

‘The West wanted Yeltsin’ from L’Humanité (18 August 2001)


Caption: On 18 August 2001, 10 years after the coup d’état in the Soviet Union, the French Communist daily newspaper L’Humanité considers the varied reactions of Western countries to the putsch: the United States and the United Kingdom strongly supported Boris Yeltsin; Germany called for Gorbachev’s return to power; and France firstly took the side of Gennady Yanayev and his putschist junta before giving its support to the Russian President, Yeltsin.

Source: L’Humanité. Journal du Parti communiste français. 18.10.2001. Paris.
http://www.humanite.fr/2001-08-18_International_RUSSIE-L-Occident-voulait-Eltsine. "L'Occident voulait Eltsine", auteur:Okba Lamrani.

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The West wanted Yeltsin

Western reactions to the coup and the counter-coup were, to say the least, contradictory. Neither the Americans nor the Europeans were honestly ‘surprised’ by the strange comings and goings in Moscow, where fiction, closely entwined with real life, brought Boris Yeltsin to power.

For many months Mikhail Gorbachev had been flailing about in the insurmountable contradictions surrounding his determination to reform the CPSU, the State and relations between a weakened federal power and the impatient Republics. The pressures on Gorbachev from both inside and outside, the different interpretations of the policy ‘of perestroika and glasnost’: all showed that the Soviet Union was at a crossroads. However, the reactions from the United States and from the European Union, and from France within it, were diametrically opposed, at least to begin with.

George Bush (senior), in the middle of an election campaign, knew he was staking part of his credibility with regard to international policy. The Republican Right, indeed, did accuse him of having over-friendly relations with Mikhail Gorbachev, especially at the time of the Gulf War. The presidential candidate stood firm and decided to condemn the coup as soon as it happened, and supported Boris Yeltsin to the hilt. The President-elect of the Russian Federation, who simultaneously called for the return of Gorbachev, usurped his constitutional prerogatives to the extent of appointing himself head of the Army and of the television (after dismissing its director) and went on to dismiss, on Friday, the Ministers appointed by Gorbachev on Thursday, based his international legitimacy in part on support from Bush. Bush himself, at his first press conference, couldn’t praise ‘the courage and enormous stature of Boris Yeltsin’ highly enough. George Bush in fact clearly set the tone when he said: ‘Boris Yeltsin’s standing in the world will be well-deserved (...) after the way things have turned out, which was the way the United States wanted them to.’ So, in brief, 60 hours after the coup, Gorbachev had already been ditched by the Americans and along with him the Soviet Union, reformed or not. The signal to start the ‘great game’ to seize the wealth of that enormous country was given, with a large head start over Europe, and it is still going on.

Reaction from the European Union was disorganised and extremely cautious. The United Kingdom, as always, sided with Washington. West Germany was in the process of incorporating the GDR and had very close links with Gorbachev. The sums of money associated with the departure of Soviet troops from the Western European countries and Germany were enormous: more than 60 billion Deutschmarks, in contrast to French funding of no more than 5 billion francs. Helmut Kohl could only condemn the sidelining of Gorbachev, even if he remained cautious vis-à-vis the rebels. Any return to the Cold War would put an end to dreams of greatness for Germany, which wanted to develop from being a world economic power to being a recognised political power, not just in Europe but throughout the world.

Helmut Kohl therefore opted to take a middle path and backed Gorbachev, while the right wing of the Christian Democrats (the Bavarian CSU under Theo Waigel) also hailed Yeltsin’s ‘courage’.

France, where successive governments had held onto the reins of privileged ‘de Gaullian’ relations with the Soviet Union, whoever was in charge in the Kremlin, was, to be frank, out of step with its Western counterparts. François Mitterrand, at a first televised news conference, gave the impression that he recognised the rebels. The Head of State, before the whole of France, read out a letter he had been sent by Yanayev, the leader of those who staged the coup. He described these rebels as the Soviet Union’s ‘new leaders’. In his letter Yanayev stressed that he intended to pursue the policy of reform and transparency, and François Mitterrand said that he would judge them ‘by their deeds’. He even felt that ‘sanctions would be premature’. In other words, the President of the Republic, in a way, recognised the legitimacy of the Yanayev group. The right, or at any rate its free-market fringe, did not so much condemn the coup as the fact that the Socialist government refused to tip Russia into the camp of out-and-out capitalism, as Yeltsin wanted. The President of the Russian Federation was actually welcomed to France by the leading figures in the now defunct ‘Léo’s gang’. Madelin, Longuet, Deniau and Giscard spent a long time trying to win legitimacy for him as opposed to Gorbachev, who was seen by them as being too far to the left. François Mitterrand refused to receive him officially in April. But as soon as the coup turned out to have failed, the Élysée did an about-turn, expressing its enthusiasm for ‘Yeltsin the democrat’. Gorbachev did not forget it,

writing in his Memoirs: 'From Foros (in the Crimea, where he was being held) I had a conversation with President Bush. François Mitterrand was due to call me, but he didn't.'

The French Communist Party found itself having to deal, in a very practical way, with the discussions, not to say confrontations, that had been sparked off for several months by Gorbachev's policies. In a press release, its politburo condemned the coup. But the wording of the press release was highly ambiguous. It said, among other things, that 'the circumstances of Mikhail Gorbachev's removal from power are unacceptable.' It is hard to tell whether this is just a condemnation of the circumstances — the subtext being that the way it was done was too brutal — or of the rebel junta. The newspapers linked to the French Communist Party clearly reflected these contradictions. The first edition of L'Humanité on Sunday, with a headline reading 'Tragic failure' (of perestroika), which seems to condemn both Gorbachev and the rebels, on the lines that shilly-shallying by the Russian leader had encouraged the attempted coup, was pulped.

All in all, Western reactions focused more on the choice between the Gorbachev model for the reform of the Soviet Union and the model put forward by Yeltsin, who wanted both power and for the country to be pitched headlong into capitalism. The question of whether the Soviet system of state control can be transformed from the inside is still waiting for an answer.