

# Why the West loved Yeltsin and hates Putin

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On May 7, Vladimir Putin, who has been President of Russia for the past eight years will step down and Dmitry Medvedev will be sworn in new leader. Even though Mr. Putin is likely to stay on as Prime Minister at Mr. Medvedev's invitation, Russia will that day form a page in its modern history.

Mr. Putin is only the second President Russia has had since the break-up of the Soviet Union and his legacy is inevitably compared — both in and outside the country — with his predecessor Boris Yeltsin. Curiously, the way the two men are judged in Russia and the West could not be more different.

Russians will never forgive Yeltsin for teaming up with the leaders of Ukraine and Belarus to bring down the Soviet Union behind the back of President Mikhail Gorbachev in December 1991. For them, Yeltsin was the man who presided over the painful and humiliating dismemberment of Russian constituents in the break-up of the Soviet Union, which cut off millions of ethnic Russians from mainland Russia. For the West, he was the man who dismantled the "evil empire."

For Russians, Yeltsin's "shock therapy" policies were all shock and no therapy. They triggered the worst peacetime industrial depression of the 20th century, with economic output slashed by half in the space of a decade. In the West, Yeltsin was hailed as a "reformer" who pursued purportedly free-market, if painful, policies that allegedly had no alternative.

In Russia, Yeltsin is associated with plunging the country into chaos, reducing a majority of Russians to abject poverty and awarding the country's oil, gas and other mineral riches to a handful of rapacious oligarchs, who plundered Russia and played Kremlin powerbrokers. The West lauded him as the "father of Russian democracy" who buried communism. Yeltsin remained "Friend Boris" to the West even after he sent tanks to blast his political opponents from

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Parliament in 1993. In Russia, he faced impeachment charges for this and other "crimes against the nation."

By contrast, Russians will remember Mr. Putin as the man who pulled the country from the brink of collapse and rebuilt the state machine. He reasserted the centre's authority over unruly territories and brought Chechnya back into Russia's fold. He curbed the omnipotence of regional governors and tamed the oligarchs; the moneybags lost all taste for political games after Mr. Putin arrested Russia's richest man, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, on charges of fraud and tax evasion. But for the West, Mr. Putin is the man who strangled Yeltsin's burgeoning democracy.

While Yeltsin was widely despised by the time he resigned, Mr. Putin is leaving office at the peak of his popularity. In fact, he is the only Russian leader who is more popular at the end of his term than he was at the beginning; all other leaders either died or fell out of favour. Mr. Putin's approval ratings have steadily topped at 80 per cent, and a majority of Russians said they would like him to stay on. However, he has set an important precedent for the fledgling democracy, relinquishing power in strict compliance with the Constitution.

Yet for the West, Mr. Putin is a KGB-trained would-be dictator and his Russia is an authoritarian menace to the free world. He has been accused of using oil and gas as a weapon, much the same way as the Soviet Union was of using tanks and missiles to threaten and conquer the West.

Commenting on U.S. President George W. Bush's well-known remark that he looked

into Mr. Putin's eyes and "was able to get a sense of his soul" during their first meeting in 2001, Hillary Clinton, now a contender for Democratic nomination, said: "He [Putin] was a KGB agent. By definition he doesn't have a soul."

One reason why Yeltsin was the West's darling — while Mr. Putin is the target of virulent attacks — was that his policies perfectly suited the Western agenda for Russia, a superpower-turned economic and military weakling, a subservient client state and a source of cheap energy and minerals. By contrast, Russia's resurgence under Mr. Putin is seen as upsetting the global balance of power and threatening the U.S. unipolar model.

But there is a deeper reason. While Yeltsin was seen as trying to implant "genuine" Western democracy in Russian soil, Mr. Putin steered Russia along its own path of democracy building.

Mr. Putin's "controlled democracy" involves centralisation of power, government control over most electronic and some printed media, and Kremlin-supervised grooming of political parties. This policy helped to curb the chaos of the 1990s and bring about political stability that has underpinned economic growth.

At the same time, the communist-era restrictions on personal freedoms are gone. Russians can choose where to live in, what books to read and how much money to earn. They are free to marry foreigners and emigrate. They love travelling abroad, fondly drive Fords, Mercedes and Toyotas, and shop for Western goods in the crowded malls lining the streets of Russian cities.

The West has denied Mr. Putin's Russia

any democratic credential because it "challenges the prerogative of the dominant democratic powers, in practice the U.S., to judge what is and what is not democratic," says Russia expert Vlad Sobell of the Daiwa Institute of Research.

According to the petrified "ideological orthodoxy" of the West, "modern democracy was incubated predominantly in the Anglo-Saxon culture and, following the defeat of totalitarian empires in the 20th century, it was spread by the victorious powers throughout Western Europe and Japan," and more recently in the former Soviet Union and also initially in Yeltsin's Russia.

The experience of Mr. Putin's Russia (as also China) "demonstrates not only that endogenous (non-Western) democratisation is possible but also that it is more successful than the imported version because it is in complete harmony with its cultural environment," the researcher says.

The rise of new Russia has undermined America's self-argued right to decide what is good and what is evil, to award marks for good or bad behaviour, and to impose "democratic transformation" on other nations, either by war as in Iraq, or through "colour revolutions" as in Georgia and Ukraine.

If Mr. Putin's Russia is accepted as an emerging democracy, rather than as a successor to the "evil empire," it will be difficult to justify the new containment policy the U.S. has set in train, surrounding Russia with a ring of military bases and missile interceptors. Nor would one be able to easily dismiss Moscow's criticism of the aggressive and arrogant U.S. behaviour across the world.

### President's poser

As Mr. Putin asked in his famous Munich speech, if Russia could carry out a peaceful transition from the Soviet regime to democracy, why should other countries be bombed at every opportunity for want of democracy? Hence the Herculean effort of Western opinion-makers to paint everything Mr. Putin does in evil colours.

The U.S. State Department's annual report on human rights in 2007 mounted the harshest attack yet on the state of freedom in Russia, while the U.S. Freedom House listed it as one of the several "energy-rich dictatorships." Republican presidential candidate John McCain has accused Mr. Putin of "trying to restore the old Russian empire," and "perpetuating himself in power" by installing his "puppet" Dmitry Medvedev in the Kremlin.

In sticking labels on Russian leaders, the West outrageously ignores the opinion of the Russian people. Russians showed what they thought of Yeltsin's legacy when they voted out of Parliament twice in recent years the liberal parties that had supported his policies in the 1990s. They demonstrated their support for Mr. Putin's policies when they triumphantly re-elected him for a second term in 2004 and when they overwhelmingly voted for Mr. Medvedev in March 2008.

Mr. Putin bluntly told the West that its criticism of his policies would not induce his successor to strike a softer posture in foreign policy. "I am long accustomed to the label by which it is difficult to work with a former KGB agent," Mr. Putin said at a recent press conference. "Dmitry Medvedev will be free from having to prove his liberal views. But he is no less a Russian nationalist than me, in the good sense of the word, and I do not think our partners will find it easier to deal with him."

For his part, Mr. Medvedev, while pledging that "freedom in all its manifestations — personal freedom, economic freedom and, finally, freedom of expression" — would be "at the core of our politics," said democratic values would be adopted in line with Russia's "national tradition."

### CARTOONSCAPE

