



Was Liberty Really Bad for Russia?

By Leon Aron

Part I of this Russian Outlook dealt with what might be called the errors of commission, or false attribution, in the “chaos-of-the-1990s” stereotype, which became a major theme of the Putin Kremlin’s propaganda. The economic crisis of that era, mostly inherited from the decaying Soviet economy, was laid at the revolutionary regime’s door. Yet the “chaos” legend also contains errors of omission, for, on closer inspection, there was a great deal in the 1990s besides the alleged “chaos.”

“When it shall be found that much is omitted, let it not be forgotten that much likewise is performed.”

—Samuel Johnson¹

A leading Eastern European student of post-communism called the reforms that followed the demise of the Soviet bloc “one more modernizing leap forward in Eastern Europe’s timeless bid to catch up with Western Europe.”² In the 1990s, Russia embarked on the same long, slow, and difficult journey. After three-quarters of a century of an economy marked by fiat, relentless shortages, ubiquitous lines, forced labor, and barter, Russia began to acquire major elements of modernity: sale of quality goods and services instead of distribution based on position in the political hierarchy; abundant and fresh food available without the indignity of ration coupons, lines, and an informal network of connection and exchange; consumer choice; a national currency convertible *inside* the country, as anyone with rubles could buy what used to be sold for special coupons (“certificates”) only in the special stores for the elite or those lucky enough to be able to work abroad; the ability to travel abroad, of which first hundreds of thousands and soon millions began to avail themselves; newspapers, books,

art, and foreign broadcasts free from government censorship and jamming; religious freedom; the end of state anti-Semitism and discrimination against Jews in employment and education; and the freedom to start a private business, to sell, and to buy.

Where not even the most basic institutions of modern economy had existed, there sprang a stock exchange, a currency exchange (Moscow Interbank Currency Exchange, or MICEX, in 1992), the Federal Commission for the Securities Market (FCSM, in 1996), commercial banks, a Treasury to deposit taxes and set interest rates (in 1997), and arbitration courts. Computers, so rare and expensive that in the late 1980s apartments were burglarized and people murdered to get them, were suddenly everywhere.

The Beginning of Recovery. As President Vladimir Putin said a few days after Boris Yeltsin’s death this past April, when the “chaos” line was temporarily muted, “It was precisely during this complicated period [of the 1990s] that the foundation of the future change was laid.”³ By 1997, the economic free-fall ended: the country’s industrial production expanded by almost 2 percent and, for

Leon Aron (laron@aei.org) is a resident scholar and the director of Russian studies at AEI. He is the author of *Russia’s Revolution: Essays 1989–2006* (AEI Press, April 2007).

the first time since 1990, there was minuscule growth in GDP. Thirty-one Russian families in a hundred now owned a car—an increase of more than 70 percent over the 1990 level, when eighteen families did.⁴ By spring 2000, car ownership expanded to 40 percent of the families, thus more than doubling in size during the 1990s.⁵

In 1995, Russian tourists spent an estimated \$11.6 billion on travel abroad.⁶ A year later, according to the World Tourism Organization, of twenty-five top country-by-country spenders, the Russians were tenth, ahead of the South Koreans, Brazilians, Spaniards, and Chinese.⁷ In 2000, there were 16,000 travel agencies in the country.⁸

By 1998, after several presidential decrees, three-quarters of the Russian population legally and permanently owned a piece of land, no matter how small, including 22 million urban families who reveled in their beloved suburban garden and dacha plots. In the countryside, 90 percent of the former collective farms became, at least nominally, joint-stock companies or cooperatives, which owned some 345 million acres of formerly state-owned agricultural land, or 63 percent of the total.

Despite the Duma's staunch resistance to the government's attempts to pass legislation affirming the right to own, buy, and sell land, the elimination of state-set prices on agricultural products and private trade resulted in a revival of food production that the Soviet Union had wasted untold trillions of rubles to achieve. Instead of buying millions of tons of grain and cereals, Russia exported 10 million tons in 1997—its first grain sales in decades.⁹

The Payoffs of Privatization. Following the largest privatization effort in history, the private sector accounted for 70 percent of Russian GDP by 1997,¹⁰ not counting the very sizable (and by definition private) “gray,” or underground, sector. Close to a million privately owned small and medium businesses were registered (the total number was much higher) to feed and clothe Russians, to repair their apartments and their cars, and to provide thousands of goods and services that were impossible or nearly impossible to receive in the Soviet days. Russia began a long trek toward becoming a normal, low-income European country.

