PUBLIC OPINION IN THE LAST MONTHS OF THE SOVIET UNION

By Tatyana I. Zaslavskaya

For a few days last August the entire world watched with worry and anticipation news from the USSR. People were shocked that the president of the USSR had been suspended by a self-nominated GKChP (Gosudarstvennyi Komitet po Chrezvychainomu Polozheniyu; in English, The State Committee for Emergency Conditions). Many understood that a putschists' victory would likely have led to resumption of the "two systems' struggle," a return to the arms race, further pauperization of the USSR and, quite likely as a result, growth in its aggressiveness. Together with acute ethnic conflicts, social contradictions, and the presence of nuclear weapons in the republics, it would have turned the country into a "powder-box" for Europe.

The victory over the putschists resulted from many independent actions among those who did not want to say good-bye to liberty and democracy. Boris Yeltsin and the team behind him played a tremendous role. But by themselves they would not have prevailed. Thousands of Muscovites came to defend the Russian White House. The best units of the Army passed to Yeltsin's side. The leaders of several republics, as well as of Russia's cities and regions, refused to recognize the GKChP as legitimate and obey its orders. Many large enterprises and mines declared themselves on strike until the activity of the GKChP was stopped. To all this we must add the thousands of courageous deeds by ordinary individuals. The combined actions of these heterogeneous forces produced just the right combination to make the putschists retreat.

Two-thirds of Russians whom we interviewed said they were pleased that the attempted coup failed. But for many of them, happiness sprang more from antipathy toward the unpopular putschists than from support for the established government. Forty-five percent thought their lives would have changed for the worse had the coup succeeded; only 7% believed there would have been an improvement. The remainder either said that their lives would remain essentially unaffected (21%), or didn't know the effect (27%).[1]

Further Blows to Political Leadership

The attempted coup caused public confidence in political leadership at large to drop. In September, two-thirds of our respondents said their confidence had declined; in October, over three-fourths said so.[2] Gorbachev's median score as a politician, based on a scale of 1 to 10 (with 1 the lowest, "no confidence" position), in October was about 4.[3] Only 17% of interviewees in a September survey indicated full approval of his political activities, and only a third listed him as one of the five or six persons they considered to be political leaders of the country.[4]

Confidence in Yeltsin did climb. In September, more than half of the interviewees said they approved his political course; almost two-thirds (63%) put his name among the political leaders of the country.[5] This relatively high level of confidence and support was used by Yeltsin to push for rapid implementation of reforms. The most important actions were: (1) division of the USSR into 15 sovereign states, including an independent Russia; (2) suspension and suppression of the activities of the Communist Party; and (3) liquidation of the all-Union political investigation service, the powerful KGB. Along with dozens of high-ranking government, army, KGB, and militia executives, many odious regional and republican leaders were arrested and put to trial. Many democrats took the posts thus vacated. According to a September survey, about half the public expressed satisfaction with these developments, while a quarter regretted them and another quarter were mostly indifferent to them. On the whole, confidence in the democratic forces rose.

Nevertheless, this confidence is very unstable. People continue to react keenly to the views, intentions, and actions of the democrats in power. For example, a survey of city dwellers in October 1991 exposed a rather wide spectrum of opinions in evaluating Yeltsin's political activity.[6] (See Figure 1). Even at the height of his prestige, he had many detractors and left many others unsure about him.

In October, only 37% of Russia's urban population felt that its leaders had the ability and other qualities to take the Republic out of the crisis in the near future; 39% said they would not be able to do so. One of the reasons for this distrust or skepticism was the conflict inside the Russian government which arose after the putsch was suppressed. Sixty percent of the respondents viewed this conflict not as a collision of principles, but as a struggle for power between various groups. Another source was the opinion among a substantial minority that order was continuing to break down. The October survey found that 30% of city dwellers thought there was less order in the country since the putsch, while only 6% thought there was more.[7]

Growing Pessimism

About one-third of the interviewees (nearly half of those with an opinion) thought that, after the putsch had been suppressed, Russia's leaders had a real opportunity to implement radical economic reforms. But only 17% believed that the leaders had seized this opportunity.[8] Pessimism deepened as summer turned to autumn. In June (just after the presidential election in Russia) a worsening of the political situation was anticipated by only 30%; in September, by

38%; and in October, by 48%. The share of those anticipating a deterioration in the economy rose during that period from 47 to 69%.[9] In September 1991 only one third were hopeful looking to the next twelve months; almost one-half were worried. Two-thirds believed the hardest times still lay ahead. All this testifies that the "democratic euphoria" of late August had already been largely replaced by disappointment and fatigue, due primarily to the collapse of the economy.

