

No Tears for Boris

Prime Minister Vladimir Putin grabs the reins in Moscow.
An inside look at the secret Kremlin plan that put him in charge

By PAUL QUINN-JUDGE/MOSCOW

NEW YEAR'S ADDRESSES, DULL CEREMONIAL affairs for most heads of state, have a habit of taking a dramatic turn in Russia. On Christmas Day in 1991, Mikhail Gorbachev announced the end of his presidency and, simultaneously, the end of the Soviet Union. Three years later, Boris Yeltsin raised his glass to the Russian army, which was at that moment storming the Chechen capital of Grozny. As the President's New Year's greetings were being broadcast, a 1,000-man unit of the Russian army was annihilated in the streets of Grozny. This year, with Russian troops again trying to fight their way into the Chechen capital, Yeltsin dropped a bombshell of his own. "Today, on the last day of the outgoing century, I am resigning," he said grimly and slowly.

His resignation took force immediately. Within a few minutes of the address being aired, he had handed over the powers of office—including control of Russia's strategic nuclear forces—to 47-year-old Prime Minister Vladimir Putin. Russian TV showed Yeltsin, already wearing his overcoat, holding the door of his ornate Kremlin study open for his successor. "Your office," he told Putin, with a stiff sweep of the arm. Soon afterward, the traffic in central Moscow was

stopped, perhaps for the last time for Boris Nikolayevich Yeltsin, as his convoy sped to his country residence. And a couple of hours later, Putin issued one of his first presidential decrees: "On Guarantees for the President of the Russian Federation...and Members of his Family." The decree provided bodyguards, pension—and total immunity

from prosecution—for Yeltsin. Putin, a veteran of the KGB and its successor, the Federal Security Service (FSB), will be Acting President until new elections are held, on March 26. By then, the people who organized Putin's lightning thrust into the Kremlin expect to ensure that he becomes Russia's next elected President.

The rapid change surprised Russians and astonished the rest of the world. U.S. officials had heard hints of an early transfer of power, but the idea seemed improbable. Yeltsin, they felt, was determined to stay. This was partly why the top officials—even as they bade Yeltsin goodbye—were struggling for a consensus on Putin, who has risen from deputy mayor of St. Petersburg to President in less than four years. Some administration officials thumbnail him as a "smooth cop"—a man tough enough to clean up Russia but charming enough to keep ties to the West. Other analysts, however, particularly at the Pentagon, are worried about

Putin's disregard for democratic practices and his reliance on a war in Chechnya to boost his popularity ratings. "All we know is that he rode to power on the back of brutalizing Chechnya again," an Army colonel said. "I don't know if that's the kind of guy we want to get too close to."

Early resignation was not how Yeltsin wanted to go. In his farewell speech he stressed

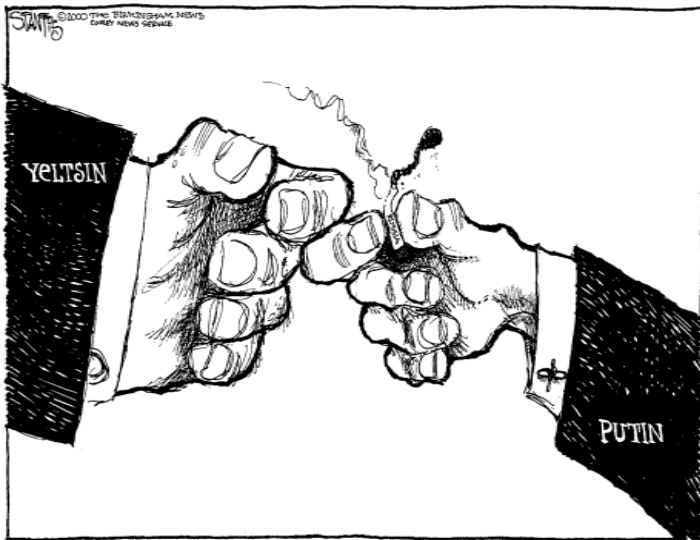
that he had dearly hoped to stay on until the end of his term, next June, and to hand over power in keeping with the timetable laid down by the constitution. But, he said, "I have come to understand that it is necessary" to leave early. There is a new "powerful man, worthy of being President," he said, referring to Putin. The speech left the eerie

WHERE PUTIN STANDS

The Military Putin thinks the armed forces are key to restoring Russian pride and power

The Economy Putin keeps his specific reform plans mysterious, but Washington believes he's a capitalist

Corruption He pledges a crack-down, but a real cleanup would mean taking on some of his supporters



THE TORCH HAS BEEN PASSED.

impression of a despondent leader who had been persuaded, gently but firmly, that it was time to go. This would explain the defeated tone that at times crept into his speech—his apology to the Russian people for the hardships they had suffered during his rule; the admission that he had been wrong in thinking Russia could be transformed in one sweep from its “gray, stagnant, totalitarian past to a bright, rich and civilized future.” In fact, “I believed this too,” he added poignantly.

Yeltsin’s resignation was planned with one end in mind—Putin’s elevation and the continued protection of the outgoing President, his family and their close associates. That tight-knit clique—ironically labeled “the Family” by Russians—had a close call in early 1999, when then Prime Minister Yevgeni Primakov unleashed a criminal investigation. It was an alarming portent of things to come and brought home to the Family the need to find a successor who would look after their interests. What intensified their concern was the fact that Primakov, who was fired in May, had rapidly become the front runner for the presidency.

So, deep inside the Kremlin, unknown to Russians, Yeltsin’s top strategists began toying with the idea of an early resignation. Gleb Pavlovsky, the political consultant who is one of the Kremlin’s main electoral strategists, told *TIME* that he proposed the idea last summer. Two key conditions had to be fulfilled for the gambit to work, Pavlovsky said. The President needed a successor he could trust completely, and all serious contenders for the pres-

idency would have to be weakened beyond the point of presenting any danger. The first condition was fulfilled when Sergei Stepashin, who had followed Primakov into the prime ministership, was fired on Aug. 9 and replaced by Putin. The second came on Dec. 19, when the political bloc the Kremlin feared most, Primakov’s Fatherland-All Russia Party, was beaten into a disappointing third place in parliamentary elections. The final decision, however, was probably made last Wednesday evening—a fact that suggests there was considerable debate within the Yeltsin camp on the desirability, or perhaps feasibility, of persuading the President to step down.

Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin was born in Leningrad (now St. Petersburg) in 1952. Little is known about his childhood and family life, though he is married and has two teenage daughters. Putin graduated from Leningrad State University with a law degree in 1975. On graduation he was quickly recruited into the KGB, which he served first in Moscow and then in East Germany. The acting President’s spy life remains as much a mystery as the rest of his biography.

Elections at the end of March mean that Putin has hardly enough time to make a serious mistake. A disaster in Chechnya could scar him, but his strategists are calculating that for the time being he has developed a Teflon coating. The biggest threat facing Putin, says Pavlovsky, is dramatically inflated popular expectations.

Last week the Russian-government website posted a long and somewhat turgid statement of Putin’s beliefs. “Russia will not soon, if ever, become a second copy of, say, the U.S. or England, where liberal values have deep historical traditions,” Putin wrote. Russians, he argued, are comfortable with a strong state, a more collective approach to society rather than Western individualism, and considerable government intervention in the economy. ■

Questions

1. When and why did Boris Yeltsin resign?
2. In what direction is Vladimir Putin expected to steer Russia?