

Cathy Young

# Russia Votes Yes

*But it also voted no.*

*Moscow*

**M**oscow streets in 1993 bring to mind those “find ten things that are wrong with this picture” games with a palm tree sticking out in the middle of a snowy mountainscape. Looking around as I stood on (unrenamed) Komsomol Avenue, I was thinking that at least 75 percent of what I saw—from the store sign bluntly proclaiming PRODUKTY (“Food”) in block letters to the squat, ugly Palace of Youth building with mosaics of robust and merry young men and women on the walls—was exactly as in 1980, only shabbier and dirtier, with more garbage on the sidewalks and more jagged holes in the pavement. But here and there, one could spot something to alarm a Rip Van Winkle from the Brezhnev era: a Kodak sign; the kiosk with its display of flamboyant liqueurs, Marlboros and Winstons, panty hose, dusty shampoo bottles, endless Mars bars, a handwritten sign reading \$/DM EXCHANGE; a weatherbeaten notice on a wall of APARTMENT FOR RENT (DOLLARS ONLY); a large poster saying, in lacy old Slavonic letters, HAVE A HAPPY HOLY



EASTER on one side and CHRIST IS RISEN! on the other. As two middle-aged women passed by, I caught a snippet of conversation: “Well, no one can hear us now—do tell me how much it costs!”

It was mid-April, and not only were the Russian Orthodox celebrating Easter—complete with three-hour TV coverage of all the pomp and circumstance of the midnight mass in one of the capital’s main cathedrals, the camera often

focusing on Yeltsin standing with his wife and top government officials—but democrats and anti-democrats of all stripes were consumed by referendum fever. VOTE IN THE REFERENDUM! RUSSIA’S FATE IS IN OUR HANDS! screamed white-and-blue banners all over downtown Moscow; and indeed many people felt that their fate was hanging in the balance. The media did little to help calm their nerves. The popular evening daily *Vechernyaya Moskva* ran a front-page report about Communist death squads lying in wait for Yeltsin. For lighter fare, there was a futuristic tale of the year 2000: under a “red-and-brown” dictatorship that has banned cars and made the wearing of traditional Russian bark sandals mandatory, a citizen doing time in a labor camp rues his failure to vote in the ’93 referendum that Yeltsin lost by a single vote.

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Not everyone was impressed. My driver Volodya (whom the constant reader may recall from "Hard Times," *TAS*, February 1992; his son-in-law is in business now and his wife is taking up farming) told me grimly that he wasn't voting: "I'm sick and tired of all these games they're playing with us. They say the results of this referendum can't be legally enforced anyway, right? Well, then, why should I bother?"

There were skeptics among the more sophisticated as well—such as Tamara, a literary translator, and her husband Sandro, a science professor, who were disgusted by the crude "Soviet-style" pro-Yeltsin propaganda campaign in the media and felt that both sides were almost equally loathsome. Tamara held her nose and voted after all, resigning herself to being needled by Sandro.

Most of my acquaintances, however, were appalled by the cynics. "Apathy" was out and rallies were in again, and people were talking politics. Walking in the crowded Arbat metro station behind two women in their forties, I heard one say emphatically, "These idiots get here to Moscow and think that just because they're deputies they can do anything—if he likes, he can decree that from this day on, Arbat will be spelled with an O." I couldn't help chuckling, and the woman turned to me eagerly: "We're telling it like it is, right?"

"Sure," I nodded, taking advantage of my unaccented Russian.

"You're on our side too?" she beamed, and I asked, a little gingerly, what side that was. "Why, the good side—the president's side! You're for Yeltsin, aren't you?" I said I was, and we parted all smiles.

