

THE ACCIDENTAL PRESIDENT

Imagine you have a country and no one to run it. This was the predicament that Boris Yeltsin and his inner circle thought they faced in 1999.

Yeltsin had been very ill for a long time. He had suffered several heart attacks and had undergone open-heart surgery soon after he was elected for a second term in 1996. Most people believed he drank heavily—a common and easily recognizable Russian affliction, though some of those close to him insisted that Yeltsin's occasional bouts of disorientation and withdrawal stemmed from his persistent physical ailments and not from drinking. Whatever the reason, Yeltsin had become incoherent or gone missing during several state visits, devastating his supporters and disappointing his voters.

By 1999, Yeltsin, his popularity rating dipping into the single digits, was not half the politician he had been. He still used many of the tools that had once made him great, making unexpected political appointments, alternating periods of hands-on and laissez-faire gov-

ernance, strategically applying his larger-than-life persona—but by now he most resembled a boxer gone blind, flailing in the ring, striking imaginary targets and missing real ones.

In the second half of his second term, Yeltsin reshuffled his administration repeatedly and frantically. He fired a prime minister who had been in office for six years, replacing him with a thirty-six-year-old unknown, only to bring the old prime minister back six months later—to replace him again in three weeks. Yeltsin anointed one successor after another, only to grow disenchanted with each of them in a very public manner that had a way of embarrassing both the object of Yeltsin's displeasure and anyone who witnessed the display of disaffection.

The more erratic the president became, the more enemies he made—and the more his enemies banded together. A year before his second and final term was to expire, Yeltsin found himself at the top of a very fragile pyramid. His many reshufflings had forced out several political generations' worth of professionals; many ministry and federal agency heads were now young mediocrities who had been sucked into the vacuum at the top. Yeltsin's trusted allies were now so few and so cloistered that the press called them the "Family"; they included Yeltsin's daughter, Tatyana; his chief of staff, Alexander Voloshin; his former chief of staff, Valentin Yumashev, whom Tatyana would later marry; another former chief of staff, the economist and architect of Russian privatization Anatoly Chubais; and the entrepreneur Boris Berezovsky. Of the half-dozen so-called oligarchs—the businessmen who had grown superrich under Yeltsin and had repaid him by orchestrating his reelection campaign—Berezovsky was the only one to remain firmly by the president's side.

Yeltsin had no legal right to seek a third term, nor was he well enough to try, and he had every reason to fear an unfriendly successor. Yeltsin was not just an unpopular president: he was the first politician whom Russians had ever trusted—and the disappointment

his people felt now was every bit as bitter as the support he had once enjoyed had been inspiring.

The country was battered, traumatized, and disappointed. It had experienced hope and unity in the late 1980s, culminating in August 1991, when the people beat back the junta that had threatened Gorbachev's rule. It had placed its faith in Boris Yeltsin, the only Russian leader in history to have been freely elected. In return, the people of Russia got hyperinflation that swallowed up their life savings in a matter of months; bureaucrats and entrepreneurs who stole from the state and from one another in plain sight; and economic and social inequality on a scale they had never known. Worst of all, many and possibly most Russians lost any sense of certainty in their future—and with it, the sense of unity that had carried them through the 1980s and early 1990s.

The Yeltsin government had made the grave mistake of not addressing the country's pain and fear. Throughout the decade Yeltsin, who had been a true populist, riding the buses and mounting the tanks—whichever the situation happened to require—increasingly withdrew into an impenetrable and heavily guarded world of black limousines and closed conferences. His first prime minister, the brilliant young economist Yegor Gaidar, who came to epitomize post-Soviet economic reform, made it plain and public that he considered the people too dumb to engage in any discussion about reform. The people of Russia, essentially abandoned by their leaders in their hour of pain, sought solace in nostalgia—not so much in Communist ideology, which had used up its inspirational potential decades earlier, but in a longing to regain Russia's superpower status. By 1999, there was palpable aggression in the air, and this was a large part of the reason Yeltsin and the Family were rightly terrified.

