

Yeltsin, West playing with fire as Russia nears explosion

by Konstantin George

The Sept. 29 ultimatum by Russian President Boris Yeltsin, ordering the deputies and their supporters encamped at the Russian Parliament to vacate the premises by Monday, Oct. 4, and companion measures extending shock therapy economic policies, have dramatically escalated the crisis in Russia. The Parliament is under siege, sealed off by elite OMON special units of the Russian Interior Ministry, and has had its electricity, heat, and running water cut off.

The responsibility for the escalation at the White House, which houses the Parliament, lies exclusively with the Yeltsin camp. The Russian media, above all TV, under the tight control of the Yeltsin entourage, is setting the stage for a storming of the Parliament by repeatedly alleging that "extremists" and "terrorists" are holed up in the Parliament building, known as the White House. On Sept. 29, Defense Minister Grachev warned that "dangerous advisers" at the White House were preparing "terrorist attacks against Russian leaders." He added, "As a military man, I feel these are the first steps toward a large and bloody conflict." Later in the day, Russian TV carried a lying report, which it never retracted, saying that "many of the deputies" at the White House were being "held hostage."

The Oct. 4 deadline for Parliament to end its resistance to the Yeltsin-initiated coup, pushed back an earlier Sept. 29 deadline. The new ultimatum came after a Yeltsin-chaired session of the Russian Security Council, and indicated that the Yeltsin camp had decided to first take stock of the situation in the country before commencing the next phase of the coup process, which will include the "liquidation" of Parliament.

More shock therapy

Three dynamics are driving Russia toward a chaotic blowup and some form of dictatorship. The first is the Yeltsin confrontation with parliament. The second is the Yeltsin confrontation with the regional leaderships, which is driving the country toward a chaotic fragmentation. And the third is the Yeltsin decree of Sept. 28 inaugurating a new round of the shock therapy economic austerity that has already pauperized the majority of the population.

The effect of the new shock therapy measures will be devastating. The price of bread has been freed, effective Oct.

1. The decrees also ended state grain subsidies to farmers, thus ensuring that future grain deliveries to cities can only be procured at exorbitant prices. The decrees also freed the price of apartment rents, which are expected to increase tenfold during October. Cheap state credits to industry will be drastically curtailed, which will force many enterprises to close, throwing several million Russians into unemployment over the coming winter. On July 1, the price of coal was freed, and on Aug. 1, the price of electricity was freed, and these effects will be felt more heavily now with the arrival of cold weather, in the form of huge heating bills. The average electricity bill for a family now is six times what it was in July. As all these measures increase suffering, the chaos factor will rise exponentially.

Yeltsin cancels democracy

The Yeltsin decree on Sept. 21 dissolved the Parliament, establishing in effect proto-dictatorial presidential rule. His second step was his categorical rejection of the reasonable compromise for simultaneous early elections in December for both Parliament and President. This solution has been advocated by a broad consensus of both regional leaderships and forces in Moscow Center, including most of the country's political parties and movements, the leadership of the Russian Orthodox Church, and even some leading personalities within the Yeltsin entourage. Contrary to media mythology, the "diehards" who want confrontation instead of a democratic solution are not the Parliament, but Yeltsin, under the sway of a core clique in his entourage.

Leading lights among this Yeltsin clique include Yeltsin's personal chief of staff Sergei Filatov; his press spokesman, Vyacheslav Kostikov; the man controlling the coup's media dictatorship, Federal Information Center head Mikhail Poltoranin; and the two pro-shock therapy vice prime ministers installed, respectively, immediately before and after the Sept. 21 decrees, Yegor Gaidar and Vladimir Shumeiko. Add to this Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev, the man giving credulous western heads of state and cabinet ministers "inside briefings," lining them up to blindly support the coup process in Russia.

No coup process is possible without critical figures in the defense, interior, and security ministries, the latter the

successor to the notorious KGB.

Pitted against this is an array of forces which form a broad consensus of the Russian political spectrum and represent the views of the majority of Russians, who want early, simultaneous elections. In Moscow Center, this involves nearly all the national political parties, including the centrist moderate parties, and powerful "new faces," political figures who, in new elections, could become major figures. This includes Yuri Skokov and Nikolai Travkin, the leaders of the recently founded proto-party organization "Consensus for the Fatherland." Skokov, a leading figure in the high-technology section of the Russian military-industrial complex, was, till Yeltsin fired him May 10, the head of the Russian Security Council. Travkin, a co-founder of the Civic Union, the original industry lobby umbrella organization, heads the centrist Democratic Party of Russia (unrelated to the Democratic Russia movement), one of the largest in the country.

