Russia's centre is not holding for Yeltsin

In beating of a legislative ambush the Russian president only won himself a temporary reprieve, argues **Hari Vasudevan**

Those who gained from the December meeting of the Congress of People's Deputies were Russia's rebel democrats and centrists, not the communists. It is a tribute to the importance of the presidency in the Russian government and his immense personal influence that Mr Boris Yeltsin has been left with most of his powers intact at the end of the session.

But the occasion was far from a repeat performance of April when Mr Yeltsin had his way in almost all respects. The outpouring of dissent at the beginning and the din thereafter were not followed by any major measure against presidential authority. Nonetheless, deputies witnessed the assertion of parliamentary power as never before. This included an advocacy of parliamentary alternatives to presidential reconstruction of the Russian economy.

This was not yearning for the past and the restoration of the command economy. What is alarming for Mr Yeltsin is that the critics who were responsible for his discomfiture during the December session were not communists or national chauvinists. They were the democrats and centrists who compete with him for his own constituency.

This was behind Mr Yeltsin's hysterical references to "parliamentary alternatives" when he called for an immediate referendum on a new constitution. He understood that when the congress refused to appoint his nominee, Mr Yegor Gaidar, prime minister, various paths of reform were being projected. These alternatives were far different from the knee jerk rejection of his economic reform programme by hardline communists. The vote against Mr Gaidar and the vote against his own authority — which mustered well over 600 deputies in a house of 1,041 — was far more than an indication of communist raving. Mr Yeltsin realised parliamentary rebellion had to be met immediately with real compromise to win time. He finally settled on such a compromise.

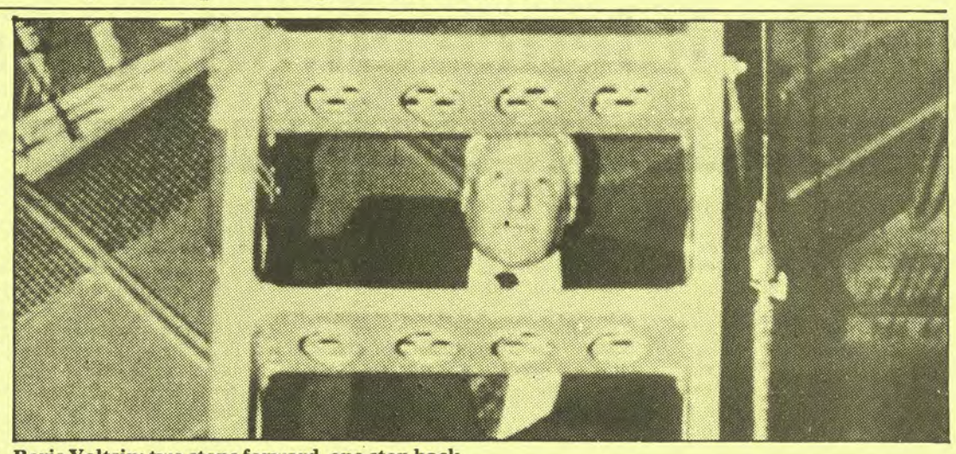
In the end, deputies shelved constitutional amendments which allowed the Supreme Soviet to determine appointments to crucial portfolios of defence, foreign and internal affairs. Instead they agreed to the appointment of Mr Viktor Chernomyrdin, who lacks Mr Gaidar's affection for millionaires, as prime minister in order to avoid an immediate crisis.

This appointment has given Mr Yeltsin a breathing space in which to apply his unconstrained authority to the completion of his own version of economic reform. It has also allowed him the use of an assistant who, if not as pliable as Mr Gaidar, is a person with whom he relates reasonably well.

Mr Chernomyrdin has been Mr Yeltsin's creature. It is for Mr Yeltsin who inducted him into the cabinet last June, along with vice premiers Shumeiko and Grigory Khiza of the "industrial" political faction, to strengthen the government's technocratic credentials. He has little love for Mr Gaidar and his radical reformist friends.

