

# YELTSIN RECOVERY

## Nato Strikes Give Him A Boost

By HARI VASUDEVAN

SINCE it has become customary for the Euro-American Press to pour opprobrium on Boris Yeltsin, it comes as no surprise that his recent manoeuvres have been met with cynicism in the Western media. There have been no serious attempts to locate what occurred in anything other than presidential whim. Most commentaries have chosen to ignore that it was primarily to protect the Euro-American interest in Russia, which he associates with the "Russian reforms", that Mr Yeltsin precipitated the country's most recent crisis in public life. In doing this, the Western Press have followed their own reasons. Most substantially, they wish to distance themselves (and the West in general) from Russia's political and economic crisis today: a crisis deeply linked to the interaction between Yeltsin's government and major interests in Washington and Western Europe.

Mr Primakov's dismissal itself is not a shock. At the time of his appointment as Russian Prime Minister, it was evident that he was a lightweight in the Russian political system. A poor political base made him susceptible to the preferences of Russia's President. Expectations of him as a possible future President were the product of Boris Yeltsin's eclipse in public life during the recent past. True, even today, Primakov cannot be written off as a force in the federation. But these are merely indicators of his acceptability as a "man for all seasons" — a competent and serious individual who attracts confidence.

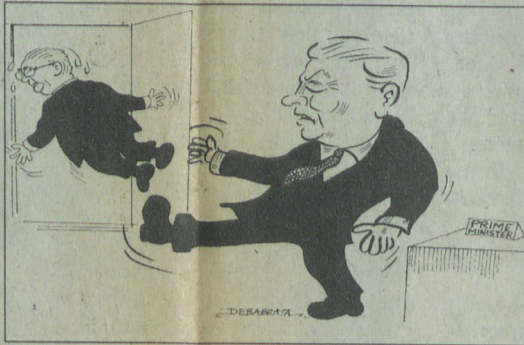
### AUTHORITY

Mr Primakov's term as Prime Minister made much of this self-evident. Although endowed by rumour with the strength of an "intelligence service" wizard, he had little to make him worthy of the reputation, and showed little such "authority" as a PM. At a different level, he has no financial clout with foreign investors or with national corporations — the strength, respectively of his predecessors, Kireenko and Chernomyrdin (the first associated with the "Westemiser" lobby and the other a powerful figure in the affairs of Gazprom, the natural gas giant). Again, Primakov did not have any substantial party base. His recent ascendancy was the product of a compromise between President and the Duma concerning the shape of Russian government after the financial crisis of August 1998. In recent weeks, Mr Yeltsin has come to consider that there is no benefit to be had from that compromise. Hence Primakov's dismissal.

The timing of the President's move is worthy of attention. Mr Yeltsin decided that the Yugoslav crisis was the ideal occasion to take a strong stand in politics to maintain some continuum in the foreign and internal dispensation he had built in the Russian Federation — a dispensation Mr Primakov had somewhat undermined. Written off as physically and mentally effete until then, Russia's President had withdrawn from public life: his powerful coordination unit, the National Security Council, had lapsed into near-oblivion as Mr Primakov's ministers and regional governors asserted their influence over executive power.

Yeltsin's protegee, Boris Berezovskii, who controls one of the five major post-1991 private financial empires of the country,

had been sacked from his position as Secretary of the CIS and hounded out of the country by the General Procurator, Skuratov, under threat of immediate arrest. Yeltsin's attempts to dismiss Skuratov were scuttled by Mr Primakov's followers and the parliamentary Upper House (the Federation Council), which refused to accept such a dismissal. Skuratov's own investigations of the involvement of Yeltsin's daughter, Tatiana D'iachenko, in a commercial scandal, threatened to become the lead issue in the impeachment proceedings against



the President. This phase in the decline in Mr Yeltsin's personal authority was expected to reach its culmination in the Duma's impeachment of the President.

