

Yeltsin represents lesser of two evils

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GUEST COLUMN

On April 25, according to the U.S. news media, an "unexpectedly large" turnout of 65.7 percent of the eligible Russian voters went to the polls. An "impressive" 59 percent pulled the lever signifying a vote of confidence in Russian President Boris Yeltsin. Even "more surprising," a "remarkable" 53 percent supported Yeltsin's economic reforms. Yeltsin won a "moral victory" in that 64 percent of those who voted wanted a stubborn and conservative parliament to face early elections.

Indeed, by U.S. political standards these numbers are impressive and remarkable.

But Russia is not the United States. These superlatives are proclaimed in a historical and cultural vacuum, ignorant of Russian political history. American analysts are imposing U.S. election standards and interpretations on Russia. From a Russian perspective, the election returns tell a different story — Yeltsin and his economic policies are not well-liked by many Russians.

Russians were asked to vote for Yeltsin or nobody. If you count the non-voters, nobody won by a large majority. When non-voters are factored into the election returns, Yeltsin's 59 percent plurality is reduced to 39 percent. In other words, 61 percent of the eligible voters either cast a vote against Yeltsin or chose

not to vote.

By not voting, these swing non-voters allowed Yeltsin to win by default because he is a known entity. If Yeltsin had lost, then, indeed, "nobody" would have won — no alternative candidate was offered to the people, just like in the old days of one-party rule.

"Nobody" could very well mean anarchy, which would be even worse than Yeltsin. So many people stayed home and decided to put up with the known entity a while longer. In order to understand this view of the Russian vote, it is necessary to review Russian history.

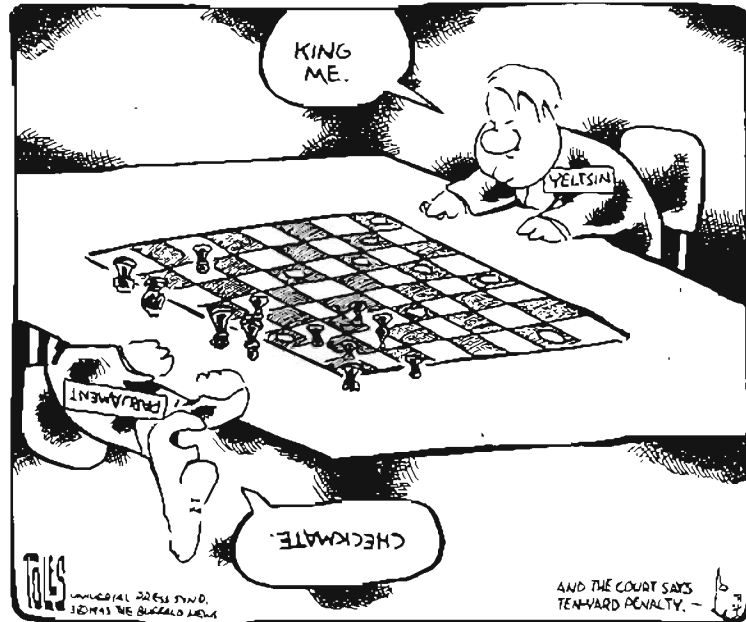
Although life for the Russian middle class was miserable in comparison to U.S. standards prior to the Soviet presidency of Mikhail Gorbachev, it was stable and the future was known.

Life changed for the worse during *perestroika* and the Gorbachev years. Goods became scarcer, the range of goods became narrower and the lines longer.

Yeltsin ran for the presidency arguing that Gorbachev was too cautious, and promising to implement a stimulus package consisting of even more radical private enterprise reforms. He would jump-start the economy with some shock therapy and all would be well within a year. Yeltsin won the election.

So what happened? Things got even worse for the middle class.

Yeltsin blamed Russia's new economic miseries on parliament, where most deputies were former members of the Communist Party. According to Yeltsin, these deputies were resisting his economic initia-



tives, thus making a bad situation worse. Members of parliament argued the situation would be even worse if they allowed Yeltsin to continue with his extreme private enterprise plans. It was this stalemate the Russians were asked to decide April 25.

In the past, every adult Russian had to vote on election day. Who were the 35 percent who broke with tradition and did not cast a ballot?

Many of them are university-educated, middle-class city residents who are very interested in politics. What alternatives did they face? If they voted in favor of Yeltsin, then Yeltsin would interpret their vote as support for him and his economic policies, which they do not support because their lives are getting worse.

If they voted no confidence, then they would contribute to Yeltsin losing. And if Yeltsin lost there would be nobody governing the current economic chaos, a ripe oppor-

tunity for the worst type of people to gain political control. Thus a Yeltsin defeat could very well lead to anarchy, a state of political affairs the middle class would dread even more.

On the one hand they don't like Yeltsin and on the other they don't want anarchy. As a result, they did not vote.

What should U.S. citizens learn from Russia's vote? First, contrary to what U.S. political analysts are writing, it was not a remarkable moral victory for Yeltsin. Second, the Russian people blame both parliament and Yeltsin for their current misery. Third, Russians seem to blame parliament more than they blame Yeltsin.

If you had a random sample of 100 eligible Russian voters, 39 have confidence in Yeltsin and 29 have confidence in parliament. The remaining 32, many of whom are highly educated city residents, have confidence in neither.

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