

A hero of our time?

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Boris Yeltsin died today, but in the eyes of many Americans the Russia he hoped for - a market-driven democracy - died several years ago. That is not how Russians will think about his passing. But the distinct associations that Americans and Russians have regarding Yeltsin are just one of the many ways in which the two countries, indeed societies, have grown apart.

If Americans, and particularly former Clinton administration officials, remember Yeltsin as the man who tried to democratise Russia, Russians will remember him as the man who helped push for the break up of the Soviet Union and then presided over - even encouraged - chaos and humiliation. Vast majorities of Russians today agree with President Vladimir Putin that the collapse of the Soviet Union was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century. Far from being celebrated, Yeltsin, and of course Gorbachev, are principally seen as responsible for these events.

For those of us who greeted the end of the cold war and the collapse of the Soviet Union as the beginning of a new, possibly golden era for democracy and human rights, it is hard to convey the sense of optimism and hope that permeated the early Yeltsin era. For my generation of Russia experts, now in our 40s, it was especially heady. We were old enough to have been to the Soviet Union, but young enough to have dropped what we were doing and moved to Russia to help in what we thought would be a positive transition. In the early 1990s, many of us fully embraced the ideal of a new Russia: a multi-party country with a vibrant civil society that was compliant with international law and an important partner in the Euro-Atlantic community. But in April 2007, this view seems at best horrendously misguided and at worst stunningly naïve. What went wrong?

While many in Russian civil society, media and politics remember the 1990s as remarkably free of fear, others experienced a decade that was marked by deprivation - and, at the same time, came to see Yeltsin as the drunken poodle of the West.

When asked in 2002 what they liked about Vladimir Putin, not by any measure a democrat, Russian men and women in focus groups gushed that "he's not like Yeltsin; he's sober; he commands respect on the world stage; he stands up to world leaders." I thought this view would be short-lived, but just months ago I heard the same lines again. While the reality of Russia today - besides high oil prices - is one of multiple public health crises, wide-spread police corruption, army abuse, pockets of poverty, rising xenophobia and unresolved conflict in the north caucasus, the Putin era is perceived as antithesis of the Yeltsin era. In Putin, Russians see order instead of chaos.

To be sure, there were terrible mistakes made - including the weirdly over-personalized

relationship between Bill Clinton and Boris Yeltsin. The Bill and Boris show enabled American officials to praise as "success stories" wobbly public institutions that the Russian public knew to be highly imperfect. The tendency to characterize television stations that were controlled by a handful of oligarchs as "independent media", or to describe elections that were clearly manipulated as "free and fair", had a devastating effect on how young Russians think about democracy. The collapse of the ruble in 1998 and economic suffering only compounded these sentiments. Nato's use of force in Kosovo in March 1999 left a particular mark on the elite, and some evidence suggests senior Russian military officials then began planning the second war in Chechnya (which began in October of the same year).

The other day, on a research trip to St Petersburg, I visited the cemetery where the 470,000 dead from the blockade of Leningrad are buried. Overwhelmed by the dignity and sadness of the place, I was suddenly struck by the thought that the high point of democracy and human rights in Russia may have already passed. Russia has already experienced as much democracy as I am likely to see in my professional lifetime. That feeling of possibility from the 1990s is not likely to return.

And then I thought of the young Russians that I have listened to so often in focus groups. This is not at all how they see it. They are feeling proud. They are confident. They don't seem to care about democracy or worry too much for human rights. Sadly, I fear this is the shared legacy of all of us who were involved in the 1990s.