Duma altogether. An example of this abuse came in the aftermath of the parliamentary elections of 1995 which returned the communists as the leading faction in the Duma. Rather than being forced to work with the newly elected parliament, Yeltsin was simply able to enact a number of decrees which bypassed the Duma completely. From January to July 1996, Yeltsin issued on average eighty four decrees a month, four times the monthly average he had issued for the previous two years. This had the effect of taking the task of policy making away from government and placing it in the hands of the president's administration in the Kremlin; a group who had very little public accountability.

This highlights some of the weaknesses of Yeltsin as a political reformer, maintaining the authoritarian nature of the former Soviet model and demonstrating very little reformist initiative.

The prominence of the presidency meant that good relations with Yeltsin were vital, and notions of corruption began to creep into Russian politics as politicians and businessmen fought for Yeltsin's favour. Sakwa (2008) describes the 1996 presidential election as an example of how this corruption developed in Russia. The law stated that no more than \$3.2 million could be spent to fund one's election campaign, yet Yeltsin's team – supported strongly by the oligarch Boris Berezovsky – reportedly spent upwards of \$500 million, far exceeding the legal limit. While Sakwa does go on to claim the campaign most likely had very little impact on the outcome due to the fears of what a communist victory would mean, it does nevertheless highlight some of the limitations of Yeltsin as a reforming political leader. Smith (1999) takes this claim further, arguing that it was only with the decline in Yeltsin's health from 1996 that other democratic institutions were able to assert themselves in the new Russian state.

Despite this, Sakwa (2008) recognises the progression that Yeltsin made during his reforms and how he created the basic principles for a reconstruction of the Russian system:

"Russia is moving from meta-corruption, a system which is corrupt in its very essence, to venal corruption; from a corrupt system to a system with corruption" (Sakwa, 2008: 87)

This reinforces the idea that despite his clear limitations, Yeltsin's strengths as a reforming political leader were in his ability to lay the foundations for the democratization of Russia.

Another area of the political spectrum that Yeltsin sought to reform was the electoral system. This also came about in 1993 with the introduction of a mixed system based on both the common first past the post system and a weighted system of proportional representation. Sakwa (2008) explains how half of the 450 seats available in the Duma were appointed using a simple method of electing single-member districts via the first past the post system. The other half were elected from party lists using a weighted

system of proportional representation. To prevent an overcrowding of small parties, each party required at least 100,000 nominations across at least seven regions, with no more than 15,000 signatures drawn from a single region. To then enter parliament, parties were required to win at least five per cent of the national vote. Using this system, Yeltsin was able to stimulate the growth of a multi-party system in Russia without the number of active parties becoming too numerous.

Chubarov (2007) refers to the success of this system, stating how from 1989 to 2000, the Russian people went to the polls ten times to take part in contested, nationwide elections. Smith (1999) also illustrates the cooperation the Duma and Yeltsin enjoyed during certain periods of his presidency. He points out that from 1994 to 1995, they worked together to sign more than 150 major pieces of legislation ranging from codes of law to the on-going struggle against organized crime.

Here we can see another strength of Yeltsin as a reforming political leader in his creation of a multi-party system in Russia which is freely elected. It is a sharp contrast to the Soviet system it succeeded which was based on one-party rule with barely any public accountability.

Yeltsin also made great strides when tackling changes to Russian foreign policy. The Soviet regime was renowned for its hostility with the USA and the West, as well as its vast military capabilities. However, Smith (1999) shows how Yeltsin changed this direction of foreign policy entirely; seeking greater cooperation with the West and decreasing Russia's military personnel by more than half. Sakwa (2001) refers to Russia's admission into the Council of Europe in 1996 and the signing of the European Convention on Human Rights in 1998 as further examples of Yeltsin's willingness to improve relations with the rest of Europe. Again we can see Yeltsin's reforming qualities as he moved away from the Soviet ideology of hostility towards the West to that of greater cooperation.

One of the greatest political reforms Yeltsin made was in his decision to resign as president on 31 December 1999, six months before his term was scheduled to end. As Chubarov (2007) elaborates, Yeltsin was the only Russian leader of the twentieth century who voluntarily stepped down from office, with half of its previous leaders only losing their post through death. Tikhomirov (2001) emphasises Yeltsin's willingness to see Putin as his successor, but recognising that the decision ultimately lay with the Russian electorate. Both of these events were unprecedented in Russia, and Yeltsin was instrumental in breaking the mould of former Soviet leaders who would remain in power or choose their successor regardless of the wishes of the Russian people.