Many hopelessly decrepit plants and factories, unable to meet demand for quality products, were either gradually closed or replaced with private companies that would

soon receive international seals of approval, such as the juice and yogurt maker Wimm-Bill-Dann, which, in 2002, became the first Russian consumer goods producer to be listed on the New York Stock Exchange. Privately owned cell phone companies began to lay the foundation for a spectacular expansion, which, fueled by price wars and fierce competition for customers, would soon leapfrog the dilapidated land line network and result in near-saturation levels of cellular ownership, first in large cities and gradually throughout the country.

As a result of restructuring, consolidating, and modernizing in the second half of the 1990s—and helped

Instead of buying millions of tons of grain and cereals, Russia exported 10 million tons in 1997—its first grain sales in decades.

by the cheaper ruble in the wake of the 1998 financial crisis and the rising world commodity prices—the new private owners of Russia's top oil, steel, nickel, and aluminum companies engineered spectacular growth in production and capitalization of their properties. At first met with sullen and dispirited workers, who in some cases had not been paid for months, many new owners proceeded to turn their acquisitions into world-class corporations awash in cash.

The young “oligarchs,” many of whom acquired stakes in the crooked “loans-for-shares” auctions, invested heavily in their enterprises—instead of stripping the assets and going abroad to live off their Swiss bank accounts, as many a Western “expert” had confidently predicted. (“Plunder” was another cliché that, notwithstanding all evidence to the contrary, is still used by Western journalists.¹¹) Between 1999 and 2004, Russia's private oil companies reinvested 88 percent of their profits, or \$36.4 billion, in exploration, drilling, and modern technology.¹² As a result, instead of becoming a net oil importer—a possibility seriously entertained by Russian and foreign specialists as well as the Russian government¹³—after the private oil sector increased production by 47 percent, Russia became the world's second largest (and in some months, leading) exporter of oil.¹⁴ During the same time, the output of state-owned companies grew by 14 percent, with the largest, Rosneft, essentially stagnant.¹⁵ Following de facto nationalization of the top two private oil companies, Yukos and Sibneft, production growth decreased from an average of 9 percent a year to 2 percent in 2005–06.

Education and Health Care. Contrary to the “chaos” cliché, there was no breakdown in higher education and

public health care in the 1990s. The number of colleges and universities grew by 75 percent between 1992 and 2000, and the number of students by 50 percent, primarily because private institutions of higher education multiplied rapidly to meet the demand.¹⁶ There was also a nine-fold increase in private schools (Gymnasiums) from 177 in 1991 to 1,606 in 1997.¹⁷

As a share of GDP, Russia's spending on health care almost doubled from 2.9 percent in 1990–91 to 5.7 percent in 1995. (In the prerevolutionary Soviet Union, the ratio was 2.2 percent in 1985.)¹⁸ Indeed, in 1997 Russia spent proportionately more (7.3 percent) than in 2005 (6.4 percent).¹⁹ Most likely, a 7 percent decrease in infant mortality from 1989–98 reflects the increase in expenditures.²⁰

Religion, Charity, and Books. Private economic activity and a civil society free from state control forged a religious revival with thousands of new (or restored) churches, mosques, and synagogues opening their doors to hundreds of thousands of new worshipers. Religious instruction and the publication of religious texts, such as the Bible and the Koran, flourished. Private charities skyrocketed from zero in 1988 to 60,000 in 1998, with an estimated 2.5 million Russians actively helping 30 million of their fellow citizens.²¹

The emergence of the post-Soviet middle class rejuvenated book publishing. In the last years of the Soviet Union, an average of 1,500 new titles appeared in Russia every year; by the end of the 1990s, the number grew to 12,000, largely because of privately owned publishing houses.²² By 2001, the national book fair in Moscow featured 2,000 publishers, 80 percent of them non-state. *Samizdat* (privately circulated forbidden texts) and the black market in books disappeared as bookstores—only a few years before drab and pitiful in their few dozen offerings—dazzled with fare for every age, taste, and political persuasion.²³

Public Support for the Reform Effort. In yet another exception to the “chaos” canon, economic reforms were not forced on a cowed population, but instead were supported by majorities or pluralities at every key juncture. With public opinion becoming a most potent political factor in the 1990s, the government had no means of

overcoming consistent opposition to its policies even if it tried, since its coercive powers had been greatly weakened, in many cases deliberately, by the regime's own policies. On the contrary, with a new political ethos in the Kremlin, public opinion was revered and feared as much as, and perhaps even more than, in

Samizdat and the black market in books disappeared as bookstores—only a few years before drab and pitiful in their few dozen offerings—dazzled with fare for every age, taste, and political persuasion.

mature democracies. Ministers, top advisers, and aides to the president were fired after real or alleged scandals were publicized by independent media. When the war in Chechnya became unpopular, it was ended by Yeltsin after a year and a half by granting de facto independence to the breakaway province.

