done to alter the monopoly position of state enterprises producing for the public. For many goods, therefore, supply remains inelastic—that is, unresponsive to change in price. The predictable result of the reform has been an improvement on balance sheets, not in production. Meanwhile, the war economy configuration of production continues, consumer production remains the same small increment of total production, and standards of living remain miserable. A planned stabilisation programme was supposed to iron over problems of transition by artificially introducing the spirit of competition into the economy with massive state-subsidised imports of western consumer goods. Such a programme is, Boris Yeltsin stated recently, still at least six months away.

The impact of the price hikes to Russians, in psychological and practical terms, can scarcely be overestimated. Gas, rent and electricity have increased by a factor of three. Basic staples increased in price two or three times more between December and January, and most manufactured goods are now well beyond the reach of Russian rouble-earners. To give a few examples. The price of a kilo of salami rose from 3.6 roubles a year ago to 24R in December and then again to 75 roubles in January. The price of ten eggs rose from 1.4 R to 9R and then to 24R in December and then again to 97R in January. The price of ten litres of vodka rose from 12 to 65R between December and January. Furthermore, many increases have been entirely arbitrary in nature, based more often on guesswork and cabal on behalf of retailers, rather than market forces. In no sense can the new prices be perceived as fair or even rational. And the Russians themselves are very aware of this.

When these figures are compared to the monthly earnings of Soviet citizens, things start to look very grim indeed. The minimum monthly wage is presently 340R; pensioners receive 342R per month; the average working wage is around 650R per month; while Yeltsin and Gorbachev now receive official salaries of 4,000R per month (plus many perks). Thus a pensioner theoretically could use his or her entire monthly pension in buying six chickens or six bottles of vodka. In reality there are some mitigating factors. First, most Soviet citizens do have substantial rouble savings. Second, most households possess a considerable stock (zapas) of hoarded staples. Third, relatives from outside Moscow and supplies from personal dachas provide some relief.

Nevertheless reserves of roubles and supplies cannot last forever—nor can vegetables harvested six months ago. The real bite on living standards is likely to come over the next two months, by which time these forms of personal insurance will have been stripped away. If by then the current relationship of wages to prices remains unchanged hunger will, perforce, become widespread. If Yeltsin can deliver on stabilisation in June the cheap goods are likely to be snapped up by those few with roubles, and sold back to poorer unfortunates at a higher price (a similar process is going on with foreign food aid now). Already life is daily becoming tougher, more unpleasant. The tension on the Moscow streets, in shops and in food queues is palpable, occasionally erupting into shouting matches and, in one recent case in Siberia, some deaths.

Since the radical Albalkin plan was mooted two years ago the Soviet press has discussed exhaustively the reasons why a price reform simply could not work without the supporting planks of privatisation and stabilisation. Yeltsin led protests against Gorbachev’s price increase proposals on the grounds that they would simply inject new life into a failed economic mechanism at the expense of ordinary people’s living standards. Thanks to the intensive media debate of recent years the general public comprehends very well the idiocy of this solitary action in the absence of other supporting policies. In response a witch hunt for scapegoats to explain the extraordinary policy of implementing crushing price increases into an unreformed economy is daily conducted in the Soviet press. Geidar, Yeltsin’s deputy prime minister, has occasionally
but the Russian parliament more often collectively assumes the role.

Anxious to satisfy the heightened expectations fed by the defeat of the August 1991 Putschists, and impelled by his impulsive and lurching desire for political activity, Boris Yeltsin pushed ahead with this hasty partial economic reform without ensuring the necessary legislative co-operation of the Russian parliament in favour of the privatisation program. This is sheer political blackmail directed against a conservative but democratic organ. Not for the first time Yeltsin has favoured a strategy not of negotiation and consultation, but a Whitlam-esque tactic of 'crash through or crash'. When faced with political opposition to his proposals last year he pushed ahead with the price rises of 1 January anyway and on 16 January presented the oppositionists in the Russian parliament with the choice between a fait accompli or the blame for the continuation of a destabilising political stand-off. The Russian parliament duly approved a privatisation program, but the implementation of this decision is likely to take some time.

