

# TIME

## From Russia, With Venom

The inside story of  
Vladimir Zhirinovsky,  
the zealot who  
would make Russia  
dangerous again







### BAD-BOY VLAD

Shrewdly capitalizing on Yeltsin's problems, he has become a touchstone for ordinary Russians' deepest yearnings and darkest fears

I say it quite plainly—  
when I come to power, there  
will be a dictatorship

■ RUSSIA

# RISING CZAR?

Part clown, part clever pol, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy is breaking all the rules in his march on the Kremlin

By KEVIN FEDARKO

*What to do? We have lost our way.  
From afar, the Demon cries out,  
He is leading us astray.*

—ALEXANDER PUSHKIN

WHEN IT COMES TO EXPRESSING HIS FEELINGS, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy is not exactly bashful. After flying last week from Moscow to the city of Nizhni Novgorod, Russia's bad-boy politician was dismayed to be confronted at the air-

port by demonstrators calling him a fascist. The chairman of Russia's Liberal Democratic Party does not brook such displays of disrespect. With an entourage of 20 people, including several menacing bodyguards, he paid a visit to the office of the region's most prominent politician, Boris Nemtsov—only to be informed that the governor was out of town.

Undaunted, the group barged into Nemtsov's office and began rifling through his drawers and filing cabinets. Then Zhirinovskiy plopped down in the governor's chair and put in several calls on Nemtsov's hot line to the federal authorities in Moscow to complain about his unfriendly reception. No one would accept the calls, but

before he left, three hours later, Zhirinovskiy made sure his visit wouldn't be forgotten. He threatened to have the governor's entire staff imprisoned or executed. The week, however, was still young. On Thursday night, Zhirinovskiy claimed he had escaped "an assassination attempt" on a highway south of the capital, in which one "terrorist" was killed. Major General Vladimir Fyodorov, the chief of Russia's traffic police, denied the story and insisted that Zhirinovskiy had been involved only in an "ordinary road accident." Fyodorov also claimed that a few hours later in Moscow, Zhirinovskiy attacked a policeman after he had tried to ticket one of the politician's bodyguards. According to Fyodorov, Zhirinovskiy twisted the guard's arm, ripped up the ticket and then tried to tear the epaulets off the officer's uniform.

While such theatrics might seem acceptable from a road-touring rock band, they are usually enough to scuttle the career of most politicians. But Zhirinovskiy is no ordinary politician. In the three years since this obscure Moscow lawyer careered into the national spotlight, his career has combined the shrewd manipulation of an instinctive demagogue with the abandon of a swinging Sybarite. Zhirinovskiy has slugged fellow lawmakers in the halls of parliament, hobnobbed with ex-Nazi storm troopers in Austria and posed, au naturel, for photographers while cavort-





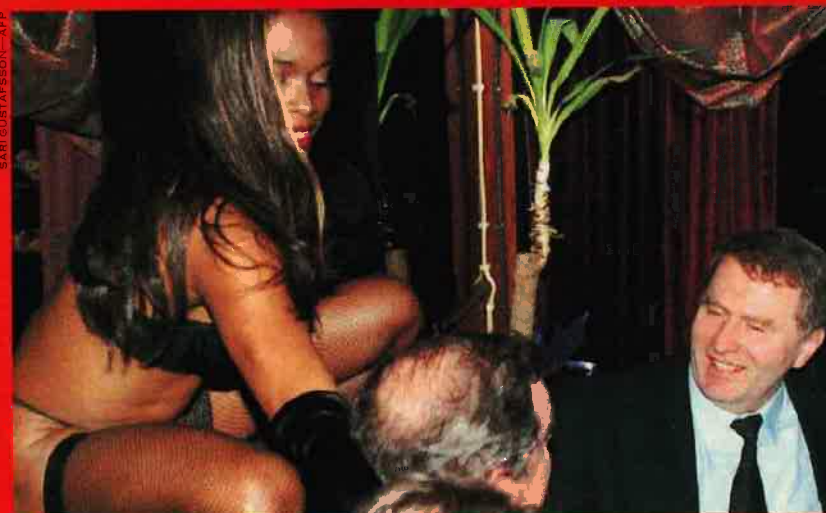
## FAMILY MAN

After a privileged childhood in Kazakhstan, Zhirinovskiy (left, at age 12) moved to Moscow and met Galina, his future wife



## DEMAGOGUE

His speeches may be inflammatory, but his visits are popular among constituents unaccustomed to seeing politicians up close



## HOT TIMES

While attending a conference in Helsinki in April, the L.D.P. leader and his entourage take time out to visit a local bar

ing in a steam bath in Serbia. He has been kicked out of or denied access to nearly half a dozen European countries. He has threatened to restore Russia's imperial borders, annex Alaska, invade Turkey, repartition Poland, give Germany "another Chernobyl," turn Kazakhstan into a "scorched desert" and employ large fans to blow radioactive waste across the Baltics.