In 1991, out of a field of six candidates, the Russians elected Yeltsin president in the first democratic contest for the Kremlin. After voters chose Yeltsin's platform of radical transformation, they had at least two opportunities to reverse the course. In the April 1993 referendum, with *monthly* inflation at 19 percent, 59 percent (40.5 million people) of those who came to the polls voted yes to the question of whether they “trusted” Yeltsin, and 53 percent (36.6 million) answered positively when asked, “Do you approve of the socio-economic policies carried out by the President of the Russian Federation and the government of the Russian Federation since 1992?” Three years later, after a very tough race that nearly cost the very sick Yeltsin his life, 40 million Russians voted to reelect Yeltsin, giving him a 54 to 40 percent victory over his Communist opponent.

In monthly surveys conducted between 1989 and 2004, Russia's most-respected independent polling firm—led by the dean of Soviet and Russian pollsters, Professor Yuri Levada—asked the respondents whether the reforms ought to be “stopped” or “continued.” In a perennial memorial to Russian people's wisdom and courage, apart from a few months here and there, the “continue” line on the chart is always above the “stop” line. Support for reform was highest during the hardest times, between March 1992 and March 1994.²⁴

Demilitarization

Building on Mikhail Gorbachev's and Eduard Shevardnadze's policies of “new thinking in foreign policy” that aimed at bringing the country into the “civilized world,”

post-Soviet Russia divested itself of the empire and undertook a peacetime demilitarization of economy and society unprecedented for a country not defeated in a war and not occupied by the victors. One of the first acts of the Yeltsin-Gaidar government in January 1992 was an 80 percent cut in defense spending from at least a quarter of GDP to under 5 percent. By 1999, the outlays were further reduced to 2.3 percent of GDP—less than one-tenth of the Soviet level. Between January 1992 and January 1998, the armed forces were slashed by more than half, from 2.7 million troops to 1.2 million. After his reelection in 1996, Yeltsin ordered the retirement of 500 generals from the immensely bloated field officers corps. Although lacking the money to implement the reform, the government proclaimed its major goal of transitioning to a 600,000-strong professional volunteer military by the year 2000.

The foundation of the Soviet Union’s military might—the strategic nuclear arsenal—was disposed of just as decisively. Russia went from 10,000 warheads in 1991 down to 6,000 in 1994 in fulfillment of its obligations under the 1991 Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START I) with the United States. Although the 1993 START II agreement was never ratified by the left-nationalist Duma majority, Russia cut its arsenal further to 4,500 warheads.

Contrary to yet another stereotype, these reductions were not the result of economic weakness. Countries do not make decisions of such magnitude based on accountants’ recommendations of what they can and cannot “afford.” If per-capita GDP determined defense expenditures, the Soviet Union and China today, Ho Chi Minh’s North Vietnam, Fidel Castro’s Cuba, Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, and Mengistu Haile Mariam’s Ethiopia would be spending a far smaller share of national wealth on the military than, say, Holland or Denmark, let alone post-World War II France, Germany, or the United States. Instead, what countries pay to maintain their armies reflects the public’s (or dictators’) priorities, which in turn are shaped by their pride, fears, perceived dangers, and, perhaps most of all, the criteria of a nation’s progress and greatness.

It is these criteria that underwent a fundamental change in the 1990s. As President Yeltsin declared in a televised address to the nation in June 1997:

Post-Soviet Russia
divested itself of the
empire and undertook
a peacetime
demilitarization of
economy and society
not preceded for a
country not defeated
in a war and not
occupied by
the victors.

A great power is not mountains of weapons and subjects with no rights. A great power is a self-reliant and talented people with initiative. . . . In the foundation of our approach to the building of the Russian state . . . is the understanding that the country begins with each of us. And the sole measure of the greatness of our Motherland is the extent to which each citizen of Russia is free, healthy, educated and happy.²⁵

Where defense expenditures were concerned, the 1990s national consensus was strong enough to survive the change of regimes from revolutionary to restorationist under Putin. Despite the oil wealth, Russian military spending is still kept under 5 percent of GDP, and in 2002, Russia agreed to a further reduction of nuclear warheads to between 1,700 and 2,200.

Managing the Imperial Collapse

Equally breathtaking was the revolutionary regime’s management of the disintegration of the Soviet Union’s East-Central European and domestic empires. From 1992–95, Russia repatriated from the former Warsaw Pact countries 800,000 troops, 400,000 civilian personnel, and 500,000 family members (frequently without homes for the officers’ families or jobs for their spouses). In the former Soviet Union, in just two years between the end of 1991 and the last months of 1993, Russia reduced its troops in Estonia from between 35,000 and 50,000 to 3,000. The departure of the last Russian soldier from the Paldiski submarine training base in Estonia in September 1995 marked the end of the Russian presence in East-Central Europe. The lands acquired and held during two and a half centuries of the Russian and Soviet imperial conquests were restored to newly sovereign nations. Russia returned to its seventeenth-century, pre-Peter the Great borders.

