

# Freedom to sell their nationhood

Independence has meant second-class citizenship for Russians in their own country, writes Hari Vasudevan



Grand Duke Vladimir Romanov being welcomed back to St Petersburg by the former subjects of his uncle, Czar Nicholas II

from Kaliningrad than with a country cousin from Kamchatka. It is not clear what "nation" is the object of celebration.

Moreover, Russia is a country where citizens are probably the most underprivileged social category. So they have little to be joyful about their independence. True, they have more political privileges now. They can say what they want and print what they want. But the minister for information and the secretary of state are not quite happy about this.

The citizens can learn tales of nastiness and cruelty which the party stashed away in the archives of the Soviet state in the quiet buildings on Bol'shaya Pirogovskaya or the Lyubyanka. If a father or a sister disappeared in the Solovniki Islands on the White Sea, which was a favourite gulag, the file is now available to the survivor. They will have information on the pick-up by the NKVD, DGPYU or KGB; the trial; the list and content of denunciations and the invariable demand for "the highest penalty the state can mete out". But these freedoms are not

just for the Russians alone, anyone could make use of them. The militia is totally demoralised, as are the officials. They do not have the heart to be rude any more over the queries and requests they face. So Japanese communists have been busy finding out what happened to their brethren who disappeared in the Thirties. Indian communists could find out about the fate of Abani Mukherjee after he was arrested in 1938 and sent to the gulag, or why Virendranath Chattopadhyay was arrested, tried and shot on that ill-fated day in Leningrad in 1937.

The privileges of the non-citizen, in Mr Yeltsin's Russia, are more than those of the citizen. The sole exception is the non-citizen from a member-nation of the Commonwealth of Independent States, though the distinction is difficult to want of new passports. The situation of a non-Russian from outside the CIS has improved rapidly since the democrats came to rule Russia.

In the past, as Martin Walker wrote for his tribe of Anglo-Saxon journalists and diplo-

mats, the non-Soviet lived in a ghetto. If he came into the country for a short stay, he was fleeced. Hotels were gruesomely expensive, the exchange rate was poor and the people were hardly helpful.

Those who came for a long stay suffered similar disabilities. Everything from their housing to their theatre tickets were dealt with by the UPDK. Movement was restricted. Foreigners were rarely given permission to use the electric train services to the suburbs or the ferries on the Moskva-Volga river system which went up to Leningrad and down to the lower Volga towns.

Foreign goods were available only in the *valuta*, foreign exchange shops. American diplomats resorted to their own shops in the embassy grounds. Indian diplomats flew in *bhindi*, *potol*, *jhinge*, 10 kgs per head, from home. In Leningrad, where the Americans were particularly about the water they drank, they had it imported from Stockholm by tanker.

Foreign scholars were distinctly underprivileged. Scru-

nised by the "foreign department" of the institutions to which they were attached, they were kept to their own reading rooms in the archives and denied access to the catalogues of the papers. Soviet scholars and journalists rarely spoke freely to their foreign counterparts. As one professor of philosophy explained to me when I asked him about generational conflict in the politburo, "I cannot give you a satisfactory answer. After all, you are going away, but I have to live here."

This has all changed. The non-Russian today is a coddled individual. He lives in a ghetto, but it is a ghetto of privilege. He stands in queues in the *gastronom*s, food shops, if he wants to. He picks up his groceries, for dollars, from a number of European and US-style supermarkets — oranges from Israel, kiwifruit from Down Under, mangoes from Florida, muesli from Switzerland. A ticket for the Bolshoi, once the largesse of Intourist, can be bought cheap for dollars from touts at the Teatralnaya and followed by supper at the Metro-

Information is readily available to the resident non-Russian. *Time Out in Moscow*, *The Guardian* (Moscow) and the English version of the *Kommersant* are only a few of the English newspapers which provide extensive information about every aspect of Russian life. Scandalous titbits are also available, if you pay prices which only those who have *valuta* can afford. There are a number of information agencies looking around for customers. Most politicians are eager to talk to accredited representatives of major newspapers and to trundle out ideological pictures which may, with luck, last 24 hours, but which they hope will place them in a long tradition of philosophising running from Tolstoy to Pasternak and Solzhenitsyn.

Democrats are more down to earth. Most of them expect a present or a hefty sum deposited in dollars with a secretary before an interview. Mr Yeltsin began the tradition of bartering the soul to Western media in 1987, when he gave an interview to the British Broadcasting Corporation after he was sacked as the mayor of Moscow.