In September 1991 we included in one of our questionnaires twelve tasks facing Soviet society, from which each respondent was to select the three deemed most important. Four-fifths chose the tasks of "establishing order in the country," "establishing order in the economy," and "ensuring high rates of economic development." Given the scarcity of food, rising prices, and general economic decline, these concerns are hardly surprising. Ties between republics, regions, and enterprises, previously held together by administrative means, were disintegrating more and more. And market relations were only slowly being formed. The sense of need for restoring order and structure was strong.

The economic problem that necessitated restructuring social relations not only had not been solved, but had become even more acute. Almost one-half (47%) of interviewees expressed their readiness to work harder, if their work were better paid and the labor better organized. But in order to mobilize these resources, an entirely different system of economic relations, first of all property relations, is necessary. It presupposes privatization of state-owned enterprises, land given to peasants, currency reform, an effective tax system, etc. The survey done October 19-20 in 14 Russian cities showed that 63% approved granting Yeltsin emergency powers for urgent implementation of economic reforms (44% "fully approved" this measure, 25% disapproved.)[10] In July 1991, 65% declared their support for a transition to a market economy, including 45% who supported it strongly.[11]

One Cheer for Capitalism

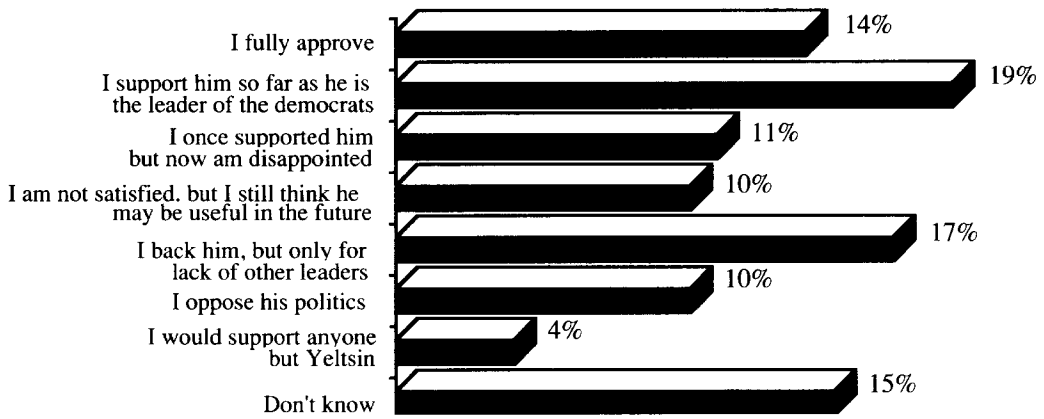
The growth in interest in free enterprise and business is substantial. Thirty percent in an August-September 1991 survey said they were "the kind of person who could start his own business."[12] Another survey in August found that 25% preferred to start their own business as a way to improve their material situation.[13] In response to a somewhat different question in July 1991, 22% preferred to own or lease their own shop or farm; the rest preferred to do wage labor, but in joint ventures, co-ops, or privately owned companies (66%) rather than at state-owned enterprises (13%). Twenty-one percent preferred to work abroad![14] Prejudices of Soviet people against "capitalist" forms of managing the economy, characteristic of them at previous times, are gradually giving way to more pro-private-sector views.

Changes are evident in notions of "socially fair income distribution." Forty-nine percent of our interviewees took the position that "to get people to pay more attention to the results of their work, there must be greater differences in what they are paid;" the "egalitarian" position was held by 34%. A majority (56% to 33%) believed that state authorities should not limit citizens' personal income. Especially sharp changes have taken place in public opinion about millionaires—the very idea of whose appearance used to sicken people. A July 1991 survey found one half of the respondents declaring that they "had nothing against people becoming millionaires," especially "if the money is earned honestly." Forty percent opposed such wealth acquisition only because "such a lot of money cannot be earned honestly." Just 5% expressed a rejection of millionaires on principle, "even if their money is earned honestly."[15]

An Explosive Situation

These survey results indicate that radical reforms aimed at the privatization of production and the development of free

Figure 1: Very Mixed Marks for Boris Yeltsin



Question: "Which of the following stands on Boris Yeltsin's activities comes closest to your own?"
Source: Penta-09 survey; October 19-20, 1991. 1,065 respondents in 14 Russian cities.

enterprise are not only necessary but socially possible. At the same time, the social situation should not be oversimplified. It is contradictory and explosive. The predicament is that reform requires unpopular measures, leading to deterioration of people's immediate material welfare.