Of all the lands post-Soviet Russia voluntarily abandoned, the separation from Ukraine was by far the most painful because of the latter’s unique place in Russia’s historic memory and national consciousness, with its capital, Kiev, the birthplace of the first Russian state and of Russian Christianity. Yet, in the end, by the terms of the 1997 treaty signed by Yeltsin in Kiev, Russia not only

recognized an independent Ukraine and pledged friendship with it, but also left behind the beautiful and fecund island of Crimea, which for two centuries had been the staple of Russian poetry and Russia's most popular summer resort, teeming with czars' summer palaces and the dachas of the finest Russian painters, musicians, and writers, including Anton Chekhov. Ethnic Russians also outnumbered Ukrainians there by more than two to one. (Crimea was "presented" by Nikita Khrushchev to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic in 1954, when separate Russian and Ukrainian states outside the Soviet Union seemed utterly beyond the realm of the possible.)

Along with Crimea, Russia surrendered the entire Black Sea fleet and its main base and the city of Sevastopol, where tens of thousands of Russian soldiers and sailors lost their lives in the heroic defense against the British and the French in 1854–55 and the Germans in 1941–42. One needs only to recall the horrific bloodshed that followed the collapse of the Ottoman, British, and French colonial empires, as well as the divisions of Ireland and, of course, Yugoslavia, to recognize the enormity of what was achieved in the "chaos" of the 1990s.

Forging the Institutions of Democracy

With the very significant exception of Yeltsin's unlawfully dissolving the Congress of People's Deputies and calling for new elections to overcome a political stalemate that brought the country to the brink of a civil war in the fall of 1993, the 1990s saw mighty strides in the institutionalization of necessary (although, as it turned out, not sufficient) elements of democratic political order. Perhaps most importantly, free elections came to be recognized as the sole legitimate means of acquiring national leadership positions.

Public opinion reflected this sea change. In 1994, essentially the same proportion of respondents in a national poll opposed (33 percent) as supported (35 percent) a hypothetical dictatorship if it were necessary to "restore order."²⁶ By 1997, the opposition to a dictatorship grew to 55 percent, while support stagnated at 35 percent.²⁷ In 1995, 54 percent of those polled said they

did not "consider the communist system acceptable for Russia"²⁸—precisely the proportion of the vote Yeltsin garnered a year later in a runoff against the Communist candidate for president.

The 1993 Constitution. Although often and rightly faulted for its loopholes and its obviously "Gaullist," "presidential," and quasi-authoritarian bias toward the executive,²⁹ the Constitution proved a remarkably lasting, reliable, and resilient foundation for a Russian republic. Even during the fiercest ideological confrontations of the 1990s, neither the executive nor the opposition risked venturing outside the new constitutional framework.

Among the "foundations" of the new political order, the Constitution's first chapter lists "man, his rights and liberties" as the "highest values,"³⁰ and the recognition, observance, and protection of these rights and liberties are declared a "duty of the state."³¹ It further describes a new Russian state as based on "ideological diversity" and "multi-party-ness" (*mnogopatriynist'*).³² No official ideology or religion may be established.³³ Throughout the rest of the document, separate articles guarantee freedom of religion, speech, demonstrations, and mass media.

One needs only to recall the horrific bloodshed that followed the collapse of the Ottoman, British, and French colonial empires, as well as the divisions of Ireland and, of course, Yugoslavia, to recognize the enormity of what was achieved in the "chaos" of the 1990s.

Free Multiparty Elections. In two national referendums, three parliamentary elections, and one presidential election between 1993 and 1999, Russia came close to fulfilling Joseph Schumpeter's requirement for a minimalist, bare-bones, "poor" democracy: "free competition for a free vote."³⁴ Thirteen electoral blocs or parties—most sharply and vocally critical of the government—and 1,567 independent candidates outside of the party lists competed for 500 seats in the first Duma election in 1993; forty-three and 2,688, respectively, in the 1995 poll; and twenty-six and 2,320 in 1999. Only in December 1993, after the leftist-nationalist rebellion and the bloodshed in Moscow, did the turnout in a national election fall below 61 percent. It was 70 percent in the 1996 presidential contest. (In the past three midterm elections in the United States, the average turnout for Congressional elections was around 40 percent, and in the last presidential election, the turnout was 56 percent.)

The hard-line, “irreconcilable” (*neprimerimaya*), Communist-led “popular patriotic” opposition held a plurality in the 1995–99 Duma, and the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF) was the largest faction in the legislatures elected in 1995 and 1999. In the 1996 presidential election runoff, the KPRF’s chairman, Gennady Zyuganov, garnered 30 million votes (40 percent of the total) and beat Yeltsin in thirty out of eighty-nine regions.

