

Putin Chokes Back Tears for Chernomyrdin

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Viktor Chernomyrdin speaking to reporters Oct. 13, 1995, after the State Duma nixed his draft federal budget for 1996. **Igor Tabakov**

Former Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin, who served as prime minister in the turbulent 1990s as the country was throwing off communism and developing as a market economy, was laid to rest Friday after an emotional eulogy by Vladimir Putin.

No cause of death has been released, but Chernomyrdin, 72, had grown thin in recent years and was reported to have been ill. His wife of nearly 50 years had died early this year.

The usually tough and sharp-tongued Putin, the current prime minister, spoke at his funeral service, and at one point he paused and appeared to be struggling to hold back tears. His voice trembled as he said: "We will miss Viktor Stepanovich. We will hold his memory in our hearts and in our work."

Viktor Chernomyrdin's Legacy

As Prime Minister:

- Immediately before becoming prime minister, Viktor Chernomyrdin was in charge of the country's energy sector. He was previously head of the Soviet Gas Ministry, where he founded gas company Gazprom and became its head.
- He was a political unknown until Dec. 14, 1992, when President Boris Yeltsin dumped Yegor Gaidar under pressure from conservatives and replaced him with Chernomyrdin as head of the government.
- Months after he was appointed, Chernomyrdin signed a decree turning Gazprom, which pumps the lifeblood of Russia's economy from the Arctic and Siberia to Europe and Asia, into a joint stock company.
- When Yeltsin ordered troops to crush a parliament-led mutiny on Oct. 4, 1993, Chernomyrdin, who mostly stayed out of the public eye, kept the machinery of government ticking.
- He was acting president for 23 hours on Nov. 6, 1996, while Yeltsin underwent heart surgery.
- In the wake of the 1998 financial crisis, he was reappointed prime minister by Yeltsin, but the State Duma rejected the appointment.

A Late Diplomatic Career:

- In May 2001, President Vladimir Putin appointed Chernomyrdin as Russia's ambassador to Ukraine.
- In 2003, he caused controversy when he dismissed talk of a Russian apology for the Holodomor, the famine that affected Ukraine in 1932-33.
- In February 2009, Ukraine's pro-Western government threatened to expel him for what it said were "undiplomatic" comments, which Russian media said were about the Kiev leadership's lack of sobriety and decency. He was dismissed in June.
- He became a presidential adviser after his ambassadorship ended.

Life Details:

- Chernomyrdin was born on April 9, 1938, in Cherny Ostrog in the Orenburg region.
- He joined the Soviet Communist Party in 1961, working his way up to be a member of the industry department of the Central Committee. He left the party in 1991.
- He worked in Russia's main oil-producing region, Tyumen in western Siberia, between 1983 and 1985, while a deputy Soviet minister.

— *Reuters*

Chernomyrdin engineered the creation of Gazprom, now the world's biggest gas company, and served as prime minister under President Boris Yeltsin from 1992 to 1998.

Alexei Miller, the current Gazprom chief executive, praised him for resisting calls to split up the gas supply system and sell off its parts at a time when the country "needed loans like air."

President Dmitry Medvedev also spoke at the service, where much of Russia's leadership joined Chernomyrdin's many relatives in saying their farewells.

Putin, who appeared tired, talked about how hard Chernomyrdin had worked, "without any swaggering or desire for stardom." Putin ended by calling him "an example for us all."

Chernomyrdin helped see Russia through some difficult times, including the economic devastation that followed the Soviet collapse and the war in Chechnya, where he once played a critical if unlikely role as peace negotiator.

Over the years he grew on his countrymen, who came to appreciate his everyman's charms and sense of humor.

He had a knack for bursting out with colorful, nongrammatical expressions, such as "we wanted the best, but things turned out as always," a phrase that has become part of Russian culture.

Born in the village of Cherny Ostrog in the Orenburg region, he was a bear of a man who rose through the ranks of the Communist Party to head the Soviet oil and gas ministry from 1985 to 1989. Chernomyrdin then engineered the transformation of the ministry into a state gas company, Gazprom, which is now the bedrock of Russia's economy.

In late 1992, he was appointed prime minister by Yeltsin and surprised the young liberal economists leading Russia's transformation by pushing ahead with market reforms.

In 1995, in the middle of the first Chechen war, he held negotiations over the telephone with rebel leader Shamil Basayev, whose forces were holding more than 1,500 people hostage in a hospital in Budyonnovsk. The hostages were freed in exchange for government promises to begin negotiating a peaceful settlement, but Chernomyrdin took heat for allowing the hostage takers to escape.

His phrase "Shamil Basayev, we can't hear you, speak louder," a plea made during the televised negotiations, became a symbol of the war. For some, it showed the government's helplessness against the rebels, but others saw in it a rare and admirable willingness to compromise for the sake of saving lives.

Chernomyrdin was fired in March 1998, but following the financial crash in August of that year, when Russia defaulted on its debts and devalued its currency, Yeltsin asked him to return as prime minister. The State Duma, however, refused to confirm him.

In 2001, a year after Putin had been elected president, he appointed Chernomyrdin as ambassador to Ukraine. Chernomyrdin had been elected to the Duma, and his diplomatic posting was seen as an effort to distance a political heavyweight from Moscow. Chernomyrdin remained ambassador until last year.

During his eight years in Ukraine, his colorful language and unflattering comments about Ukraine's leaders won him few friends. He once suggested that then-President Viktor Yushchenko was acting on orders of the U.S. government, saying, "American ears are sticking out everywhere."

Putin characterized him Wednesday as a "real patriot," praising his contributions to the development of Russia but most of all his character.

"Behind his seeming simplicity, his jokes, his playing on his own aphorisms ... was in fact hidden a subtle, wise and decent man," Putin said at a televised Cabinet meeting. He concluded by asking the ministers to rise to pay their respects.

Chernomyrdin was buried Friday beside his wife in Moscow's Novodevichye Cemetery, the final resting place of Yeltsin, Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev and many of Russia's most notable cultural and military figures.

Chernomyrdin is survived by two sons and four grandchildren.

See ["Viktor Chernomyrdin: Life in the Lens,"](#) a photo gallery of Chernomyrdin's two decades in Russian politics.

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