Still, there were good reasons to be put off by the pro-Yeltsin campaign, even if such reservations might be overshadowed by fear of the other side's victory. All one had to do was look at some of the posters issued by Yeltsin supporters. One showed a grinning, cocky worker in overalls and a visor cap holding four ballots marked *Yes, Yes, No, Yes*, the politically correct answers to the four referendum questions (confidence in Yeltsin, approval of his policies, new presidential elections, new parliamentary elections), while four snake-like microphones representing deputies in the Congress hissed at him menacingly. The caption read,

*Never trusted them one bit!  
I vote Yes, Yes, No, Yes—that's it!*

The worker had a decidedly Soviet, brave-common-man look about him. Another poster of a smiling Yeltsin, clenched fist held up, flatly declared, A PRESIDENT MUST

ALWAYS WIN (a motto that would delight certain folks in Washington, D.C.), amidst signatures of people who were utterly unknown to me but turned out to be Russian rock stars. (There was a "Rock for Yeltsin" concert on Red Square, too.)

The campaign was star-studded enough to match the Clinton White House: actors, musicians, and athletes appeared on pro-Yeltsin posters and fliers and figured prominently in popular newspapers like *Vechernyaya Moskva* and the irreverent, tabloid-style *Kuranty*. *Kuranty* introduced a daily front-page "My Choice" column featuring distinguished people to suit every taste, from Elena Bonner to stand-up comedian Gennady Khazanov, who said, "I will vote Yes, Yes, No, Yes so that we don't get a régime that has only one word for us: No!"

Veteran TV sportscaster Nikolai Ozerov, currently the head of the Spartak soccer fan club, made a bathetic statement refuting the claim of the Communist newspaper *Sovetskaya Rossiya* that the club sympathized with the anti-Yeltsinites, and affirming his loyalty to the president and to the red, white, and blue of democratic Russia. This was especially touching to those who remembered Ozerov on TV in the old days, faithfully presenting every Soviet

athletic victory as a triumph for Communism and every defeat as a result of evil anti-Soviet plotting by judges or referees.

*Vechernyaya Moskva* had a daily one-hour direct line for callers to express their opinions on the referendum, with comments published the next day—from the Jewish engineer who said that she and her mother lived in fear of fascism and were voting for Yeltsin to avert this threat; from the retired woman who said Yeltsin's opponents were bloodthirsty madmen, adding, "I receive a minimum pension, but I'm not going hungry—no one's going hungry, it's all lies"; from a nameless lady who said, "We'll tie your Yeltsin to the railroad tracks, and all of you too! [expletives deleted] You filthy Yids! [expletives deleted] Scum!" On April 19, the newspaper peevishly complained about being unfairly accused by some readers of biased selection of opinions, and resorted to listing all the calls of the previous day; pro-Yeltsin callers outnumbered anti-Yeltsin ones by four-to-one. Occasionally, there were voices of hesitancy, such as one Galina Aleksandrovna: "I'm still undecided. But your recent headline, 'Vote for Yeltsin if You Want to Live,' was awful. What is this supposed to mean—if you're against, you'll be killed?" (Others praised the headline for conveying a proper sense of urgency.)

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# Time of Troubles

by Adrian Karatnycky

Russia's "centrist" forces are not go-slow-reformers but proponents of a statist economy, who regard the disintegration of the USSR as a regrettable and reversible event. An extremist majority in Russia's parliament—consisting of two-thirds of deputies—poses a constant threat to President Yeltsin and Russian democracy. Although the Russian people—including the Russian military—gave President Yeltsin their backing in the April 26 referendum, the Civic Union's "Great Russian" ideas have the potential to win the support of large segments of Russia's electorate in this autumn's likely elections.

Russia's May Day celebrations were marred by extremist neo-Communist violence in which a policeman was killed by a mob. Instigated by lumpenized shirts from the Working Russia movement, the protests were backed by the National Salvation Front, whose leaders also head Russia's largest parliamentary bloc, Russian Unity. Russia's erratic parliamentary speaker Ruslan Khasbulatov added to tensions by declaring that Yeltsin had lost the referendum and had succeeded in splitting the country. With Yeltsin's disloyal Vice President Aleksandr Rutskoy a heartbeat away from power, Russia's political scene remains unpredictable.

