

Russian shift in policy threatens neighbors

by Konstantin George

In an angry speech delivered March 20 in Moscow, Russian President Boris Yeltsin declared "a decree of special rule" to be in effect until a popular referendum on new elections is held on April 25. Yeltsin reserved to himself the right to override any decrees of the Supreme Soviet, and said that he has ordered Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin to work out a "list of economic priorities." But while the short-term situation in Russia is in flux, the move is an act of desperation in which Yeltsin will either be forced to become a figurehead for a change in Russian policy already being implemented, or face removal from office.

What is certain is that cabinet changes reflecting the influence of the Civic Union, the lobby for the military-industrial complex, are imminent. On March 20, Yeltsin himself announced that "several" cabinet ministers had been removed, although no names were given. In an attempt to curry support from the Civic Union, Yeltsin outlined what he called eight important points, including measures to stabilize the ruble, take control of the Central Bank, and introduce private ownership of land, and also including cheap state credits for small and medium-sized enterprises and a state program to construct housing and transportation to combat unemployment.

On March 23, the Russian Constitutional Court voted 6-3 with 4 abstentions that Yeltsin's TV address was a violation of the constitutional principle of the separation of powers between the executive and legislative branches of government. However, the court declared that the address did not provide the basis for proceeding with the impeachment of Yeltsin. Indicative of the temporizing of the court as a whole,

Valery Zorkin, the head of the court, accused Yeltsin on March 20 of "attempting a coup," but then expressed hope that a "compromise" could be reached.

The most important figures in Russia have lined up unanimously to condemn Yeltsin's move. Vice President Aleksandr Rutskoy, who enjoys the support of the military, went on Russian TV, along with Zorkin and Russian Chief State Prosecutor Valentin Sepankov, late on March 20 to declare Yeltsin's actions "unconstitutional." Yuri Skokov, secretary of the all-powerful Russian Security Council, accused Yeltsin of going over his head in not consulting with him on his TV address. "It could only worsen the political atmosphere in the country," he said.

Yeltsin does not have the support of the Army and security forces, as indicated by statements of key cabinet ministers at a March 21 press briefing. The briefing was held to demonstrate that the government "supports" the Yeltsin declaration, but Defense Minister Pavel Grachev declared that the "Army will abide by the Constitution." Grachev observed that the Army is still under control, "but the situation is hour by hour more and more tense, above all in the units based in Moscow." Grachev said he didn't want to "dramatize the situation," but developments could "end in bloodshed." He concluded by urging the parliament: "The Army appeals to you deputies of the people. We need a compromise. The entire people is waiting for that. I'm sure you'll find a means to settle the crisis."

Security Minister Barannikov and Interior Minister Yerin also declared their support, not for the President, but for the Constitution.

A strong government

Should Yeltsin refuse to back down, preparations are under way for an emergency session of the Congress of People's Deputies, to vote for removing him from power. Meeting in an emergency session on March 21, the Supreme Soviet condemned Yeltsin's emergency measures in an overwhelming vote put forward by parliament head Ruslan Khasbulatov. When the Congress convenes, it will do so on the basis of Article 121 of the present Constitution, which states that a President is automatically barred from the right to continue in office if he dissolves any "legally elected constitutional organs."

Yeltsin's declaration followed the conclusion, on March 13, of a four-day session of the Congress of People's Deputies which administered Yeltsin a stinging defeat. Yeltsin described that meeting as a "dress rehearsal for the reestablishment of the communist *nomenklatura*." He accused parliamentary Speaker Khasbulatov as "calling for renewal of the Cold War," and said that this would mean an arms race and confrontation with the rest of the world. "Russia cannot stand another October Revolution," he continued, referring to the Bolshevik seizure of power in 1917. "That will be a jump into the abyss."