Freedom of Speech and Campaigning. Free from government censorship—and in many instances privately owned—press, radio, and television ensured immeasurably greater transparency of political and economic decision-making than in the Soviet days and provided a reliable and extensive outlet for political opposition.

Not only independent media, but state-owned television channels, regularly and with glee castigated the Kremlin and the president.

Like other registered parties, the “irreconcilable” Communists received government subsidies for their leading newspapers and funding for campaign expenses, and they enjoyed complete freedom to demonstrate, to distribute campaign materials by tens of thousands to door-to-door organizers, and to advertise in print and electronic media, on billboards, and on banners. They also received free air time on three state-owned national television channels and on four radio networks. Running for president in 1996, Zyuganov’s campaign, like that of other candidates, was allotted and used a free hour and a half on television and two hours on the radio.

The opposition’s views and electoral platforms were thoroughly covered by large independent and privately owned newspapers and magazines, as well as by half a dozen national and over 150 local pro-Communist periodicals with a combined daily circulation of over 10 million.³⁵ The Communist candidates, including Zyuganov, were regularly interviewed on national television and participated in the nationally televised debates, most frequently on the independent, privately owned NTV network.

Separation of powers began to emerge, reflected in pitched battles between the president and the parliament, and in vetoes and veto overrides on issues ranging from land privatization to freedom of religion. In January 1994, over the strenuous objections of the Kremlin, the

Duma used its constitutional prerogative to vote for amnesty for everyone involved in the September–October bloody leftist-nationalist uprising in the center of Moscow (known also as a “mini civil war”). Some leaders of the uprising, including those who openly called for the execution of Yeltsin and his government, were subsequently elected governors and members of the Duma.

Decentralization of Power: Local Self-Rule and Courts

Too big and diverse to be governed democratically as a unitary state, Russia was held together through most of its history by hereditary authoritarianism of the czars or one-party dictatorship. Tyranny’s only alternative was

anarchy. In the 1990s a new federal Russian state was born: decentralized and consisting of self-governing provinces—yet resilient and whole.

Although Yeltsin’s decree authorized direct elections of governors in 1995, by then many regions had already begun to elect the “heads of the regional administrations.” As a result, in the 1990s all of Russia’s then—eighty-nine regions held at least three gubernatorial and regional legislative elections. The Kremlin’s support was by no means a guarantee of success.

In 1996, for example, the candidates supported by the opposition People’s Patriotic Union of Russia won a third of the contested governorships.

The 1990s also ended the state’s ownership of justice and, with it, the unchallenged dominance of state prosecutors over judges and defense. The Constitution declared all citizens equal before the law; affirmed their right to defend “personal rights and liberties in court”; guaranteed the “independence” of judges and their “immunity” from prosecution; established an “adversarial and equal basis” for the relationship between the prosecution and defense in court; and outlawed a key tool of the Soviet justice, forced self-incrimination. Spurred by the Constitution, the increasingly independent courts began to function as such, rather than as rubber stamps for the prosecution.

Following the October 1995 “instruction” of the Supreme Court that allowed regional and district courts to review the constitutionality of the actions of local and federal authorities, the courts became a venue not only for citizens’ successfully defending themselves against the

Not only independent media, but state-owned television channels, regularly and with glee castigated the Kremlin and the president.

state, but also for suing it and winning. As the courts proceeded to invalidate national and local decrees and laws, including those of the president,³⁶ there followed a cascade of decisions bolstering the freedoms of speech, place of residence, religion, and conscientious objection to the military draft.

Among these “firsts” was the December 1999 acquittal, unprecedented in Russia’s history, of a defendant charged with treason in a case brought by the security services. In undermining the legality of the state’s case, the defense team of the former navy captain and environmental activist Alexandr Nikitin—who was arrested by the KGB’s successor, the FSB, in 1995—drew on the constitutional right to “freely seek, receive, pass on, produce and disseminate information,” as well as on the constitutional ban against the application of unpublished laws and the retroactive application of the law.

Contrast with Today

Every one of these hopeful developments has been eroded or reversed in the last few years. Independent candidates may no longer run for Duma seats: everyone must belong to a party, while the blocs of smaller parties are outlawed, and registration of parties for elections is made so cumbersome and expensive that virtually any party could be disqualified by the Central Election Commission, which is now completely subservient to the Kremlin. Among the leading opposition parties already refused registration for the December 2007 election are the liberal-right Republican Party of Russia and the left-nationalist Great Russia. Other parties in effect are blackmailed into “behaving” by the threat of losing the chance to be represented in the Duma. The threshold for entrance to the Duma has been raised from 5 percent to 7 percent of a national party vote; with independent verification of the vote by the opposition, and press and public opinion polling made difficult if not impossible, there is widespread belief that the Electoral Commission will follow the Kremlin’s orders in lowering (or raising) the official results to allow or disallow the parties in the parliament.

