

# The Moscow Times

## '91 Foes Linked by Anger and Regret

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*By Vadim Nikitin*

They squared off on opposite sides of the barricades in 1991, the Communists seeking to prop up a dying regime, the democratic activists fighting to tear it down. This weekend, they were allied in anger and disillusionment.

Some 200 veteran liberals and several dozen Communists were the only people who turned up for public commemorations of the 1991 August coup, which set off huge demonstrations and presaged the collapse of the Soviet Union.

They sounded just as angry at former President Boris Yeltsin -- and a Russia that has morphed into a foreign country for democratic reformers and old-time socialists alike -- as they were at the coup plotters.

Braving heavy rain Saturday evening, the democratic activists, some haggard and shoddily dressed, converged at the foot of Gorbaty Bridge, next to the White House, to voice nostalgia, pride, a sense of betrayal and anger. They recalled confronting columns of tanks and the deaths of three of their comrades, and they lamented the politicization and hijacking of their cause.

An old man in a cream-colored military uniform kissed several members of the crowd. Despite drawing only a couple hundred demonstrators, the event was marked by heavy police presence. Last year's commemoration was disrupted by violent clashes between militant communists and democratic veterans.

"It's a chance to meet with the lads and remember those difficult days during the revolution, or whatever you choose to call it," said retired pilot Valery Shogalev, who was greeted with handshakes and hugs.

"Valery is being too polite," said his comrade Vladimir Gvardionov, a burly former air traffic controller who helped defend the White House during the coup. "What really happened was that they threw us away like a used condom."

As the crowd assembled, a speaker took to the microphone to declare: "As you can see, we have come here to show that we are still alive, and to remind everyone that we won in 1991."

From the crowd, someone shouted: "We lost!"

The speaker replied: "No, we did not lose. The politicians lost for us."

That was the general consensus -- that it was the political leaders, and above all Yeltsin, who had sacrificed all the hopes and ideals of the perestroika movement for power, money and, ultimately, a return to the same authoritarianism that so many had fought.

Soviet-era activist Mikhail Arutyunov, who attended the rally with fellow dissident Gleb Yakunin, a defrocked priest, recalled that 1991 "was the first time I felt that I could really affect the situation in my country. Our souls soared. It was such a feeling of unity. We felt invincible. But Yelstin let us down. He turned out to be rotten to the core."

Vitaly Neiman, who headed a cadre of activists called the 20th Battalion, charged with guarding the entrance to the White House back in 1991, added, "What we got was entirely the opposite of what we dreamed of. We went to the barricades for them, lay our lives on the line, but they didn't keep their promises. 'Go home,' Yeltsin told us. 'Everything will be OK.' What became OK? Today I am a bum. I have no work, no property. We defended the White House! We defended Russia! I commanded the 20th Battalion!"

The Union of Right Forces, or SPS, which organized the rally, held another event commemorating the coup Sunday that drew several hundred supporters.

Earlier on Saturday, a paltry gathering of graying communists met outside the former Lenin Museum. Standing beneath banners blaring "1991-2006: From Great Power to Disgrace" and "Every Day Under Putin Is a Day of Mourning," the elderly men and women waved Soviet flags and gave speeches decrying a historical process that nobody -- Mikhail Gorbachev, Yeltsin, Vladimir Putin or Karl Marx -- could have predicted during those frenzied few days toward the end of the last summer of the U.S.S.R.

"Fradkov recently announced that the economy had reached 1991 levels," Vladimir Gusev said, referring to Prime Minister Mikhail Fradkov. "What then, may I ask, has the government been doing this whole time?" Gusev, a professor at the Moscow Automobile Institute, continued: "What have our motherland and her people gotten out of the last 15 criminal years? The years of criminal capitalism have killed off 10 percent of our population."

Speakers heaped praise on Belarussian President Alexander Lukashenko, dubbed "Europe's last dictator" by the West, and denounced "democratic fascist Latvia" for, presumably, its rehabilitation of Nazi sympathizers.

But they reserved their harshest criticism for the coup plotters themselves, known as the State Committee for a State of Emergency, or GKChP.

"The GKChP did not so much as lift a finger to defend the Soviet Union", Gusev said.

When someone from the crowd suggested that the GKChP were cowards who had been afraid the new regime might have them shot, Sergei Khristenko, a retired physicist and member of a hard-line splinter group, retorted: "Why should they have been shot? The GKChP did nothing. They were traitors, enemies of the people, who offered up the USSR on a plate."

When asked why so few people had turned up, Yuri Krivashei, a retired Gosplan employee, said: "We are dying off. Every year there are fewer of us. The youth doesn't care about anything. They live only in the present."

Gorbachev, the last Soviet leader, said Friday that the last 15 years showed that the full

meaning of the communist collapse had yet to come clear.

Referring to the October 1993 showdown between Yeltsin and the parliament -- regarded by many as the beginning of the end of Russia's fledgling democracy -- Gorbachev said: "Instead of the government investigating the shootout ... those implicated in it were given amnesty."

He added: "Many of those who were with the GKChP are still in power and receive awards."

Gorbachev did not participate in any events commemorating the 15th anniversary -- during the coup, the Soviet president was held against his will at his Black Sea resort -- but did give a telephone interview to Interfax from Athens, where he was on vacation.

The national television stations Channel One, Rossia and NTV marked the occasion with documentaries about the August 1991 events that included interviews with GKChP members and those who defended the White House against government tanks.

The Kremlin and other government officials held no official ceremonies recalling the coup. The only official comments came from State Duma Speaker Boris Gryzlov, who called the three-day coup, which happened from Aug. 19 to 21, "a tragic date in the history of our country."

A Kremlin spokesman said the president, who is on a working vacation in Sochi, did not plan to participate in any of the ceremonies commemorating the August 1991 events.

On Saturday, Putin met with Unified Energy Systems head Anatoly Chubais, a major force behind the SPS and one of the architects of the Yeltsin economic reform program. Chubais is one of the few Yeltsin-era politicians who still has a government job. The two discussed the prospects of energy sector reform and energy deficit in some of the regions, Kremlin.ru said.

*Staff Writer Oksana Yablokova contributed to this report.*