But the inherent weakness of Yeltsin was, ironically, even clear from the contents of his declaration. He did not establish presidential rule nor any state of emergency. Had he had the support of the Armed Forces, he would certainly have done so. Instead, the "special administration" form leaves the road open for a strong post-Yeltsin government, acting as the front for the Russian Security Council and its institutional components—the military, military-industrial complex, the industry lobby, and the security services.

Georgia, Baltics, Ukraine in the cross hairs

Immediately following the last session of the Congress of People's Deputies, Russia began sustained air attacks on the city of Sukhumi, the capital of the Georgian region of Abkhazia, on the night of March 14-15, with many civilians killed. These attacks, timed with attacks by Russian-backed Abkhazian separatists on Georgian positions outside Sukhumi, have brought Russia and Georgia to the brink of war. In response, Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze declared that a de facto state of war exists between Georgia and Russia, and that Georgia may have to declare a "general mobilization."

Russia also militarily threatened the Baltic states of Estonia and Latvia. In a speech on March 16 to the Baltic Council in Helsinki, Russian Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev warned of the "danger of Yugoslav conditions" in the Baltic, and attacked the "appearance of aggressive nationalism and chauvinism" in Estonia and Latvia. Kozyrev demanded that U.N. special emissaries be sent to these two states to investigate "human rights violations" against the Russian minorit-

ies, which are threatening a "Balkan scenario," where Russia could be "forced" to send "peacekeeping forces." This was no National Front extremist speaking. This was the Russian foreign minister threatening a Russian military re-occupation of two Baltic states.

The Russian posture toward Ukraine has also become more threatening, though, in this case, military moves can probably be ruled out for the near future. A senior unnamed Ukrainian Foreign Ministry official was quoted in the March 17 London *Financial Times*: "Russia's attitude toward its neighbors can now be compared to Germany's in 1939. This is a crucial moment when the West must realize that the consequences of a policy of appeasement are as dangerous as they were in 1939." The paper cited western diplomats reporting that they have been told by Russians "not to bother building large embassies in Kiev, because within 18 months, this will be downgraded to consular sections." During a February visit to Warsaw, Yeltsin adviser Sergei Stankevich warned Poland to scale down its growing political and military ties with Ukraine. Ukraine and Belarus are in the Russian sphere of influence, he told his hosts. These statements are not empty alarms.

A 'new centrist government'

While Yeltsin is losing power, the outcome will not be a triumph of the Congress. All signs indicate that the Russian political crisis will be resolved through a strong presidential system, where the President would sign decrees dictated by the leading figures of the Russian Security Council, the locus of real power. The key figures who would actually rule include Security Council Secretary Yuri Skokov, who embodies the military-industrial complex; the military leadership; Vice President Aleksandr Rutskoy, who enjoys the complete support of the military and Civic Union; Arkady Volsky, leader of the Civic Union, and Valery Zorkin, president of the Russian Constitutional Court.

Parallel to a strong presidency under its aegis, the Russian Security Council is also pressing for a so-called new centrist government, which would reflect the interests of the Civic Union industry lobby and the military-industrial complex. This has become the clarion call of the Russian elite. The call by Constitutional Court President Zorkin for a "salvation government of the center," issued on March 13 as the Congress was closing, sets the stage for the incoming regime. Zorkin repeated the call on March 15 at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C., where he called for a "new government based on a centrist orientation" in Russia, existing side by side with a "strong presidency" as in "the French model." Zorkin's visit to the United States itself is striking. He was clearly dispatched as an unofficial Security Council emissary to brief Washington on Russian developments, and his agenda included a meeting with President Clinton on March 16. His reference to the "French model" also preceded

by 24 hours the arrival of French President François Mitterrand in Moscow.

