

# SECURE FORTRESS

## Yeltsin Wants Insurance For Family

By HARI VASUDEVAN

IT is easy to write off Mr Boris Yeltsin's latest political gambit as a mark of rank lunacy or personal whim. His dismissal of Mr Stephan Stepashin as Prime Minister and his appointment of Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin appear to have few justifications. It is impossible to fall back on the simple excuse that Mr Yeltsin does not like to have individuals around him who pull public weight. This might have been a good explanation for his recent dismissal (in May this year) of Mr Primakov, or even of Mr Chernomyrdin (in April last year). But Mr Stepashin is a lightweight in public affairs; and even if he had the potential for eminence, he has hardly had the time to demonstrate it.

In terms of loyalty, Mr Stepashin was wholly committed to Mr Yeltsin. He was a simple security man whose prime patron has been the President, to whom he owes everything for his rise. Mr Putin's position is comparable; the only difference being that he has not served in government ministries (as Mr Stepashin did), and he has been with the presidential staff, or with institutions closely associated with it (the federal security services). Of comparable age to Stepashin (he is in his late forties), Putin was with the KGB, served in Germany before Soviet disintegration, and later was deputy chief of the St Petersburg administration under "democrat" mayor Anatoly Sobchak, who claimed that Putin had become "his pupil". Putin was brought to Yeltsin's staff by the architect of Russia's privatisation, Yeltsin favourite Anatoly Chubais, in 1996, and he has been with Yeltsin since then — being appointed the security services's head last year.

### SENILE PATRIARCH

There is no apparent reason, consequently, for exchanging Stepashin for Putin on the surface of it. There will probably be few ministerial changes that will accompany the appointment of the new Prime Minister. In Russia's current circumstances, there are no grand economic or social projects the President can contemplate, since there is no money for anything, and there was no serious disagreement between Mr Stepashin and the President regarding what was good for Russia's future, i.e. a mixture of private enterprise and state corporatism.

The argument therefore seems to stand that we are witnessing presidential whim: that Russia is subject to the twists of a senile patriarch with no sense of institutional continuity, who operates according to personal preferences. Charitable commentators point to intrigues within "the family" as the possible source of the change in the head of government. This refers to the per-

sonal entourage that surrounds Boris Yeltsin, centred on his daughter, Tatiana Diachenko, his chief advisor, Valentin Iumashev and his chief of staff, Alexander Voloshin (Tanya, Valya and Sasha in Kremlin chit-chat). Around the group, a number of figures have been playing for presidential favour and assistance: those who are powers in their own right, such as Anatoly Chubais, tycoons Boris Berezovskii and Roman Abramovich, and the manager of Kremlin properties, Pavel Borodin. The switch to Putin is associated

prosperous future that is fast proving pie in the sky. Investigations are rife to associate him and his family with the siphoning of funds, during the country's privatisation, to Swiss banks. As authorities in Geneva have made it clear last month, serious probes are afoot concerning major Kremlin links with Swiss accounts. In a country where the legal process is far less well established than India's humble system of justice and law, Boris Yeltsin will have to have powerful friends in future if his life is to have even the slightest shade of peace about it.

Hence, the powerplay, set in motion during the Kosovo crisis, the dismissal of Mr Primakov and the appointment and dismissal of Mr Stepashin. In the event of Yeltsin's death, Mr Putin will be most able to provide a quick safety net for the "family" in a period of transition, when he would assume presidential authority pending elections. However, if Yeltsin survives, Mr Putin is unlikely to be the last one to come and go as Mr Yeltsin plans his own future and the future of the establishment he has constituted. For there is already too much against Mr Putin. The new Prime Minister will probably survive the parliamentary vote of confidence that is coming up: for the Duma will not want to force the President to an early dissolution (which is his prerogative if they reject his candidate for Prime Minister). So Mr Putin is likely to make it to the parliamentary elections in December.

### PUTIN'S QUALITIES

Here, he will be a major weapon in Mr Yeltsin's hands as he attempts to curb and direct the country's 89 Governors and Republican heads of state, who can influence the country's electoral process in a decisive manner. Mr Putin has been the Kremlin's intermediary in dealing with local "executives" in the recent past, and his experience will come in useful in making up Yeltsin's arithmetic for the elections. Mr Putin's security experience will also be valuable in handling the current Wahabi crisis in Daghestan — possibly to help mend bridges with Nato-inclined Azerbaijan, through a firm stand against Islamic fundamentalism.

When the months pass, though, there will be a new Duma and new Federation Council. And Mr Yeltsin will have to consider how valuable Mr Putin will be in the next round of the battle to preserve the Yeltsin system, as he seeks to handle his new Parliament. Meanwhile, it is almost certain, that Mr Putin and other men of the security establishment will seek to create of the presidency a fortress of sorts, ready, should the opportunity provide, to make dangerous experiments with Russia's fragile constitutionalism, should the occasion present itself.



with the declining influence of Berezovskii with Diachenko. But this itself would be no reason to sack a government and do away with a Prime Minister. That such flimsy factors could be of significance would merely mean that court politics is crucial in the Kremlin's Byzantine ambience.

Disturbing, though, in all journalist backchat that surround Moscow politics, is that it fails to account for Boris Yeltsin's skills as a politician: his capacity, amply demonstrated in the past; of knowing precisely what to do to ensure his position and authority. Generating a banter where whim, fancy, and the manoeuvres of skirts and trousers take over, there is a high chance that the pronouncements of the "scribes" blind the public to the deeper (and more dangerous) sides of presidential intention. When politics has been concerned, even if there might be room for the contention that he is wildly irrational, there has always been method in Boris Yeltsin's madness.

### PROMISES BELIED

Clear, in fact, in the latest appointment of a new Prime Minister, is Yeltsin's attempt to survive the struggle for authority in the Russian Federation that must unfold during the coming twelve months. The necessity for that attempt is all too clear. Today's Russia is not India, let alone the US or any state of Western Europe. The departing President cannot be assured that he can retire quietly into private life after next year's presidential election. He is held responsible for the disintegration of the Soviet state and the unmaking of the welfare of the Russian people in the name of a

The author is Professor, Department of History, Calcutta University.