However, many historians still had concerns over whether Russia really was a transformed society. Pogany (1996) in his evaluation of post-communist states regarded Russia as an 'authoritarian and/or populist society', lacking the qualities to be considered a genuine political democracy. He stated that there was still a risk of a communist return in Russia due to the devastating social and economic costs of Yeltsin's reforms. Yet as we know with hindsight, this threat of a communist return did not come to fruition and many of the political reforms that Yeltsin implemented remain in Russia today.

Chubarov (2001) helps to summarize the effects Yeltsin's reforms had on the transformation of Russian society. He makes reference to the fact that Yeltsin's political reforms ensured the breakdown of the Neo-Stalinist system of government, encouraged

the development of democratic institutions and promoted the freedom of political and ideological pluralism. From these developments we can see that despite his limitations, Yeltsin's strengths as a political reformer outweigh his weaknesses.

The second area of Yeltsin's reforms I will examine is his strengths and weaknesses as an economic reformer. Like many other reformists, Yeltsin believed that the best solution to economic reform was to bring about a swift and radical reconstruction of the Russian economy. Chubarov (2001) illustrates some of the economic proposals that Yeltsin outlined in October 1991: he stressed the need for economic stabilization; the introduction of price liberalization; increased privatization; the introduction of a mixed economy; and a reorganisation of the financial system with an overhaul of the tax and banking sectors.

To move these plans forward, Russia began the process of 'shock therapy' under the newly appointed Prime Minister Yegor Gaidar. Chubarov (2001) states the reforms were launched in January 1992 with the effects being felt almost immediately. The introduction of price liberalization had a dramatic effect with price rises far exceeding government predictions, plunging many Russians into poverty overnight. Yeltsin's promise that the economy would see improvements by the end of 1992 was misguided and even by 1994 unemployment continued to rise to over ten million. Inflation wiped out many people's lifelong savings and resentment towards Gaidar and the economic reforms grew.

Chubarov (2001) points out that it was not only individuals who suffered greatly from the economic downturn but industry as well. The rise in inflation and soaring costs in energy prices left many industries on the verge of collapse.

The results of shock therapy indicate some of the weaknesses of Yeltsin as an economic reformer. Regardless of whether the reforms laid the foundations for a market economy or not, the human impact that they had on the Russian people was catastrophic. Inevitably there was a drastic decline in living standards throughout Russia and the consequences of the reforms were felt for years to come.

The backlash from the Russian people and opposition in the Supreme Soviet led to an easing of the reforms. Chubarov (2001) emphasises the level of state involvement in the economy which was still apparent during the mid-1990s as an example of this. Railways and entire branches of industry were still at least partially owned by the state and it still controlled the exportation of raw materials.

The restricted levels of privatization led to a growth of prominent businessmen in Russia, men who recognised the importance of building close relations with politicians at all levels to ensure their needs were considered when state decisions were made on the economy. Chubarov (2001) details the emergence of oligarchs in this period in Russia such as Mikhail Khodorkovsky, Vladimir Gusinsky and the previously mentioned Boris Berezovsky. Oligarchs such as these were able to build strong relations with Kremlin officials, often showering them with gifts in return for political and economic influence. As a result of this, many small to medium sized businesses were excluded from the decision-making process and the desires of the privileged few began to overshadow the needs of the many.

Service (1998) details the developments of this privatization led by Anatoli Chubais, the chairman of the State Committee for the Management of State Property. Chubais began

by introducing a 'vouchers' system in June 1992 which citizens could use to invest in newly privatized companies to the sum of ten thousand roubles per citizen. Those who were employed by a particular company could additionally buy up to twenty five per cent of the shares placed on the market, and further privileges could be granted should they wish to become majority shareholders.

There was strong resistance to this policy from the former administrative elite of the Soviet era; they remained in charge of these companies which were now at risk of becoming privatized. Prominent politicians such as Viktor Chernomyrdin – chairman of state-owned Gazprom – were particularly opposed to the changes and called for the continuation of state subsidies to prevent the complete collapse of these companies. Viktor Geraschenko – the head of the Central Bank of Russia – perpetuated this reversing of the reforms by increasing state subsidies to these companies and continuing to print paper roubles; all against the wishes of Gaidar. This led to another acceleration of inflation in Russia, which reached 245 per cent by January 1993.

Here we can see the weaknesses of Yeltsin's reforms as their devastating impact presented an opportunity for anti-reformists to reverse the progression towards a market economy and in turn maintain high levels of state involvement in industry.

Yet Service (1998) suggests that by the end of 1993, Yeltsin was presented with an opportunity to re-accelerate his market reforms. This was due to Yeltsin's success in the constitutional crisis of 1993 where a resistance failed to overthrow Yeltsin as president, crushing his opposition and giving him greater freedom to implement his policies. By the end of 1994 two fifths of the working population were employed by private enterprises. Some command economy principles such as state subsidies still remained but Yeltsin had now set in motion a move to a market economy in Russia.