Hurt and aggression have a way of rendering people blind. So the people of Russia were largely oblivious to the actual accomplishments of the Yeltsin decade. Notwithstanding the many, many wrong

turns made along the way, Russia had succeeded in privatizing much enterprise—and the biggest privatized companies had been turned around and made competitive. Despite an increase in inequality, a great majority of Russians had experienced overall improvement in their lives: the number of households with televisions, washing machines, and refrigerators grew; the number of privately owned cars doubled; the number of people traveling abroad as tourists nearly tripled between 1993 and 2000. In August 1998, Russia had defaulted on its debts, and this had caused a short but significant spike in inflation; but since then, the economy had been growing.

The media were flourishing: in an uncannily short period of time, Russians had taught themselves to make sophisticated, beautiful television, and had also created an inordinate number of print outlets and several budding electronic publications. Many though certainly not all of the country's infrastructure problems had been addressed: intercity trains were once again running on time, the postal service was working, the number of households with telephone landlines was growing. One Russian company, a cellular service provider founded in 1992, had placed its stock on the New York Stock Exchange and done very well.

Yet the government seemed entirely incapable of convincing the people that things were indeed better than they had been a couple of years earlier, and certainly better than a decade earlier. The sense of uncertainty Russians had felt ever since the Soviet Union crumbled under their feet was so great that any losses seemed to confirm their expectation of doom, while any gains were transformed into fears of further loss. Yeltsin had only his populist ways to fall back on: he could not challenge or reshape expectations; he could not lead the country in finding new ideals and a new rhetoric. He could only try to give the people what they wanted.

And what they wanted was decidedly not Yeltsin. Tens of millions of Russians held him personally responsible for every misfor-

tune they had encountered over the previous ten years, for their lost hopes and their shattered dreams—even, it seemed, for their vanished youth—and they hated him passionately. Whoever came to lead the country after Yeltsin could win easy popularity by prosecuting him. What the ailing president feared most was that a political party called *Otechestvo*—*Vsya Rossiya* (Fatherland—All Russia; the name, a hybrid of two political titles, sounds as inelegant in Russian as it does in English), headed by a former prime minister and several mayors and governors, would come to power and exact revenge on Yeltsin and the Family—and that he would spend his final days in jail.

That is where Vladimir Putin came in.

As Berezovsky tells it, the Family was casting about for a successor. Incongruities of scale haunt this story. A tiny group of people, besieged and isolated, were looking for someone to take over the world's largest landmass, with all its nuclear warheads and all its tragic history—and the only thing smaller than the pool of candidates seems to have been the list of qualifications required of them. Anyone with any real political capital and ambition—anyone with a personality commensurate with the office—had already abandoned Yeltsin. The candidates were all plain men in gray suits.

Berezovsky claims that Putin was his protégé. As he told it to me at his villa outside London—I kept my promise to forget its specific location as soon as I returned to the city—Berezovsky had met Putin in 1990, when he was looking to expand his business to Leningrad. Berezovsky was an academic turned car dealer. His business was selling the Lada—the name Russians slapped on a car shoddily made on the basis of a long-outdated Fiat. He was also importing used European cars and building service stations to fix what he sold. Putin, then a deputy of City Council chairman Anatoly Sobchak, had helped Berezovsky arrange to open a service station in Leningrad, and had declined a bribe—and that was enough to make Berezovsky remember him. "He was the first bureaucrat who did not

take bribes," Berezovsky assured me. "Seriously. It made a huge impression on me."

Berezovsky made it a habit to "run by" Putin's office whenever he was in St. Petersburg—given Berezovsky's frenetic nature, these were most likely truly run-by visits during which the oligarch would storm in, chatter excitedly, and storm out, possibly without registering much of his host's reaction. When I spoke with Berezovsky, he was hard-pressed to recall anything Putin had said to him. "But I perceived him as a sort of ally," he said. He was impressed, too, that Putin, promoted to deputy mayor of St. Petersburg when Sobchak became mayor, later refused a position with the new mayor when Sobchak failed to be reelected.