To Western eyes, the incendiary rhetoric and exuberant loudness of this barnstorming Bonaparte have marked him as something of a buffoon. But to many Russians, Zhirinovskiy offers a kind of touchstone for their deepest yearnings and frustrations. Less than three years after throwing off the communist yoke, Russia is ensnared in a financial, political and spiritual crisis as great as any in its thousand-year history. The economy is tottering like a besotted barfly. Crime and corruption are rampant, and citizens who once took pride in their nation's world-class stature now find themselves shoved to the margins of the world stage and forced to swallow a mortifying demotion from superpower to global beggar. While Yeltsin seems increasingly isolated at home behind the Kremlin and liberal politicians drone endlessly about mastering inflation and listening to the IMF, Zhirinovskiy is one of the few leaders who speak in a language that average Russians can understand.



SEERGEI GUNEV FOR TIME

**D**ESPITE HIS ASTONISHING displays of excess, there seems to be a kind of brutal calculus behind the madness. "If I behave like the good-natured intellectual I really am," Zhirinovskiy told TIME editors last week, "I won't get votes. It's war out there, and I'm out to win." Yet the loud applause that greets his vision is no longer confined to the fringes of the Russian nationalist movement. After a stunning success last December when his Liberal Democratic Party won 25% of the vote in the party preference poll, dealing a major blow to Yeltsin and the embattled democrats, Zhirinovskiy has seen his support edge toward the mainstream. His followers now include military officers, well-groomed young men from the new commercial classes and middle-age, postcommunist apparatchiks.

His ascendance has not been without growing pains. In the past few months, discord has broken out in the ranks of his par-

ty and a number of dissidents have pulled away. Still, the L.D.P. has mustered impressive leverage in parliament. Moreover, as Yeltsin's power base grows shakier, Zhirinovskiy's brand of shoot-from-the-hip populism has enabled him to bully his way into the small group of candidates vying to be the next President of Russia. "There is a great danger that someone like Zhirinovskiy could take over," says Yuli Guzman, a parliamentary Deputy from the democratic Russia's Choice bloc. "He is not just a clown in the eyes of ordinary folk."

A TIME investigation of his past has revealed that much of Zhirinovskiy's up-from-poverty life history has been embel-

**"American Zionists offered me \$100 million if I left politics. But any attempt to eliminate me is doomed to failure."**

lished or distorted. There is evidence that Zhirinovskiy's father may have been Jewish and that his son tried to cover that up—this from a man who expressed fears of a future in which "150 million Russians have to obey" 2 million Jews. Moreover, suspicions that the KGB was instrumental in his rise to power persist. Such discrepancies do more than simply call into question Zhirinovskiy's personal honesty and integrity; they also suggest that by elevating his life to the level of myth, he may be attempting to lay the foundations for a personality cult.

"From the moment of my birth, I have always walked alone," writes Zhirinovskiy. "I grew up in a situation where there was no kind of warmth from anybody—not from relatives or from friends and teachers. I lived the greater part of my life without almost a single happy day... It seems to have been my fate that I never experienced real love or friendship."

These passages come from Zhirinovskiy's autobiography, *The Last Thrust to the South*, a book that James Billington, U.S. Librarian of Congress, calls "in some respects psychologically an even more unstable work than *Mein Kampf*." In it, Zhirinovskiy recounts in extravagant detail the injustices of an emotionally and economically deprived childhood in Alma-Ata, the capital of Kazakhstan.

A visit to Alma-Ata and conversations with several of those who knew him as a boy reveal a quite different picture. He writes, for example, of living in squalor with his mother in a filthy communal apartment where he had to endure the indignities of a communal toilet ("it smelled bad"). Yet the two-story house was, at the

time, one of the best in the city, constructed during the 1930s for elite Russian workers. "Zhirinovskiy complains there was no hot water, but it was a rare house in Alma-Ata that had hot water then," recalls Vladimir Rerikh, a documentary-film director who was also born and raised in Alma-Ata. "His house actually had its own sewerage and toilet facilities, which was even more of a rarity than hot water in those days."

