Assessing Boris Nikolaevich Yel’tsin’s tenure as the first democratically elected President of Russia is no easy task. He and his administration are replete with contradictions. Born and raised to political maturity within the old Communist order, he initially embraced reform and democratization with a passion that exceeded almost all of the other apparatchiki-cum-democrats who supported Gorbachev’s agenda. In frustration, Gorbachev once termed him an “ultra-perestroikist,” accusing him in proper Leninist fashion of a sort of modern day “adventurism” in pressing for reforms at too rapid a pace. Politically reborn a populist through the elections to the Congress of People’s Deputies, Yel’tsin emerged as one of the most strident proponents of true (as opposed to Communist Party-led) democratization, market reforms, and – a bit opportunistically and belatedly – of moderate Russian nationalism and the redefinition of the multinational Soviet state. He dramatically abandoned the Communist Party at its last congress and won popular election to the presidency of the Russian Federation in June 1991.

Then came comic opera coup of 19-21 August 1991 that reversed the role of the Soviet and Russian leaders. Whatever can be said about Gorbachev’s own culpability in surrounding himself with unreliable allies who turned against him to prevent the signing of a draft union treaty, it is certainly true that Yel’tsin emerged from the events of August as both a national hero and with a considerably strengthened hand. Gorbachev’s own credibility, already slipping because of a declining economy and his own indecision over reforms, fell precipitously, and the reform elements within the Communist Party on which he had staked his hopes for the future fell victim to the complete rejection of the old order which followed August. In contrast, Yel’tsin and the other leaders of the independence-minded republics became the key players, stripping the center of what little of its powers remained and leading to the formal disillusion of the USSR in December 1991.

When the Soviet flag was lowered for the last time and the Russian tricolor took its place, the new nation that emerged was still governed in large measure by what remained of the “reformed” Soviet elite, the nomenklatura-cum-democrats who have survived, even manipulated, the transition. Assessing that new regime therefore is a difficult and complicated task. Like Gorbachev, Yel’tsin is best understood as a transitional leader, one who personally and in terms of the institutional order within which he operates is a creature of both the Soviet past and the disordered democratic present. Both he and that order are complex and contradictory, and the best that can be done at this moment is to offer a tentative commentary on what might be termed
phase two of the transition.

As a leader, Yeltsin makes that task all the more difficult. Whatever one may think of some of the defining moments of his presidency – his defense of the reforms against the attempted coup in August 1991, or his abolition and eventual forceful destruction of the Parliament in September-October 1993 – the fact remains that he is an erratic and frequently uncommunicative helmsman. His personal style is a mixture of direct confrontation and brinkmanship unpredictably wedded to a propensity to lose the momentum of the moment or to yield (perhaps wisely) to the opposition. The moments of confrontation are the clearest and tell us more about Yeltsin’s personality than about his prowess as a political tactician. Even before his break with Gorbachev in 1987, he defied the Moscow Party organization he headed, and after the dramatic confrontation with Gorbachev at the Central Committee plenum that year, he challenged conservatives such as Egor Ligachev at every turn. He grew even more radical after his election to the new legislature and then to the Russian presidency. Yeltsin’s opposition to the coup attempt, and then his forceful abolition of the legislature two years later, confirmed both his confrontational style and his propensity to assume that he represented the will of the Russian people against the organized interests of the old order. Both in his own populist style and in the creation of a Gaullist presidency in which the chief executive emerges as the will incarnate of the nation, Yeltsin seemingly assumes that the wellsprings of public opinion support the notion that only a strong executive can unify Russia and control the disorder inherent in a divided society.

Yeltsin has also shown moments of weakness and compromise. He failed to capitalize on his overwhelming personal popularity after the defeat of the August coup attempt to build a viable pro-reform party, just as he avoided personal involvement in the elections that followed the October 1993 destruction of the Parliament. Both lapses cost him dearly, the first contributing to continuing divisions among reformers, and the second resulting in the election of a divided and most certainly hostile State Duma. Yeltsin has also shown a willingness to adjust, perhaps only temporarily, to political necessities. He backed away from his earlier attempt in March 1993 to institute special presidential rule, and since the December 1993 elections he has shown moderation in selecting Viktor Chernomyrdin as head of the government and shifting both economic and foreign policy to more conservative positions.

How are we, then, to assess this contradictory leader? If we apply the standards usually used in other democratic systems such as the success of a leader’s party in off-year or bi-elections, then the assessment must be essentially negative. While Yeltsin remained aloof from the December 1993 campaign, the divisions that persisted among pro-reform parties, the unexpectedly poor showing of Russia’s Choice and the even more surprising success