An alliance of Russian ultranationalists and the main currents of the Civic Union would be dangerously similar to the balance of political forces that dominates Serbia. Like the Serbian political majority, anti-Yeltsin forces want to revise borders, challenge the West, protect a state economy, and restore a multinational federal state. While Yeltsin has taken on the neo-Communists, he has tried to dampen the appeal of ultranationalists by adopting an assertive Russian foreign policy.

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Under intense nationalist pressure, Yeltsin has reluctantly permitted Russian troops to be engaged in combat in Tajikistan, Georgia, and Moldova. And on March 29, Russia stopped its agreed withdrawal of forces in the Baltic states.

Russia's 1993 oil production may fall 20 percent compared to 1991—and Russia plans to make neighboring Ukraine bear the brunt of this decline. Kiev has been told it will receive 15-20 million metric tons of oil this year—around 50 percent of the 1992 allotment—at twice the price Russia will charge Belarus and other, more accommodating states. In January, Russia and Kazakhstan created an energy exporters' group within the CIS to pressure energy-dependent republics into greater political, economic, and military integration.

Such foreign bullying dovetails ominously with developments in Ukraine itself, where 242 of the parliament's 450 deputies have called for a motion to relegalize the banned Communist Party to be put on the legislative calendar. Parliamentary Speaker Ivan Plyushch has tried to pack the Supreme Court with ex-Communist cronies, who could overturn the ban. Forces opposed to economic reform and statehood have allied in a Labor Party that derives support from industrial directors. And a May Day celebration by the "Working Ukraine" coalition brought 5,000 pro-Communists onto the streets of Kiev.

Since the failed August coup of 1991, Ukraine's politics has evolved almost as a photographic negative of Russia's. While Yeltsin's democratic reformers took power in Russia's government early on, in Ukraine ex-Communists clung to power by embracing the patriotic slogans and nation-building agenda of the democratic nationalist Rukh party. But as Ukraine's president and prime minister plunged the nation into deep economic crisis, opposition voices gained a foothold in a coalition government, just as President Yeltsin was surrendering key democratic ministers to the anti-reform axe.

A campaign by Rukh and other demo-

cratic parties to force new elections exerted pressure on ex-Communist legislators, who feared losing office for supporting a corrupt, ineffectual government. A strike of railway, airline, and mine workers paralyzed the country in September 1992 and was the first sign of social unrest.

Whatever the political differences, Ukraine's economic balance sheet much resembles Russia's. Under the government of Communist holdover Vitold Fokin, the first nine months of 1992 saw Ukraine's gross national product fall by 12 percent, gross social product (spending on pensions and other social services) by 18 percent, industrial production by 19.7 percent, production of consumer goods by 12 percent, and the production of foodstuffs by 17.5 percent. Monthly inflation exceeded 30 percent and the budget deficit was 44 percent of GDP.

In October 1992, economic crisis loosened the grip of the nomenklatura and led to Fokin's ouster at the hands of Prime Minister Leonid Kuchma and his reform coalition. As the director of the Pivdenmash machine-building complex—which produced ICBMs—Kuchma was not an apparatchik but a design engineer. As prime minister he quickly entrusted key ministries to democrats, and Deputy Prime Minister Viktor Penzenyk has sought to make reform "irreversible" by drafting plans for widespread privatization. But despite Kuchma's efforts at budget and money-supply cuts, Ukraine's dependence on Russian fuel is certain to plague its efforts at economic stability.

As in Russia, the military has stayed out of the fray. The Ukrainian Defense Ministry was started from scratch in October 1991, before Ukrainian independence was proclaimed by referendum, and so was staffed by officers ready to take risks—unlike Russia's, which inherited functionaries from the old order and used the structure of the old Soviet Defense Ministry and Red Army. Moreover, Defense Minister Konstantin Morozov relied on