The state’s virtually unlimited control over the political process renders multiparty elections in today’s Russia all but fictional. Gone with them is an essential element of democracy: effective political opposition capable of appealing to the electorate and influencing the regime.

Governors, Duma, Media, and the Courts. In a flagrant violation of the constitutionally mandated people’s right to self-government,³⁷ gubernatorial elections have been abolished. Governors are now appointed by the local legislature following the Kremlin’s “recommendations,” not one of which, thus far, has been rejected. In turn, governors chosen by the government now appoint one of the members of the upper house of the Federal Assembly and the Council of Federation; the other

The state’s virtually unlimited control over the political process renders multiparty elections in today’s Russia all but fictional.

members are selected by the regional legislature. With the executive branch’s control over the legislative branch, separation of powers, too, is a thing of the past. (In 1993–95, the Council of Federation, informally known as the “Senate,” was filled with two representatives elected from each of the country’s eighty-nine regions. During the rest of the decade, the council was filled, ex officio, by the governor and the chairman of the regional legislature, both of whom were elected by the people of the region.)

Society’s ability to pass informed judgment on the regime’s performance and to make informed political choices is further reduced by the state’s ownership or firm control of all national television channels. Government supervision of the programming reportedly includes weekly lists of “recommended” topics for coverage and lists of opposition leaders, independent commentators, or journalists who under no circumstances should be allowed to be interviewed or appear as guests on talk shows. “The real freedom of speech has existed in Russia only for nine short years: from the moment Yeltsin wrestled it from the GKChP [the leaders of the August 1991 attempted hard-line coup] and to the time he handed it over to the heirs of GKChP [on the last day of 1999],” noted a prominent Russian journalist.³⁸ “It disappeared afterwards—at least for the consumers of the major state-owned or pro-government television and radio channels, that is for the absolute majority of the population.”

A majority of the most popular independent newspapers and magazines have either been forced to fold (such as *Itogi* or *Novoe vremya*—magazines) or have been “tamed” with the change of ownership (for instance, *Moskovskie novosti*, *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, and *Izvestia*—newspapers). Not counting Internet publications, accessible to 15 to 20 percent of the population at most, all that remains of the 1990s muckraking,

raucously-critical-of-the-authorities mass media with nationwide reach is *Ekho Moskvy* radio, with an estimated weekly audience of 900,000.

The courts' autonomy has been gravely weakened by a series of high-profile cases replete with gross procedural violations, including the replacement of judges and jury manipulation. For the local authorities throughout Russia, the trials and convictions of former oil tycoon Mikhail Khodorkovsky, arms-control expert Igor Sutyagin, and professor and satellite technology expert Valentin Danilov (the former was accused of tax evasion, fraud, and embezzlement, the latter two of espionage) signaled the return of the Soviet-style "telephone rule"—the right of state representatives at every level to dictate the outcome and verdict over the phone. Along with the legislative branch, the judiciary now appears to be under almost total dominance by the Kremlin.

Away from the "Chaos" Myth? After Yeltsin died this past spring, 25,000 people stood for hours in a very long line on a cold April night to pay their last respects to Russia's first freely elected chief executive—until the body was suddenly whisked away by the authorities for a quick burial after fewer than twenty hours of lying in state.³⁹ Even more remarkable, given the negative opinions of Yeltsin and his era to which the Russian people had become accustomed, was the tone of the obituaries (mostly on the uncensored Internet sites) that strongly challenged the "chaos" stereotype. Instead of a period of senseless destruction and chaos, emerging from the obituaries, appreciations, and comments was a precious and unique moment in Russian history—a hectic time, marred by ignorance and corruption, but, in the main, an earnest trial-and-error search for modern liberal economic and political arrangements best suited to the national conditions.

Putin's former personal economic adviser, Andrei Illarionov, captured the tenor of the reevaluation when he wrote that Yeltsin had "pulled the country out of communism, out of empire and out of its past" and "pushed it forward toward civilization, openness and freedom."⁴⁰ In another view, the 1990s have shown that the traditional Russian "feudal mentality" and the worst features of Russian political culture, which many consider immutable—disrespect of laws, the delegation of complete power and

responsibility to the supreme leader, the "thousand-year-old corruption" and the notion that authorities of all ranks were there to "feed" off whatever they were appointed to supervise, the servility toward those above, and the violence toward those below—could, at least in principle, be changed.⁴¹ It is possible in Russia to "respect liberty," to tackle "laziness," and to treat other people not "as enemies and scoundrels."⁴²