Despite his claim of having had "almost no education," the school where Zhirinovskiy spent 11 years was actually the most prestigious institution of its kind in Alma-Ata. His fellow students came from the families of top party functionaries and KGB officers. Indeed, as classmate Yuri Anoshin explains, the school, following a popular practice

of factories and government offices at the time, was "adopted" by the local KGB administration. This enabled Zhirinovskiy and his peers to enjoy such rare amenities as flowers, potted palm trees, upholstered armchairs and pet canaries.

The future L.D.P. leader was not always popular among his classmates. One of them, Nikolai Salatyov, recalls a student-court session in which two younger pupils were put on trial for stealing car parts from an automobile repair shop. Zhirinovskiy acted as prosecutor, and even though such pilfering was common, he turned the proceedings into a show trial, delivering a shrill speech about the need to punish the boys. Enraged, his peers waited until after class and beat the tar out of him.

"We considered him such a small fry, we didn't think he was fit for wiping our

**"All we want is three countries: Afghanistan, Iran and Turkey. Russia can...save the world from the spread of Islam."**

feet on," recalls Dyusenbek Nakipov, who grew up in the same neighborhood. "We sent him to buy cigarettes, and he would ask, 'May I join you guys?' The usual answer was, 'Get the f--- out of here,' or just a kick in the butt."

There was also gossip about his possible Jewish parentage—an issue that could have explosive implications for a politician in this country where anti-Semitism is still widespread. According to Zhirinovskiy's own account, his father was Volf Andreyevich Zhirinovskiy, a legal adviser with the Turkish-Siberian railway, who died in a car

crash before Zhirinovskiy was born. But an American reporter working for the Associated Press and CNN recently unearthed a set of alleged family documents in Alma-Ata suggesting that Zhirinovskiy's real father was a man named Volf Isaakovich Edelshtein, a name most Russians assume to be Jewish. Zhirinovskiy claims the documents are forged, and has vigorously denied Jewish heritage.

In any event, after completing high school in June 1964, Zhirinovskiy boarded a plane for Moscow to attend the prestigious Oriental Languages Institute at Moscow State University. The move was surprising for a provincial boy with no family connections, and it has fueled speculation that he must have had help from his school's KGB sponsors. Suspensions increased when Zhirinovskiy, after studying Turkish and English for five years and then landing a job as a translator in the Turkish city of Iskenderun, was kicked out of the country eight months later.

The circumstances of his expulsion are not clear. According to Nuzhet Kandemir, the Turkish ambassador to the U.S., Zhirinovskiy was arrested and expelled from Turkey in 1969 as a KGB agent. Students back at the Oriental Languages Institute heard that the Turks had thrown him in prison for passing out Soviet badges to Turkish boys and that, after the Soviet consulate sprang him on bail, Zhirinovskiy jumped bail. It was widely assumed that the KGB had played a role in his release.

Whatever happened in Turkey, the incident left a bad odor with the authorities and seemed to set back Zhirinovskiy's career. Even though he graduated with a red diploma of excellence, he was not offered the kind of lucrative employment that his academic record warranted. Instead, he



GUNEV FOR TIME

was drafted into the Soviet army.

Returning to Moscow in the spring of 1972, he spent two years working with delegations from French-speaking countries, then joined a state-run law firm that handled inheritance and pension cases for Soviet citizens with relatives abroad. "He was not much of a lawyer," recalls a former associate. "He disliked responsibilities and shirked any job that might entail them, but he loved to be in the thick of things and loved making public speeches."



## An Evening of Talk with Mr. Nice Guy

**D**ERIDED AND OFTEN DISMISSED AS A BUFFOON, VLADIMIR Zhirinovskiy knows how to tailor his image to different audiences. During a dinner with TIME editors at Moscow's Metropole Hotel, Zhirinovskiy repeatedly insisted that he was a "moderate" and that his more extreme statements were intended only to call his countrymen's attention to Russia's dire condition.

As part of the charm offensive, Zhirinovskiy brought along his attractive, dark-haired wife Galina, a biologist, and their 23-year-old son Igor, in lieu of the two senior aides who had been invited. "He's complicated, but he's predictable," Galina said with a laugh. Zhirinovskiy barely touched the vodka and wine that were proffered. And when loud music from a French fashion show in an adjacent ballroom threatened to drown him out, he raised his voice without missing a beat.

