

## EUROPE

# Viktor Chernomyrdin, Russian Ex-Premier, Dies at 72

By ELLEN BARRY and MICHAEL SCHWIRTZ NOV. 3, 2010

MOSCOW — Viktor S. Chernomyrdin, who served as Russia's prime minister during the turbulent transition to a free-market economy in the 1990s and who founded the state-owned gas monopoly Gazprom, died Wednesday morning, the Russian government announced. He was 72.

No cause was released.

President Boris N. Yeltsin appointed Mr. Chernomyrdin prime minister in 1992, and he remained in that post through the most painful years of economic turmoil. Initially a champion of market reform, he later let it be known that he thought Western economic theory had done "more harm than good."

A former Soviet oil and gas minister, Mr. Chernomyrdin (pronounced churn-o-MEER-dihn) resisted pressure from reformers to split the gas industry into smaller companies, as the oil and metals industries had done. That decision originated the blend of state and capitalism that came into vogue under Vladimir V. Putin.

Mr. Chernomyrdin was recalled in Russia on Wednesday as a crucial mediating figure in a country caught between young, inexperienced reformers and the old guard of the Soviet elite.

"Chernomyrdin turned out to be the strongest, most effective and flexible bridge for the extraordinary work of our generation: raising and building a new Russia from the ruins of the totalitarian Soviet system," said Gennadi E. Burbulis, a former Yeltsin adviser and deputy in Russia's lower house of Parliament.

Viktor Stepanovich Chernomyrdin was born on April 9, 1938, at the height of Stalin's purges in a village in the central Russian Orenburg region. The son of a rural truck driver, he worked as a machine operator at an oil refinery and graduated from a technical institute through correspondence courses. He then rose through the ranks in the Soviet gas industry, becoming minister the year Mikhail S. Gorbachev came to power.

He remained in charge in 1989, when the ministry was transformed into Gazprom, and made sure its assets stayed intact. When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, the supply of heating gas to apartments was never cut off, an accomplishment that the newspaper Nezavisimaya Gazeta credited to the fact that "sly Viktor Chernomyrdin managed to 'rebrand' " the gas ministry and protect it from perestroika-era pressure to sell it off.

He enriched himself and his family in the process.

In 2001, Mr. Chernomyrdin was ranked No. 8 on Forbes magazine's list of Russian billionaires, with \$1.1 billion. His garage housed a fleet of luxury cars, according to a financial statement on the Kremlin Web site.

Mr. Chernomyrdin was famous for malapropisms, as when he told Parliament, "Government is not the organ in which one uses his tongue only," or instructed his detractors, "If your hands are itchy, scratch yourselves in other spots," or declared, "We will live so well that our children and grandchildren will envy us!"

But former colleagues remembered a steely politician who helped anchor an often wayward government.

Vladimir A. Ryzhkov, a former member of Parliament, recalled the day in 1993 when a standoff between Mr. Yeltsin and members of Parliament had brought Russia near civil war. Mr. Chernomyrdin called a meeting with leaders of all of Russia's regions via speakerphone, chatting casually about coal stockpiles and pension payments and the weather.

“Then Chernomyrdin says: ‘O.K., guys. You know what’s going on in Moscow. I’ll tell you what. I am the prime minister, and I have seven ministers sitting here next to me. We have a president, Boris Nikolayevich. He was popularly elected, we are supporting him. Get to work, support the president and don’t make any unnecessary movements,’” Mr. Ryzhkov recalled in a radio interview.

He said this meeting, which was never made public, was the “decisive moment” in the crisis.

Two years later, Mr. Chernomyrdin negotiated with the Chechen rebel leader Shamil Basayev, who was holding up to 2,000 hostages in the city of Budyonnovsk. The negotiations were carried live on television, and Russians watched in frozen horror as Mr. Chernomyrdin barked into the phone at Mr. Basayev.

Most of the hostages were released, and Russians credited him.

“It was incredible,” Katya Amachenova, a secretary, told The New York Times at the time.

She added: “He was very calm. He acted like a leader. We haven’t seen that in a while.”

While serving as prime minister, Mr. Chernomyrdin remained so closely associated with Gazprom that the political party he founded, Our Home is Russia, was jokingly referred to as “Our Home is Gazprom.” His company was allowed to expand lavishly despite falling behind on tax payments. It also stepped in to assist the Kremlin at key moments, foreclosing on the media empire of Vladimir A. Gusinsky, who had turned into a sharp critic, and putting pressure on neighboring countries like Georgia and Ukraine when they fell behind on payments.

Mr. Yeltsin fired Mr. Chernomyrdin as prime minister in 1998, but tried to bring him back as the country spiraled into economic crisis. By that point, however, the president’s authority was on the wane, and Parliament blocked Mr. Chernomyrdin’s appointment.

When Mr. Putin came to power, he replaced Mr. Chernomyrdin as chairman of Gazprom with a little-known adviser, Dmitri A. Medvedev. Largely shut out of the halls of power, Mr. Chernomyrdin put his experience in the oil and gas industry to use as ambassador to Ukraine, whose pipelines carry Russian gas to Europe. From 2001 until his retirement in 2009, he played a crucial role in disputes over natural gas prices that caused energy flows to Europe to be shut off on several occasions.

Mr. Chernomyrdin’s funeral will be shown live on Russian television. Burial will be in the Novodevichy cemetery, alongside such figures as Khrushchev, Chekhov and Mr. Yeltsin.

Mr. Chernomyrdin is survived by two sons. His wife of 50 years, Valentina, died in March, a loss that those close to the former prime minister said affected him deeply.

Mr. Chernomyrdin will long be remembered for his fatalistic commentary on a botched monetary overhaul carried out by the Russian Central Bank in 1993: “We wanted to do it better,” he declared at a news conference, “but it turned out as usual.”

Andrew Kramer contributed reporting.

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