But Mr Chernomyrdin also has no connections with the rightwing opposition in the congress, the Russian Unity bloc made up of a constellation of communist hardliners and nationalist factions with names like Communists of Russia, Russia, Fatherland and the Agrarian Union. He will operate in circumstances where the president's rights over the cabinet are far reaching, where legislation is more the result of presidential decree than ministerial reflection. The appointment does not weaken the executive's preeminence in Russian politics.

But Mr Yeltsin has seen the writing on the wall. Hence his decision to move to a referendum on the constitution in spring. He has learnt from the behaviour of congress deputies that the communist bogey is insufficient to rally his own democratic and centrist supporters behind him. He requires new instruments to push on with his own style of presidential government and his own version of reform, based on the encouragement of American investment in Russia.



Boris Yeltsin: two steps forward, one step back

In the autumn of 1991, according to many democrats, Mr Mikhail Gorbachev was the main obstacle to social and economic reform in Russia. This autumn it is Mr Yeltsin whom many democrats single out as the agent of distortion in Russia's reforms and the harbinger of "*nomenklatura* reform" — that is the concentration of capitalist wealth in the hands of the old privileged caste of the USSR. Centrists consider him simply ham fisted.

Such a state of affairs was self evident in the December congress session. The challenge to Mr Yeltsin was not solely from the hardliners of the old Communist Party of the Soviet Union and nationalists. Hardliner, it should be warned, is a vague term which encompasses everyone from anti-Yeltsinite social democrats to Stalinists. These groups, contrary to the received wisdom of Western commentators, do not have a majority in the congress. The large no vote against measures proposed by Mr Yeltsin cannot be attributed to the hardliners.

The Russian Unity bloc which is at the core of the communist patriot axis only commands the loyalty of about 29 per cent of congress members — 311 deputies. They carry about the same parliamentary weight as the democratic bloc. This bloc comprises parties like Democratic Russia, Radical Democracy and so on and commands the support of about 250 deputies. This is somewhat more than the centrist constructionist bloc which coincides substantially with the Civic Union group. The constructionists can regularly count on 165 deputies.

Without the support of either democrats or centrists it would have been impossible for Russian Unity to muster the massive numbers of votes that were the source of Mr Yeltsin's discomfiture.

This is even more true of the situation in the country at large. The Russian Unity bloc is deeply divided. The patriots openly refer to the hardline communists as "deluded people". The hardliners are themselves at odds with each other and split into a host of small groups which defy attempts at unity.

Attempts among communists to find trade union support has run into heavy weather. In the mining and metallurgy industry, the organisation of a pro-Russian Unity platform has merely led to a split in the union concerned. Without democratic and centrist assistance it is unlikely that the Russian left will make such headway in the country.

However, such support is likely to be forthcoming. Democrats and centrists are convinced that the communist threat is more and more a figment of Mr Yeltsin's imagination. They are inclined to the belief that the real threat of the hour is Mr Yeltsin's and Mr Gaidar's lack of concern for containing privilege and an excessive devotion to the dictates of US and European capital. Important Russian centrists like Mr Arkady Volsky, Mr Yuri Afanasev and Ms Maria Sale verge on such opinions.

Mr Yeltsin has undoubtedly been worried about such views for some time. In a speech in the Supreme Soviet in October the president criticised the Gaidar reforms. He adopted many of the cliches of the centrist Volsky programme, counselling a move away from the excessive macroeconomic perspective of his cabinet and its lack of attention to specific problems and regional considerations.

The Congress of People's Deputies has demonstrated that many democrats and centrists are disinclined to believe Mr Yeltsin's protestations that he is unsure and thinks deeply about his actions. He has asked for the benefit of the doubt and they have been unwilling to give it to him. Admittedly Mr Yeltsin has won time through compromise. But this only puts off the day of reckoning; it does not solve his problems.

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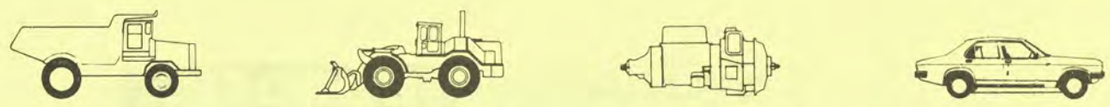

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