Chubarov (2007) indicates the banking crisis of August 1998 as another opportunity for Yeltsin to accelerate his reforms. The crisis altered Russia's economic practices and forced the government to look for new ways to improve state regulation, improve domestic output and to undergo greater budgetary prudence.

These examples emphasise Yeltsin's strengths as an economic reformer as he radically transformed the Russian economy to a more capitalist model based on market economy principles. Similar to his political strengths as a reforming political leader, we see that despite Yeltsin's economic failures, his strengths lie in his ability to create the conditions for which a market economy could flourish in Russia.

The final area of Yeltsin's reforms I will consider is in his strengths and weaknesses as a social reformer. As Lane (1992) suggests, the origins of Yeltsin's social reforms lay in the developments made under Gorbachev's perestroika. Lane argues that one of the key elements of perestroika was the growth of professionalism in Russia with the decentralization of decision making, resulting in policy choices being placed in the hands of experts rather than politicians. An example of this professionalization was with lawyers, who increasingly received greater autonomy from the state from 1989 onwards.

Yeltsin developed this independence further with his reference to the judicial system in the 1993 constitution. Smith (1999), states that the constitution led to a radical overhaul of the judicial system. It paved the way for the creation of Commercial courts which were tasked with tax and bankruptcy disputes; Supreme courts which heard appeal

cases; and Constitutional courts which reviewed constitutional questions; as well as many others, all with greater independence from the state.

The reconstruction of the judicial system did have a detrimental effect in some aspects, leading to an increase in organized crime with property crime increasing by seventy five per cent from 1991 to 1992. Nevertheless this level of crime began to decline by the late 1990s and the modernization of the judicial system was clear to see. As Judge Armetistov, a justice of the constitutional court observed:

"The courts and law in Russia were not tools for protecting people but for suppressing them. But in the last years, the situation has changed. More and more people now come to the court to protect themselves." (Smith, 1999: 12)

This quote demonstrates the strengths of Yeltsin's judicial reforms. Judges themselves began to recognise that the system no longer possessed the corrupt nature that it did in the Soviet era and confidence grew in the courts as a result.

Another area Yeltsin looked to reform was the media. Despite the good intentions of glasnost and the 1993 constitution however, Lane (1992) maintained that the media within Russia remained restricted. He accounted for this restriction in the actions of politicians and oligarchs who consistently undermined the independence of the press in an attempt to either censor or control media distribution for their own personal interests. Service (1998) highlights Yeltsin's actions before the December 1993 elections as an example of this. Before the election, Yeltsin proclaimed that any political broadcast that criticised the draft constitution was forbidden. Jones (2002), in his study of the long-running Russian daily newspaper *Izvestia*, argued that while it formally had control over its own journalistic path, the paper was constantly pressured by the Duma and influential oligarchs. Its on-going struggle led to the dismissal of its editor and much of its staff in 1997. Berezovsky also ensured he had close ties with the paper, maintaining his media influence along with his ownership of ORT – the largest TV network in Russia.

This implies that Yeltsin's weaknesses in his social reform lay in his inability to preserve the independence of the press. By endorsing censorship himself and allowing oligarchs such as Berezovsky to amass large media empires, he did very little to reform its corrupt nature.

From these examples it could be argued that Yeltsin's social reforms were not as successful as his work in the political and economic fields. However, I would suggest that the success that he enjoyed in those sectors is gradually bringing about greater social reforms even after his resignation. Chubarov (2007) points out the changing demographic in Russia as an example of this. He highlights the rise of the new post-Soviet generation to leading positions throughout the country, and the evidence that this generation has largely shown support for Yeltsin's reforms at the ballot box. This influence is perpetuated by the decline in the Communist Party as its electorate grows older and moves away from the political arena. Yeltsin's creation of a multi-party system and a market economy are what has provided this new generation with the opportunity to rise through the ranks and ultimately bring about a profound social change in Russia.

Thus, despite the immediate failures and repercussions of Yeltsin's reforms, his strengths as a reforming political leader lay in his ability to establish the framework for democratic institutions and a free market economy.

"Yeltsin's period marked a revolution in Russia. An entire order, based on the political, economic, and ideological system of Soviet Marxism-Leninism, was overthrown. They have been replaced by a new set of economic and political institutions... They are still fragile and uncertain, but they are a world apart from the past." (Chubarov, 2007)

This quote demonstrates the precedent Yeltsin was able to set in Russia, ensuring that any future return to the old Soviet model would be virtually impossible.

It is perhaps at present too soon to fully assess the implications of Yeltsin's reforms as the Russian state post-Soviet Union continues to develop its own path and identity. However, what can be concluded is that Yeltsin, at least to an extent, created an environment in which the modernization of Russia was possible.

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