In the 1990s a Russia began to be forged that was not an empire or a monarchy, but a "democratic and civilized country, of which others are not afraid," wrote a former Yeltsin aide. "A country that did not harbor treachery or hostility. A country that is liked in the world. A country in which there could be market economy, competition, freedom of speech."⁴³

Yeltsin's death seems to have occasioned a broader public reevaluation as well. Compared to 2000, the percentage of those who thought that the Yeltsin era was overall more negative than positive dropped by almost one-third, from 67 percent to 47 percent, while the share of those remembering the 1990s positively increased by two-fifths from 15 percent to 26 percent.⁴⁴ Attitudes toward Yeltsin have changed even more decisively: the share of those who say they liked him grew by more than half from 2000–07 (9 percent to 19 percent), while the proportion of those disliking him diminished by more than half from 55 percent to 26 percent.⁴⁵

Most likely these numbers testify to the well-known feature of human memory: only distance can provide a proper notion of scale and meaning for events of such magnitude.

Writing about the American republic almost half a century after its birth, Alexis de Tocqueville noted "a mature and thoughtful taste for freedom."⁴⁶ The first decade of Russian political and economic liberty brought nothing less than a different order of being to Russia, but hardly made the taste for it mature. The development of such a taste, along with a balanced view of the 1990s untinged by the political needs of a ruling regime, may be a project for decades.

Society's ability to pass informed judgment on the regime's performance and to make informed political choices is further reduced by the state's ownership or firm control of all national television channels.

The author is grateful to AEI research assistant Kara Flook and web editor Laura Drinkwine for their help in editing and producing this essay. Part I of this Russian Outlook is available at www.aei.org/publication26600/.

Notes

1. Samuel Johnson, "Preface to a Dictionary of the English Language," in *Rasselas: Poems and Selected Prose*, ed. Bertrand H. Bronson (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), 259.
2. Edmund Mokrzycki, "A New Middle Class?" in *Culture, Modernity and Revolution: Essays in Honor of Zygmunt Bauman*, ed. Richard Kilminster and Ian Varcoe (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 191.
3. Quoted in Ekaterina Grigor'eva, "Prezident Putin—Federal'nomu sobraniyu" [President Putin to the Federal Assembly], *Izvestia*, May 1, 2007.
4. Steve Liesman, "Surprise: The Economy in Russia Is Clawing Out of Deep Recession," *Wall Street Journal*, January 28, 1998.
5. Gregory Feifer, "People's Carmaker Evolves," *Moscow Times*, May 30, 2000.
6. "Travel Fever," *Washington Post*, August 2, 1997.
7. "Round and Round They Go. And Where They Stop and Shop," *New York Times*, April 12, 1998.
8. Ekaterina Terpigoreva, "Nevziraya na vizy" [Visas Notwithstanding], *Novoe vremya* 30 (July 2000).
9. Leon Aron, "The Strange Case of Russian Capitalism," in *Russia's Revolution: Essays 1989–2006* (Washington, DC: AEI Press, 2007), 53, available at www.aei.org/book874/.
10. See, for example, Stanley Fischer, "The Russian Economy at the Start of 1998" (speech, U.S.-Russia Investment Symposium, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, January 9, 1998).
11. For instance, Serge Schmemmann writes of "the plunder of national assets by a handful of oligarchs." See Serge Schmemmann, "When the Bear Cries Wolf: Trying to Understand Vladimir Putin," *New York Times*, July 19, 2007.
12. Vladimir Milov, "Russian Energy Policy in a Broader Context" (presentation, U.S.-Russia Working Group, AEI, Washington, DC, May 19, 2006), available at www.aei.org/docLib/20060519_MilovPowerpoint.pdf.
13. See, for example, Yegor Gaidar's interview with *The New Times* ("Boris Yeltsin: ushla epokha," April 24, 2007, available at <http://newtimes.ru/talkshows/ts61/> [accessed April 25, 2007]). "Before the loans-for-shares auctions the government discussions were about what we would do when, following the clear trend, Russia stopped being an exporter of oil and became an importer."
14. Vladimir Milov, "Neftyanoe gosudarstvo" [The Petro-State], interview in *Novaya gazeta*, December 22, 2005, available at <http://2005.novayagazeta.ru/nomer/2005/96n/n96n-s15.shtml> (accessed October 16, 2006).
15. Vladimir Milov, "Russian Energy Policy in a Broader Context."
16. *Strategiya razvitiya Rossiyskoy Federatsii do 2010 goda* [The Strategy of Development for the Russian Federation to the Year 2010] (Moscow: Center for Strategic Planning, June 2000), 57. See also Harley Balzer, "Demography and Democracy: Human Capital Challenges to Democratic Consolidation," *Demokratizatsiya* (Winter 2003), available at http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3996/is_200301/ai_n9186650 (accessed August 27, 2007).
17. *Strategiya razvitiya Rossiyskoy Federatsii do 2010 goda*.
18. Anders Åslund, *Building Capitalism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 321, table 8.9.
19. World Health Organization, "Russian Federation: National Expenditure of Health" (Geneva: NHA Unit, EIP/HSE/CEP, WHO, 2007), available at <http://www.who.int/nha/country/RUS.pdf> (accessed August 27, 2007).
20. Anders Åslund, *Building Capitalism*, 320, table 8.8.
21. "Russian Love in a Cold Climate," *The Economist*, August 15, 1998.
22. "Soyuz pravyykh—zavtrashnyaya vlast" [The Union of the Right Political Forces is the Government of Tomorrow], *Novoe vremya* 49 (December 1999): 13.
23. A typical middle-size Moscow bookstore, Mir Pechati, off Tverskaya Street, which the author visited in June 2000, offered 11,000 books from 281 publishers (*Katalog knig* [List of Books for Sale] [Moscow: Presstorg, 2000]).
24. "Monitoring peremen: Osnovnye tendentsii" [Monitoring Changes: The Main Tendencies], *Vestnik obshchestvennogo mneniya* 72, no. 4 (July–August 2004): 5, table 6. The only exception of a significant length was half a year after the 1998 financial crisis.
25. Boris Yeltsin, "Teleobrashchenie Prezidenta RF Borisa El'tsina" [Televised Address by the President of the Russian Federation Boris Yeltsin] (Moscow: National Information Service, June 12, 1997), 2.
26. Richard Dobson, *Is Russia Turning the Corner? Changing Russian Public Opinion, 1991–1996* (Washington, DC: U.S. Information Agency, September 1996), 55, table 25.
27. Steven Grant, *How Unsteady Is Russian Democracy?* (Washington, DC: U.S. Information Agency, May 1997), 2.
28. Inga Mikhailovskaya, "Russian Voting Behavior as a Mirror of Social-Political Change," *East European Constitutional Review* (Spring/Summer 1996): 60.