Zhirinovskiy had simple—but often implausible—answers for every challenging question. His publicized meeting with an Austrian Nazi, he said, was a "setup." His claim that Russian troops would someday wash their boots in the Indian Ocean meant only that chaos in



Zhirinovskiy making a point at dinner with TIME editors in Moscow last Friday

Muslim countries would require Russian peacekeeping within 20 years. He glibly promised that within months of taking office, he would end homelessness, unemployment and crime.

Try as he might to sound reasonable, Zhirinovskiy could not quite conceal his real sentiments. He rejected accusations that he was anti-Semitic, yet a few sentences later he allowed that there were too many Jews among Russia's democratic forces. Nor could he help speaking disparagingly of non-Russians from the Caucasus and Central Asia. Zhirinovskiy chastised Russia's new rich, but his entourage included two young bankers from St. Petersburg who were scrupulously recording the scene with a video camera.

It was a carefully modulated performance, yet whenever he touched on his hot-button issues he began to wave his arms and wag his finger as if he were at a street-corner rally. Zhirinovskiy justified his frequently bizarre behavior as "tactical." "It's the sorry state of affairs in this country that forces me to take so tough a stand to avert something even worse," he said. "If there were a healthy economy and security for the people, I would lose all the votes I have."

What he did have was the gift of gab. "Boy, could he talk!" says another colleague. "Whenever he stood up, there was a whisper in the audience: 'Now Volodya is going to show 'em!' The only problem was that he could never offer a reasonable solution."

Though Zhirinovskiy has always claimed that he rejected the Communist Party out of principle, in fact he applied to join the party organization at his law firm in 1981, but was turned down. "He

improper gift from a client in the form of a pass to a vacation resort. "We offered him the chance to quit quietly," says Kulichev, "so he did."

His next job, as a legal adviser for the Mir publishing firm, was to serve as the springboard for his political career. In 1987, as Mikhail Gorbachev's tentative experiments with democracy were gathering steam, Zhirinovskiy put himself forward as an independent candidate from his publishing company for the city's district Soviet. His promise—anything bluster drew the

attention of Communist Party authorities, who were

**"I may have to shoot 100,000 people, but the other 300 million will live peacefully."**

was terribly offended," recalls Yevgeni Kulichev, Zhirinovskiy's old boss. "He started writing signed complaints and anonymous denunciations, and he leveled all sorts of accusations at us." The incident exacerbated the strain between Zhirinovskiy and his firm; he eventually left in the wake of allegations that he had accepted an

worried by this troublesome nonparty populist. Zhirinovskiy was disqualified from the election by party officials and Mir management, who cited a letter from the law firm where he had worked, questioning his ethical and moral qualities.

Nevertheless, the flirtation with politics launched his new career. Zhirinovskiy spent much of the next two years in Mos-

cow attending rallies, giving speeches, drafting programs and steeping himself in the heady milieu of the "informal" political movements that were sprouting in the capital. It was during this period that he was spotted by Vladimir Bogachev, founder of a fledgling organization called the Liberal Democratic Party. Impressed by Zhirinovskiy's rhetorical flair, Bogachev gave him the largely symbolic post of chairman in March 1990, intending to keep the real levers of power to himself.

It did not work out that way. The party was shocked when its new chairman began expounding an increasingly heated repertoire of hostile themes—the evils of Western culture, the meddling of foreigners, the conspiracies of Jews. By October, members succeeded in expelling the irksome lawyer from their midst. But Zhirinovskiy got his revenge by stealing the organization's name when he registered his own party in April 1991. "I wish I had had an abortion," says Bogachev, "because I was the one who gave birth to Zhirinovskiy."

The sudden emergence of the new L.D.P. brought more charges of KGB connections. An official at the Ministry of the Interior, the KGB's longtime rival, insists that "Zhirinovskiy was a KGB creature from the very outset . . . Otherwise, there could

**"[We must] deal with [ethnic minorities] as America did with the Indians and Germany did with the Jews."**



GUNEYEV FOR TIME

have been no way to set up his own party when the Communist Party was still in charge." Anatoli Sobchak, the mayor of St. Petersburg, has charged that Zhirinovskiy's party was engineered by the KGB and that Zhirinovskiy was handpicked by the secret police to head it. Zhirinovskiy denounces such theories as slanderous.