Most of the country's regional leaderships are also firmly opposed to the Yeltsin coup, including the St. Petersburg City Council and forces in the Moscow City Council which were in the vanguard of the democratic movement that stopped the August 1991 coup. Were the Yeltsin camp really "fighting for democracy," these organizations would be supporting Yeltsin, not the other way around.

One figure in the Yeltsin entourage who has come out supportive of simultaneous early elections is Sergei Shakhrai, deputy prime minister and Yeltsin adviser on nationalities. Shakhrai is a prospective presidential candidate, having founded his own party during the summer.

The Russian Orthodox Church, which has a profound sense of historical processes, knows that under current conditions of economic and social breakdown, the unleashing of a process of disintegration and regional fragmentation will have incalculable consequences. On Sept. 28, Patriarch Aleski II, the leader of the church, offered to mediate an end to the crisis on the basis of early elections for both President and Parliament. Aleski II motivated his offer with the urgent need to "prevent bloodshed and the breakup of Russia into principalities."

The Parliament and its "President," Russian Vice President Aleksandr Rutskoy, are not only against confrontation, but have endorsed the solution of early, simultaneous presidential and parliamentary elections. On Sept. 29, speaking to western journalists at the Parliament, Rutskoy agreed to participate in any mediation effort by Patriarch Aleski II.

Yeltsin is also playing with fire in his rejection of simultaneous elections, first stated Sept. 27 and repeated on Sept. 29 and 30, as are western leaders and governments, beginning with President Clinton and his administration, who are giving their unequivocal support to Yeltsin, which in reality is an endorsement of a dictatorship. The American White House has bought the Yeltsin regime line that a storming of the Russian White House will be "necessary." After the Russian Security Council announced the Oct. 4 deadline,

Russian Foreign Minister Kozyrev met with President Clinton on Sept. 29, and told him that "unhappily there's a risk that blood will flow." Kozyrev stressed that he had "advised Yeltsin to avoid all compromises."

The regions revolt

The most dangerous situation is the Yeltsin regime's confrontation with the regional leaderships of Russia. In an attempt to amicably end the crisis on a democratic basis, the leaders of 39 regional parliaments and nine regional heads of administration met on Sept. 26 in St. Petersburg. They unanimously called for a solution based on early simultaneous elections for President and Parliament, to take place in December. Their compromise package included a face-saving clause for Yeltsin: He would have to revoke his decree of Sept. 21, but the old Parliaments, i.e., the Supreme Soviet and Congress of People's Deputies, would be replaced by the Federation Council, the organ of regional leaders, acting as the interim Parliament pending new elections.

From the Yeltsin side, Deputy Prime Minister Sergei Shakhrai gave his qualified support to the St. Petersburg agreement. For the first time in five days, a ray of hope had entered the picture. But it vanished the next day, when Yeltsin categorically rejected the St. Petersburg formula, and instead began a process of escalation against the regions. During the week, he fired the heads of administration in Bryansk and Novosibirsk for having refused to support the coup, threatened to purge other resisting regional leaders, and even issued decrees dissolving regional parliaments.

This Yeltsin confrontation with the regions is creating centrifugal tendencies in Russia. On Sept. 29, he abruptly "postponed" his meeting with the Federation Council, a meeting he himself only 24 hours earlier had endorsed for either Sept. 30 or Oct. 1. Something that was avoidable until that juncture has now begun: a "revolt" of the regions against Moscow, setting into motion the nightmare "breakup into principalities" that the patriarch had so urgently warned against.

The revolt began on Sept. 29 with a meeting of the leaderships of all the Siberian regions in the city of Novosibirsk. They issued an ultimatum to the Yeltsin regime to stop its anti-constitutional actions, saying that in the case of non-compliance, Siberia would hold referendums in all the Siberian regions for the purpose of declaring itself an "Autonomous Siberian Republic," and begin withholding tax payments and supplies of oil, gas, and coal from Moscow. The keynote address was given by the "fired" Novosibirsk head of administration, Vitali Mukha, who declared, "The Constitution has been violated. . . . Our prime concern is the economy. . . . We have to unify the regional budgets" in Siberia. The regions agreeing to this ultimatum included the Tyumen region, the leading producer of oil and gas in Russia, and the Kemerovo region, the leading coal supplier in the Russian Federation.