Agreement to a temporary lowering of their living standards for the sake of economic stabilization was expressed by only 8% of the interviewees. This position is easy to understand. For most people, the small reserves of money and material goods they had stored in the mid-eighties have been exhausted. Inept early reform efforts brought no good effect and made people unwilling and often unable to bear further reforms. During the course of Perestroika, the living standards of the populace have fallen steadily. A further deterioration of their family financial situation was anticipated in August 1991 by 38%, and its amelioration, only by 10%.[16] Almost two-thirds feared that rising prices might cause their families to become poor.[17]

The economic and political difficulties experienced by the population are coupled with a troubled state of consciousness, the distinctive traits of which are pessimism, nostalgia for the past, uncertainty, and fear of the future. People are exhausted by the scarcity of goods, inflation, crime, and the decay of central and local authority. They are demanding that order be restored. There are numerous signs their endurance, if not fully exhausted, is very near to an end. Patience with social experimentation is rapidly being exhausted. Even Yeltsin and democratic leaders in the new Commonwealth of Independent States, relatively popular as they are, may be held to a reckoning soon.

"The economic and political difficulties experienced by the population are coupled with a troubled state of consciousness, the distinctive traits of which are pessimism, nostalgia for the past, uncertainty, and fear of the future. People are exhausted by the scarcity of goods, inflation, crime, and the decay of central and local authority."

Endnotes

[1] Survey POF 91-9, September 1991, of 1943 people from 20 regions of the USSR, 9 Union Republics, urban and rural population. Question: "How, in your opinion, would your life have been affected, had the State Emergency Committee seized and retained power?" All surveys referred to in this article were conducted by the Soviet Center for Public Opinion and Market Research.

[2] Survey POF10, October 5-10, 1991, of 2,053 people from 13 regions of Russia, the Ukraine, and central Asia, urban and rural population. "How was your confidence in the Soviet leadership affected over the last few months?"

[3] Survey Penta-09, October 19-20, 1991, of 1,065 people in 14 cities of the RSFSR. "How would you rate the political activity of Mikhail Gorbachev, using this scale from 1 to 10?"

[4] POF 91-9. "To what extent do you approve of the activities of Gorbachev?" "Please name five or six persons whom you consider political leaders of the country now."

[5] POF 91-9. "To what extent do you approve of the activities of Yeltsin?" "Please name five or six persons whom you consider political leaders of the country now."

[6] Penta-09. "Which of the following stands on Boris Yeltsin's activities come closest to your own?"

[7] Penta-09. "Do you agree with the position that the present leadership is capable of taking the Republic out of the crisis?" "What, in your opinion, is behind the present controversy among the Russian leadership: a collision of different economic programs, or only a struggle for power?" "Would you say that there has been more, or less order in the country since the events of August 22?"

[8] Penta-09. "Do you agree with the opinion that after the events of August 22 the chances of carrying out radical economic reforms increased?" "Do you agree with the opinion that the republican leadership has taken advantage of that chance?"

[9] POF10. "What can the USSR expect in economics? Political life?"

[10] Penta-09. "Would you approve or not of vesting Yeltsin with emergency powers for carrying out urgent economic reforms?"

[11] Survey Omnibus 9, July 1991, of 3,003 people in 27 regions of the USSR, 10 union republics. "Do you support the transition to a market economy?"

[12] Survey POF4, August-September 1991, of 1,964 people in 11 regions of the RSFSR, urban and rural population. "Do you agree or not with the following statement: I am the kind of person who could start his own business."

[13] Survey Omnibus 10, August 1991, of 3,004 people; 20 regions in 9 union republics, including 11 regions of the RSFSR. "Which way of improving your material situation would you consider most acceptable to you?"

[14] Omnibus 9,"Which do you prefer? Open your own cafe, service-shop, shop, have a farm; lease a farm, shop, service-shop; work at an employee-leased enterprise; work at a joint venture enterprise; be employed by a private owner; be employed by a co-op; become a member of a co-op; work at a state-owned enterprise, state farm; work abroad; doesn't matter?"

[15] Omnibus 9. "What is your attitude towards the fact that there will be millionaires in this country?"

[16] Omnibus 10. "Do you think the material situation of your family will change in the next year or two? If so, then how?"

[17] Omnibus 10. "Do you fear that in a situation of rising prices your family might become poor?"

Tatyana Zaslavskaya is director of the Soviet Center for Public Opinion and Market Research