When Putin moved to Moscow in 1996 to take an administrative job at the Krenlin, the two began to see each other more frequently, at the exclusive club Berezovsky maintained in the center of the city. Berezovsky had used his connections to arrange for "No Entry" traffic signs to be placed on both ends of a city block, essentially marking a segment of a residential street as his own. (Residents of the several apartment buildings across the street could no longer legally drive up to their homes.)

But by early 1999, Berezovsky was a man under siege—like the rest of the Family but more so: he was the only one of them who valued his place in Moscow society. Locked in a desperate and apparently losing power struggle with former prime minister Yevgeny Primakov, who led the anti-Yeltsin political alliance, Berezovsky had become something of a pariah. "It was my wife's, Lena's, birthday," he told me. "And we decided not to invite a lot of people because we didn't want anyone to have to strain their relationship with Primakov. So it was just friends. And then my security tells me, 'Boris Abramovich, Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin will be arriving in ten minutes.' And I said, 'What happened?' And he said, 'He wants to wish Lena a happy birthday.' And he showed up ten minutes later,

with a bouquet of flowers. And I said, 'Volodya,* what are you doing this for? You have enough problems as it is. Are you just making a show of it?' And he says, 'I am making a show of it, yes.' And this was how he cemented our relationship. Starting with the fact that he would not accept a bribe. Then refusing to abandon Sobchak. And then this incident, which made me sure that he was a good, direct man—a KGB man, yes, but still a man." It went straight to Berezovsky's head.

Berezovsky was made in the same mold as other early Russian entrepreneurs. Like all of them, he was very intelligent, well educated, and a risk lover. Like most of them, he was Jewish, which had marked him as an outsider from the time he was a small child. Like all of them, he had outside ambition and boundless energy. He was a mathematics Ph.D. who had started in business with a car import-export and service company. By leveraging credit against hyperinflation, he had essentially made millions of dollars out of Russia's largest carmaker. In the early and middle 1990s he got into banking, continued to keep a hand in the car business, acquired part of a large oil company, and, most important, placed himself at the helm of Russian Public Television, or Channel One, the country's most-watched television channel—which gave him unfettered access to 98 percent of Russia's households.

Like other oligarchs, Berezovsky invested in Yeltsin's 1996 reelection campaign. Unlike the rest of them, he parlayed his access into a series of political appointments. He shuttled around the country, brokering political deals, negotiating for peace in Chechnya, and reveling in the spotlight. He cultivated the image of a kingmaker, certainly exaggerating his influence and just as certainly believing half of what he said or implied as he said or implied it. A couple of

*"Volodya," "Vova," "Volod'ka," and "Vovka" are all diminutive forms of "Vladimir" listed here in increasing order of familiarity.

consecutive generations of foreign correspondents in Russia believed that Berezovsky was the country's shadow ruler.

NO ONE IS EASIER to manipulate than a man who exaggerates his own influence. As the Family looked for Russia's future leader, a series of meetings between Berezovsky and Putin commenced. By this time, Putin was the head of Russia's secret police. Yeltsin had obliterated the top brass everywhere, repeatedly, and the FSB—the Federal Security Service, as the successor agency to the KGB was now called—was no exception. If Berezovsky is to be believed, he was the one who mentioned Putin to Valentin Yumashev, Yeltsin's chief of staff. "I said, 'We've got Putin, who used to be in the secret services, didn't he?' And Valya said, 'Yes, he did,' and I said, 'Listen, I think it's an option. Think about it: he is a friend, after all.' And Valya said, 'But he's got pretty low rank.' And I said, 'Look, there is a revolution going on, everything is all mixed up, so there . . .'"