Shaking aside the stupor which is part of his nature, Yeltsin rallied in such circumstances. This was substantially in response to the demands of his entourage — the major private operators who are the darlings of the IMF and the backbone of Russia's private sector (Anatoly Chubais, Peter Aven, Boris Berezovskii, Sergei Kireenko, Boris Nemtsov etc). The austerity and fiscal policies taken by Primakov and his "communist" economic advisor, Masliukov (ironically himself a leading entrepreneur) threatened to weaken this group; and there were also indicators that Primakov would allow investigations into various public scandals of the past, which would have been disastrous for this coterie. It was to save the establishment he himself had created, that Yeltsin decided on an initiative. But, to have moved against Primakov, with impeachment hearings pending on corruption grounds, would have been unseemly both abroad and at home.

### OPPORTUNITY

In such difficult circumstances, it was the international impasse over the Kosovo that gave Russia's President the opportunity to find a major role for himself in public life. He had the presence of mind to seize that opportunity and to obtain room to manoeuvre on behalf of the economic and civil dispensation he has created. Slurred in speech, puffy in face and rambling in his utterances, Yeltsin rose to the occasion.

The conditions that allowed this "revival" are self-evident, and lie in the foreign policy impasse in which the Russian federation found itself. A natural solution to the Balkan crisis had become difficult to envisage, given Nato's obduracy over the bombardment of Serbia and the alliance's hard line over the withdrawal of Serb forces from Kosovo. This has added to Serbian President Milosovich's hard-headedness, and his bestiality towards a section of his own people, to make for a stalemate in the Balkan war. Meanwhile, Russian national support for Serbia, and public condemnation of Nato "aggression" required that the Russian federation take hard decisions verging on confrontation with the alliance. This, along with strong "commu-

nist" demands in Russia for a conflict course with the West, matched against Russia's difficult economic situation and dependence on the IMF, left Mr Primakov with a tightrope walk which he found increasingly difficult.

As the federation lurched into uncertainty in late March, it was left to Yeltsin to take charge to keep all sides in some order: to argue for peace, yet state a hard line on Nato's actions. To carry his course internationally he chose his own type of politician: i.e. a reformed apparatchik of the old order, Viktor Chernomyrdin. Yeltsin's public standing increased substantially during April. To break with Mr Primakov, who had been neutral towards presidential decline, was a logical step: even if it meant risking a constitutional crisis.

The gamble was well taken. It anticipated the failure of impeachment proceedings in the Duma last weekend, which gave Mr Yeltsin's position a boost. To make it difficult for the Duma to reject his candidate for Prime Minister, Mr Yeltsin also chose the kind of figure whom the communists and liberal democrats could not easily reject. For Mr Stephan Stepashin, whom the President nominated is not only a close personal loyalist, but he is grounded firmly in the old traditions of the security establishment. He was trained in that establishment, and worked with paramilitary forces in Baku, Fergana, Nagorno-Karabakh and Sukhumi until 1990. He has worked with security for the past few years and he is unsullied by "reform" dealings.

### WISDOM

The wisdom of the choice has been demonstrated by Wednesday's Duma vote, which comfortably confirmed Mr Stepashin.

Mr Yeltsin's broader concerns in reshaping the government, though, have been partially clear in the nomination of Mr Aksionenko, a Berezovskii stalwart, as pro-tem Railway Minister. The President will certainly do his best to ensure that the economy's "privatizers" will have a say in the establishment as future policy is shaped. In charting such a course successfully, Mr Yeltsin has acted in such a manner that, in the forthcoming Duma elections, US and Western European commitment to his supporters is assured: partly by catering to their narrow interests in Russia itself, and partly by finding the right combination of diplomacy and threat to enable Russia to save her self-respect and permit Nato to find a compromise solution in Yugoslavia.

Worrying, though, is the shape of things to come as Nato's eastward expansion proceeds and Russia's political and economic establishment lurches from crisis to crisis. For, it is impossible to rely on Mr Yeltsin's pulling the Euro-American fat out of the fire in the future. His physical collapse has gone too far, and in times to come, Russia will be pushed to an adventurous foreign policy, driven on by her economic "sickness". It is in the rise of powerful interests in the Russian provinces that some solution to these problems might be found. The political instruments for this new order, though, are not clear: and it is for that reason that Euro-American governments (and their newspapers) have been trying to show themselves open to all suggestions, even while, when brought to the crunch, they have supported their man in the Kremlin.

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