With or without KGB's help, the L.D.P. quickly proved it could stand on its own. Last December the party shocked Yeltsin's reformers by taking 64 seats in the parliamentary elections. Since then, Zhirinovskiy has cemented his control over the organization. In April, at the L.D.P.'s Fifth Party Congress, the 340 Deputies unanimously voted to give him absolute power. They also extended his tenure as party chairman until the year 2004 and nominated him as their candidate in the country's next presidential elections. Evidence of a Zhirinovskiy personality cult cropped up at the congress. A placard proclaimed him THE ONLY HOPE OF DECEIVED AND HUMILIATED PEOPLES. Copies of the party newspapers on sale offered readers a palm print of the chairman's right hand.

The speed with which Zhirinovskiy has consolidated power within the L.D.P. has left many Russians wondering whether he would, if he became President, dispose of the country's democratic institutions just as quickly. As early as 1991 he proclaimed, "I say it quite plainly—when I come to power, there will be a dictatorship." Such high-handedness is already causing problems among his supporters. In March, four Deputies from the L.D.P.'s 64-member parliamentary bloc pulled out. Among them was Victor Kobelev, once second to Zhirinovskiy in the party hierarchy. A fifth dissident was later expelled from the party and, just last month, six more members broke ranks to create their own faction.

Zhirinovskiy's momentum, moreover, may already be wearing thin. "He is still functioning on the level of the street-corner rallies we were involved in before the election victory," says Kobelev. "This kind of streetwise showing-off is inappropriate in the Duma." In April an argument in parliament between Zhirinovskiy and dissident L.D.P. Deputy Vladimir Borzhyuk degenerated into fisticuffs. At one point, Zhirinovskiy was seen actually banging

Borzhyuk's head against the wall. Entertained as they now are by such debauched antics, the Russian public could eventually grow tired of his wild style and write him off as yet another *samozvanets*, or "pretender Czar," who failed to deliver on promises.

Still, the fact remains that when Zhirinovskiy talks to ordinary Russians, they listen. His brazen but canny style was on fine display when TIME accompanied him on a visit recently to Shchelkovo, the rural industrial center 25 miles northeast of Moscow that he represents in parliament.

First stop for the L.D.P. convoy was the Shchelkovo District Administrative Office, located on a central square dominated by a huge statue of Lenin. With a pack of a dozen journalists at his heels, he paraded into the office of Nikolai Pashin, the head of the local administration. Wiping his face with his hands, tweaking his nose and interrupting his host several times to give orders to his aides, he listened as Pashin trotted out a list of ills afflicting the community. No problem was so large that Zhirinovskiy wasn't ready with an instant solution. The district's atrocious road? "I'll see Prime Minister Chernomyrdin and slip these documents about the road to him." The lack of funds for new projects? "Everything is manageable." Wrangles over bureaucratic red tape? "I'll handle it all."

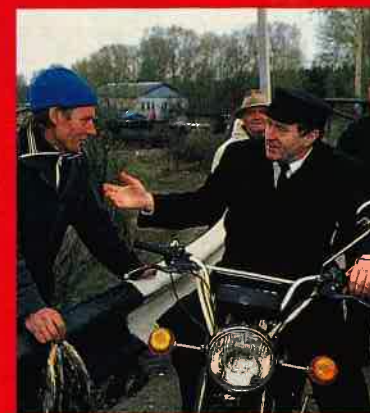
**I**N THE MIDDLE OF THE CONVERSATION, the L.D.P. leader suddenly had a brainstorm. On a recent trip to Yugoslavia, he said, he made valuable contacts with Serb businessmen who could be of use to his district. His Serb friends could be persuaded to put up a mini-bakery or mini-dry-cleaning service in Shchelkovo. "What you need are little things which are of immediate use to the people," he explained. "A mini-bakery would bake excellent bread." He turned to his chief of staff, Gennadi Kazantsev, and said, "Put it all down!"

A woman bureaucrat timidly asked, "How much will it all cost?" Zhirinovskiy seemed insulted. "We're not talking about money. It's all for free! I saved the Serbs from bombing, so they can't do enough to show me their appreciation."



### PUBLIC RELATIONS

Enraged, the L.D.P. leader heaves a potted plant at Jewish protesters in Strasbourg



### PEOPLE'S PAL

Lecturing a Russian fisherman from the vantage point of a borrowed motorcycle



### DRINKS ON HIM

Posing with a birthday bottle of eponymously labeled "Zhirinovskiy" vodka