29. See, for example, Leon Aron, *Yeltsin: A Revolutionary Life* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 714–17, available at www.aei.org/book294/.

30. *Konstitutsiya Rossiyskoy Federatsii* [The Constitution of the Russian Federation] (Moscow: Norma, 2003), 2.

31. *Ibid.*

32. *Ibid.*, 7.

33. *Ibid.*

34. Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1950), 271. For the concept of “poor democracy,” see Leon Aron, “Poor Democracy,” in *Russia's Revolution: Essays 1989–2006* (Washington, DC: AEI Press, 2007), available at www.aei.org/book874/.

35. “We thank the journalists of *Pravda*, *Sovetskaya Rossiya*, *Pravda Rossii*, *Glasnost*, and all 150 local publications,” Zyuganov said in early May 1996. See Gennady Zyuganov, “Patrioticheskaya vlast' vosstanovit spravedlivost” [A Patriotic Government Will Restore Justice], *Pravda*, May 5, 1996.

36. For instance, in December 1994 the presidential administration issued a decree dismissing the mayor of Vladivostok, Viktor Cherepkov. After a lengthy legal battle, the country found the dismissal unlawful. Twelve days after the court's decision, Yeltsin signed a decree restoring Cherepkov to office.

37. *Konstitutsiya Rossiyskoy Federatsii* [The Constitution of the Russian Federation], Chapter 1, Article 32, Part 2; Chapter 8, Article 130, Part 2; and Article 131, Part 1: 15, 74–75.

38. Nataliya Gevorkyan, “Vytravim—i postvim” [We Will Squeeze Out (the Slave in Ourselves) and Erect (a Yeltsin Memorial)], *Gazeta*, April 24, 2007, available at www.gazeta.ru/2007/04/24/oa_237579.shtml (accessed April 25, 2007).

39. Ilya Barabanov, “Manevry vmesto pokhoron” [Military Exercises Instead of Burial], *The New Times*, available at www.newtimes.ru/magazine/issue_12/article_447.htm (accessed August 28, 2007).

40. Quoted in Andrei Illarionov, “In the End, Yeltsin Went the Way of Freedom,” *Moscow Times*, April 28, 2007.

41. Daniil Dondurey, “Yeltsin pokazal” [Yeltsin Has Shown], *The New Times*, April 30, 2007.

42. *Ibid.*

43. Comment by Sergei Filatov in Daniil Dondurey, “Yeltsin pokazal.”

44. “Rossiyane o pervom prezidente” [Citizens of Russia about the First President], *Levada-tsentr*, May 17, 2007, available at www.levada.ru/press/2007051701.html (accessed May 18, 2007).

45. *Ibid.*

46. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. George Lawrence (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1969), 72.