As a description of the decision-making process for appointing the head of the main security agency of a nuclear power, this conversation sounds so absurd, I am actually inclined to believe it. Putin's rank was indeed low: he had left active duty as a lieutenant colonel and had received an automatic upgrade to colonel while in reserve. He would claim to have been offered a general's stars when he took over the FSB and to have turned the honor down. "It doesn't take a general to order colonels around," was how his wife explained his decision. "It takes someone who is capable of doing it."

Whether he was capable or not, Putin clearly felt insecure in his job at the FSB. He quickly began appointing people he knew from the Leningrad KGB to top positions in the federal structure. Meanwhile, he did not even feel safe in his own office: whenever he met with Berezovsky, the two would take their conversations to a disused elevator shaft behind Putin's office; this was the only place in the

building Putin believed their discussions would not be recorded. In this desolate and dysfunctional setting, Berezovsky met with Putin almost every day to talk about his battle with former prime minister Primakov—and, eventually, about becoming president of Russia. The potential candidate was skeptical at first, Berezovsky recalled, but he was willing to listen. One time Putin carelessly shut the door that separated the shaft from the hallway in front of his office, and the pair got locked in the elevator shaft. Putin had to pound on the wall for someone to let them out.

In the end, Berezovsky, who fully felt he represented Russia, courted Putin. In July 1999, Berezovsky flew to Biarritz, in southwest France, where Putin was vacationing. "I called him ahead of time," Berezovsky remembered. "I told him I wanted to come and discuss something serious with him. I got there; he was vacationing with his wife and two daughters, who were still very young at the time, in these very modest condominium-type accommodations. It was like an apartment building slash apartment hotel. A small kitchen, a bedroom or a few bedrooms. Really very modest." By this time, Russian millionaires, of whom Putin no doubt was one, had become accustomed to taking their vacations in giant villas on the Côte d'Azur: this was why Berezovsky was so impressed with Putin's unassuming holiday arrangement.

"We spent an entire day in conversation. In the end, he said, 'All right, let's give it a shot. But you do understand that Boris Nikolayevich [Yeltsin] has to be the one to say it to me.'"

All of this resembled an old shtetl joke. A matchmaker calls on an aging tailor to discuss the possibility of arranging his middle daughter's marriage to the heir to the Rothschild empire. The tailor puts up several objections: he has no business marrying off his middle daughter before the older ones have found a match, he does not want his daughter to move far from home, he is not so sure the Rothschilds are as pious as his daughter's husband ought to be.

The matchmaker counters each argument with his own: this is, after all, the heir to the Rothschild fortune. Finally, the old tailor relents. "Excellent," says the matchmaker. "Now all I have to do is talk to the Rothschilds."

Berezovsky reassured Putin. "I said, 'Volodya, what are you talking about? I was sent here by him, just to make sure there was no misunderstanding, so it wouldn't happen that he would say it to you and you responded, like you have to me on many occasions, by saying you don't want this.' So he agreed. I returned to Moscow and told Yumashev about our conversation. And a short time later—I no longer remember exactly how many days later—Putin returned to Moscow and met with Boris Nikolayevich. And Boris Nikolayevich had a complicated reaction. At least, I remember his saying one thing to me: 'He seems all right, but he is kind of small.'"

Yeltsin's daughter, Tatyana Yumasheva, remembers the story differently. She recalls Yeltsin's then chief of staff, Voloshin, locked in an argument with a former chief of staff, Chubais: both agreed Putin was a good choice for successor, but Chubais did not believe the Russian parliament would confirm Putin as prime minister. While both were presenting their cases to Yeltsin, Berezovsky flew to Biarritz to pop the question—because he wanted Putin and the rest of the country to believe he was the kingmaker.

Like the other participants in the presidential selection process, however, Tatyana Yumasheva remembers the panic with which they viewed the political situation and the country's future. "Chubais believed that the Duma would not confirm Putin. There would be three votes and then the dissolution of parliament.* Communists, united with [former premier] Primakov and [Moscow mayor Yuri]

*The Russian constitution allowed Yeltsin to force three votes on the prime minister's candidacy and then dissolve parliament.