Needless to say, foreigners have easy access to the archives now. Separate reading rooms are gone. Catalogues are easily available. There is a project afoot to microfilm the most important sections of the archives of the Soviet state and deposit the film at the Hoover Institute in California.

Those who wield the green-back and those who are the speculators in trade and real estate, therefore, are the real beneficiaries of Russia's emergence in real terms. Thermidorian members of the old *nomenklatura* have done well too. So an odd mixture of non-Russian businessmen and diplomats and Armenian, Georgian, Azeri or Central Asian traders are the real inheritors of Soviet power, together with the democratic politician.

Russians retain an option to prosper in provincial towns, say, Kostroma or Nizhny. But in Moscow they are marginalised among the prosperous. They are driven by real estate sharks from the plum spots of the centre to Domodedovo and other suburban mass settlements.

All this is done in the hope of resurrecting Russia. The question is what will remain of Russia to save when "everything that can be sold is sold and everything that can be betrayed is betrayed". Probably a series of festivals and celebrations.

# It could be a show worth watching

To David S. Broder, Clinton-Gore is Harry Truman all over again

The legacy of 1948 and 1968 and the influence of Mr Ross Perot lie heavily on Mr Bill Clinton's choice of Mr Albert Gore for the Democratic ticket. It is an unconventional but shrewd decision for the Arkansas governor to pick the Tennessee senator as his running mate.

In 1948, Harry Truman of Missouri, a scorned underdog, picked Senator Alben Barkley of neighbouring Kentucky for second place on his ticket and scored one of the great upsets of American political history. Shift the axis two counties south and you have the Clinton-Gore ticket of 1992.

The pairing also owes much to the "Southern strategy" that became part of Republican presidential doctrine in 1968. That was the year Mr Richard Nixon, politically homeless after moving from California to New York, found in the South a new political base.

The Southern strategy has been the basis of almost every Republican campaign since then. Mr Ronald Reagan cemented the South to the party in the Eighties, and Mr George Bush insisting that he was a Texan, made it the cornerstone of his 1988 drive.

That Mr Clinton feels emboldened to challenge the Southern strategy head-on in 1992 owes something to his own Dixie roots. In combating Mr Bush for the support of the conservative white male, especially in the South, the Democrats have a realistic chance to win plurality victories with the help of a solid black vote in both the Deep South and the Border States.

As the Clinton campaign manager, Mr David Wilhelm, told me the day before Mr Gore was formally announced: "If it's Gore, we can force Bush to defend his base. He won't be able to spend all his time in Ohio, Michigan, Illinois and California, as he did in 1988."

In fact, Mr Gore may help in several of those states as well. The Tennessean is accustomed to campaigning in small town and rural areas, and there is a lot of the South in downstate Illinois, in California's Central Valley and in all of Ohio below Columbus.

He offers Mr Clinton at least a veneer of protection on two of the vulnerabilities in the Clinton record. If Mr Bush hopes to make hay on Mr Clinton's suspect environmental decision as governor, Mr Gore as the Senate's leading environmental advocate, has the credentials to challenge what the Bush administration has done in that area. And if Mr Clinton's draft record becomes an issue in Autumn, as it almost certainly will, Mr Gore will be a defender who volunteered for military service during the Vietnam War, but has long made it clear that he, too, opposed the war and respected the motives of anti-war protesters such as Mr Clinton.

In all these ways Mr Gore seems an almost perfect match for Mr Clinton, despite the geographical oddity of the ticket. What is suspect about the senator is his ability to campaign well when away from home. He has been unbeatable in Tennessee, where his father pioneered the way to the Senate in 1952. But his 1988 bid for the Democratic presidential nomination showed him often the opposite of the easygoing, engaging and yet substantive stump speaker he is at home.

Yet it would be a mistake to underestimate Mr Gore—especially in the television debate against the vice-president, Mr Dan Quayle. Mr Quayle will not want to compare military records with Mr Gore. And he can hardly fault Mr Gore's credentials on foreign policy.

If Mr Quayle chooses to raise his favourite "family values" issue, he will find his Democratic opponent well prepared. As I learned one evening at the home of a Gore colleague, the Tennessean has devoted much time and thought to the dynamics of contemporary family life, reading psychoanalyst Erik Erikson and Harvard psychologist Carol Gilligan, among many others. He is prepared to carry that discussion beyond the Murphy Brown level — so Mr Quayle had better be sure he has done his homework.

It could be a show worth watching.

The Washington Post

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