In the meantime, Yeltsin has promised an impossible improvement in living standards from the middle of next year. A backlash of frustration and anger is well-nigh inevitable; Yeltsin can delay its political consequences only for a certain time. He could raise wages, to make the sacrifices made from 1 January look like a bad joke, or he could try to shift blame. He can point the bony finger at Geidar, his chief economist, or any of the "Kamikaze Economists" who surround him. He could—as Gavril Popov did recently—blame his own parliament. When the inevitable difficulties of implementing privatisation mount, the old nomenklatura can be duly wheeled out for a last turn at the dastardly sabotaging role. How long this process would continue depends on his political skill. What we can say, judging by Yeltsin's past political track record, is that if his political future is on the line, he is unlikely to go quietly, as Gorbachev did. He is a political streetfighter, and his power struggles have always been protracted and destabilising; this was true of the lead-up to his fall from grace in 1987, and his meteoric rise thereafter.

If Yeltsin's struggles become too destabilising he is, however, likely to arouse the opposition of those who are struggling for control of the new wealth in Russia: the emerging, indigenous bourgeoisie. For this social group the fate of Yeltsin in itself is of little concern. Their activity is predominantly short-term, speculative or export-oriented and to a great extent parasitic of the domestic economy. Their interest is in continued stability, not disruptive reform. In the longer term it is only by accommodating or taming the new nomenklatura that Yeltsin can survive.

The fascination surrounding Yeltsin is thus to some extent a smokescreen which shrouds the damaging activity of the Russian business class. Unimpeded by communist—or any other kind of—controls, and devoid of any Tory ruling class type conscience, entrepreneurs are well placed to take advantage of the current political turmoil. This new breed ranges from Moscow Mayor Gavril Popov, an academic five years ago and now one of the wealthiest men in Russia, to the sons of old communists who recently purchased Moscow TV facilities at bargain basement prices, to the state employee flogging stolen beer off the back of a truck. For them, the existing profit extracted from the illogicalities of the hopelessly corrupt mixed command-market system is at least as good as anything a properly functioning market could offer.

For all that was written of the flowering of civil society under perestroika, the Soviet polity remains behaviourally a subject culture and a prime target for manipulation by self-interested elites. While as individuals Russians impress with their education and sophisticated culture, the legacy of communism weighs heavily against their effective, collective, political action. For seven long decades of Soviet power, Russians had heard promises, hoped for improvements, and been disappointed. Perestroika accelerated the process, and married it to a steady deterioration in living standards. Right now, Russians are absorbed in the hardly trivial question of day-to-day survival. The evidence of apathy is clear in the current popularity of inward-looking or past glorifying pastimes—anything rather than face the present. Theatres are playing to packed houses, depression fodder: Noel Coward and Oscar Wilde comedies, or solid pre-revolutionary pieces. Soft porn and detective novels are for sale at every metro, and religion, in particular Hare Krishna, is drawing many new converts.

Of course, discussing politics remains a favourite Russian pastime and their grasp of it would surely put most Australians to shame. Beyond chatter there are, however, no unifying ideas to rival the rallying cry of the democrats prior to August: 'Let's destroy Communism'. Political action is a luxury reserved for a small number of committed intellectuals. In a society thoroughly atomised by Communism, people's outlooks have become by necessity very parochial. The unit of identification here is not of class, or region, but the clan: that small group of contacts, family and friends, whom one must cultivate and trust to get by here. Wider identification may well develop over time though, one suspects, not via the importation of foreign notions of multi-party democracy, but through the harsh school of exploitation.

It is thus only within this constellation of forces in today's Russia—of politicians who regard political office as meal tickets, emerging capitalists operating untramelled by government authority or public opinion, and a still largely homogeneous, passive, polity—that we can profitably examine the question of Yeltsin's political future. Which begs the question; if Yeltsin goes, who cares?

PETER FEENEY, a researcher at the Soviet Studies Centre at Melbourne University, is at present studying in Moscow.