

Survival of the Fittest

Boris Yeltsin beat an impeachment rap and left his opposition in tatters again. But he still doesn't seem to have a plan for Russia

By PAUL QUINN-JUDGE/MOSCOW

WHEN BORIS YELTSIN WAS BAPTIZED, A tipsy priest dropped the baby in the font and left him there, struggling for air, until his terrified parents persuaded the priest to fish him out. The priest was not fazed, Yeltsin recalled in his autobiography. "The boy's a fighter [*borets* in Russian]," he said. "We'll call him Boris." Yeltsin is still a fighter, and still has luck on his side, as the collapse of an attempt to impeach him last weekend shows. He also has cunning, and a formidable state patronage system that works for him, as well as a constitution that he had made to measure. But his vision these days is not of a Russian renaissance. Instead, he is a man obsessed with simple survival. As a frustrated member of parliament, Vladimir Semago, said after Saturday's impeachment vote, "He's like a bear protecting his lair—he's defending himself and his family."

Yeltsin's fate and that of Russia have in some ways come to resemble each other. Seven years ago, Russians pinned hopes for a peaceful, prosperous future on Yeltsin. As his turbulent and sometimes bloody presidency draws to a close, both the President and his people are sunk in depression, their dreams in tatters. Millions live on the poverty line. The country has neither the confidence of investors abroad nor self-confidence at home. Life is a struggle, and there seems little prospect it will improve soon.

Last week even Yeltsin seemed to have taken on too much in the war with his old enemies in the Duma, Russia's lower parliamentary body. The day before im-

peachment discussions opened, Yeltsin fired his popular Prime Minister, Yevgeni Primakov. Primakov was officially dismissed because of the President's concern about the slow pace of economic change. In fact he was dropped because he broke all the rules in his relations with Yeltsin. He was independent, he answered back, he even interrupted the President in public. This smacked of disloyalty. And in the twilight of his career, Yeltsin values loyalty above everything else.

The communist-dominated opposition in the Duma was infuriated by Primakov's dismissal—he enjoyed good relations with the communists—but was certain that it would guarantee the 300 votes needed to impeach Yeltsin on at least one of the five counts leveled against him. The motion with the best chance of success accused Yeltsin of starting a violent civil war in the breakaway Russian province of Chechnya in 1994. But once again Yeltsin thwarted his opponents. Last Saturday one-third of the Duma failed to turn up for the most important vote in their careers. Opposition deputies claimed, without offering evidence, that the Kremlin had offered members \$30,000 each to stay away.

Most peculiarly, firebrand nationalist Vladimir Zhirinovsky and his faction—who usually denounce

the President in flamboyant and colorful terms—suddenly became passionate supporters of the government. Zhirinovsky denied that he had been bought off but made it clear he would like a high post in the next government. From the background, Yeltsin aides put out the word that the Duma could be dissolved and a state of emergency declared if the vote went against him. When the results were an-

A SINKING FEELING

Russia's economy continues to slip, so weary consumers hoard cash and barter for everything from food to cars

Inflation	↑	115%
Growth	↓	4.6%
Ruble	↓	76%
Stock Market	↓	69%

nounced, Chechnya gained the highest number of votes in favor of impeachment, 283—still 17 short of the two-thirds needed.

But in Russia these days, one battle just leads to another. The Duma presents Yeltsin with a similarly complex enigma. The very machinations he used to wriggle out of impeachment—everything from firing Primakov to making promises to the opposition—now present him with a new maze to negotiate.

With the approach of the year 2000 and the end of his second term, Yeltsin has become a prisoner of his own nightmares—that he and his family will be persecuted or prosecuted by political enemies once he leaves office, that the sort of slights and humiliations he has inflicted on others will be visited on him.

The Boris Yeltsin who occupies the Kremlin hardly resembles the man who emerged as the country's preeminent leader in 1991, when he faced down a communist coup aimed at rolling back reform. Then he was Russia's first real politician, and his thick hair and fast smile seemed to evoke a future that made Russians dreamy with hope. But Yeltsin today is an all too familiar Russian archetype. Reclusive and suspicious, the President lives in a tightly sealed world. Most presidential meetings are rigid and formal. Senior Cabinet ministers and aides have an old-fashioned phone next to their desks. Instead of a dial it bears a simple sign reading *THE PRESIDENT*. It is widely understood, however, that the phone is for answering, not calling.

In an era in which most world leaders are plugged into hundreds of sources of information, from CNN to their own intelligence reports, Yeltsin's worldview is shaped largely by a daily



press digest of about 17 pages. Whether he looks at it is another matter: a succession of aides have complained that he is loath to read. It is equally hard to persuade him to watch the TV news. Meanwhile the circle of people who have unfettered access to him is strikingly small. The circle consists of his former chief of staff Valentin Yumashev, who still wields enormous influence from the shadows; Yeltsin's daughter Tatyana; and very few others.

And this, at heart, is how Yeltsin's tragedy has become Russia's. He is no longer a man of the people—certainly not in the political sense. His once broad-reaching vision, for a Russia where all people had a vote and a share in economic prosperity, has been replaced by a narrow and dangerous selfishness. Yeltsin had the political wiles to avoid being impeached this time, but whether he deserved to be impeached or not is still a question many Russians are unhappily discussing. ■

Questions

1. Why did some Russian lawmakers attempt to impeach Boris Yeltsin? What was the result of this effort?
2. According to the profile, how has Yeltsin changed in the years since he became President?