Luzhkov would garner a firm majority in the next election, possibly even a constitutional majority. After that, the country would be on a slippery slope to catastrophe, and it could go as far as civil war. The best possible scenario was a neo-Communist regime, slightly adapted to more modern conditions; but business would be nationalized again, borders would be closed, and many media outlets would be shut down."

"The situation was bordering on catastrophe," was how Berezovsky described it. "We had lost time, and we had lost our positional advantage. Primakov and Luzhkov were organizing countrywide. Around fifty governors [out of eighty-nine] had already signed on to their political movement. And Primakov was a monster who wanted to reverse everything that had been accomplished in those years."

Why, if the Family saw the situation as desperate, did they see Putin as their savior? Chubais said he was an ideal candidate. Berezovsky clearly thought he was a brilliant choice. Who did they think Putin was, and why did they think he was qualified to run the country?

POSSIBLY THE MOST BIZARRE FACT about Putin's ascent to power is that the people who lifted him to the throne knew little more about him than you do. Berezovsky told me he never considered Putin a friend and never found him interesting as a person—a strong statement from a man so ebullient that he tends to draw anyone with intellectual ambition firmly and enthusiastically into his orbit and hold him there by sheer magnetism. The fact that Berezovsky never found Putin attractive enough to try to pull him close suggests he never perceived a spark of curiosity in the other man. But when he considered Putin as a successor to Yeltsin, he seemed to assume that the very qualities that had kept them at arm's length would make

Putin an ideal candidate: Putin, being apparently devoid of personality and personal interest, would be both malleable and disciplined. Berezovsky could not have been more wrong.

As for Chubais, he had known Putin briefly when he served as an economic adviser to Mayor Sobchak in St. Petersburg and Putin had just been appointed deputy. He remembered Putin as he had been during his first year of working for the mayor: it had been a uniquely charged year, and Putin had been uncharacteristically energetic and curious, always asking questions. Chubais had left St. Petersburg in November 1991 to join the government in Moscow, and his initial impressions had remained untempered.

And what did Boris Yeltsin himself know about his soon-to-be-anointed successor? He knew this was one of the few men who had remained loyal to him. He knew he was of a different generation: unlike Yeltsin, his enemy Primakov, and his army of governors, Putin had not come up through the ranks of the Communist Party and had not, therefore, had to publicly switch allegiances when the Soviet Union collapsed. He looked different: all those men, without exception, were heavysset and, it seemed, permanently wrinkled; Putin—slim, small, and by now in the habit of wearing well-cut European suits—looked much more like the new Russia Yeltsin had promised his people ten years earlier. Yeltsin also knew, or thought he knew, that Putin would not allow the prosecution or persecution of Yeltsin himself once he retired. And if Yeltsin still possessed even a fraction of his once outstanding feel for politics, he knew that Russians would like this man they would be inheriting, and who would be inheriting them.

Everyone could invest this gray, ordinary man with what they wanted to see in him.

On August 9, 1999, Boris Yeltsin named Vladimir Putin prime minister of Russia. A week later he was confirmed in that position by a wide majority of the Duma: he proved just as likable, or at least unobjectionable, as Yeltsin had intuited.

Two

THE ELECTION WAR

You know, some people are saying the FSB is behind the bombings," my editor, one of the smartest people I knew, said to me when I walked in one afternoon in September 1999. "Do you believe it?"

For three weeks, Moscow and other Russian cities had been terrorized by a series of explosions. The first occurred on August 31 in a crowded shopping mall in the center of Moscow. One person died, and more than thirty people were injured. But it was not immediately clear that this explosion was anything more frightening than a giant prank, or perhaps a shot fired in a business dispute.

Five days later, an explosion brought down a large part of an apartment block in the southern city of Buynaksk, not far from Chechnya. Sixty-four people were killed and one hundred and forty-six injured. But all of the building's residents were Russian military officers and their families—so, although the dead included twenty-three children, the blast did not have the effect of making