The entire political spectrum in Moscow is echoing Zorin's call for a "new government based on a centrist orientation," or admitting that such a government is coming. On March 15, figures ranging from Congress head Khasbulatov to National Front leader Dukin endorsed the idea of a new centrist government. Telling in this regard was the admission on the same day by former Prime Minister Yegor Gaidar, the shock therapy maniac, that a "centrist political government" is "likely to emerge." Dukin told *EIR* two days before the Russian Security Council meeting that "plans for a centrist government" are in the works. The Khasbulatov statement of March 15 tells volumes: "Now it is necessary to concentrate solely on the economic reforms. In this question, the govern-

Solzhenitsyn warns that Russia is up for grabs

Aleksander Solzhenitsyn warned in a March 7 letter to Russian ambassador in Washington Vladimir Lukin that a strong government was necessary to defend Russia. Excerpts follow.

The Russian Federation . . . cannot exist without a strong presidential power, a power which is at least as strong as that in the United States. . . . What is at issue is not just President Yeltsin or the current composition of the Supreme Soviet; at issue is a long-term policy, an agreement which prevents Russia from tottering from every gust of wind. . . . The alternative which will be adopted now . . . will decide the future of the country, probably for one century ahead, when the present politicians will long be dead, but the burden of a wrong decision will be still tied around Russia's neck. . . . When people have been thrown into the abyss, is it really the time for garbled referendum questionnaires on clauses of the Constitution . . . to organize elections into a Constituent Assembly, or have meetings, month after month, working out an 'ideal' constitution? During the whole of 1917, ideal electoral laws had been elaborated, and finished just in time for the October coup. . . . Hasty politicians, who wage furious battles in the stratosphere . . . in the meantime the pillage has assumed a massive, unprecedented scale, Russia's riches are sold out for a song, the country in chaos is irreversibly up for grabs.

ment must have the last word. The decisions of the last Congress have deeply strengthened their [the government's] importance as the highest organ of the economy."

The indications that the Russian elite had reached a consensus for a "strong presidency" and a "strong government," with or without Yeltsin, as the only alternative to an impending chaos without end, were evident before the Congress session began. This was clear on March 7 when a letter from Aleksander Solzhenitsyn to Russian ambassador to Washington Vladimir Lukin was read on Russian TV by Yuri Karyakin, a member of the consultative Russian Presidential Council. "I agree completely" with Solzhenitsyn's demands, he told viewers. He urged them to "listen to the voice of the man whose contemporaries we are proud to be."

The Solzhenitsyn letter provides a unique window into the thinking of the Russian elite (see box). Notably, Solzhenitsyn denounced any return to communism as leading to the death of Russia, and equally denounced the idea of restoring the U.S.S.R., whose only result would be "a bloody war in a dozen republics." He concluded with a call for "the only real formation which offers us any hope . . . a union of the states of Belarus, Russia, and Kazakhstan."

Social explosion brewing

An early resolution of the Russian political power struggle will be forced by the accelerating economic devolution which has brought the country to the brink of a social explosion. For most of the population, the last "reserves" from savings have vanished after the record hyperinflation rates of 126% for January and 129% for February. The March rate is even higher. For the first time, a hyperinflation, as opposed to "only" heavy inflation, has affected basic foods, the prices for which have increased 74% in Moscow in the first two months of 1993. The great majority of people are now not "merely" living in poverty, but below the minimum for existence, which now stands officially at 6,000 rubles per month. (As recently as last autumn, 6,000 rubles per month was considered a "very good wage"; now it is bare minimum.)

As a result of this non-linear economic crisis, "labor peace" under Yeltsin is now over. The early March warning strikes by the coal miners of Kuzbass in Siberia, and Vorkuta in the Russian far north, were but the harbingers of things to come. New miners strikes could erupt at any time. The next strike wave will be far broader. Tens of thousands of mostly women textile workers from Ivanovo, north of Moscow, plan a march on Moscow in mid-March to protest before the Russian White House the closure of 40 textile plants and the imminent closure of another 46, following the breakdown of cotton imports from Uzbekistan. In the Russian Pacific port of Vladivostok and its environs, a quasi-general strike, involving dock, shipyard, and urban transport workers and foresters, is set for sometime in March to protest plant closures.