

Storm clouds gather in Russia

by Roman Bessonov

The following was filed by Russian journalist Roman Bessonov on Oct. 11, before the outbreak of the ruble crisis.

The situation in the Russian economy is becoming more and more catastrophic, making it clear that the new "period of stagnation" will not last for long. The President's charisma is rapidly fading; almost every newspaper, including most "democratic" periodicals, openly discusses his alcoholism, and, correspondingly, his ability to rule the state.

The Gorbachov-linked *Novaya Yezhednevnyaya Gazeta* recently published a photo of President Boris Yeltsin in Germany, trying to pronounce something after consumption of a large quantity of alcohol. Readers were invited to offer the best caption for the picture. After three years of unconditional support for Yeltsin, liberal newspapers have begun to recollect a whole list of his mistakes during his time in power. It is clear that the President is not satisfying the self-styled "anti-fascist" radical liberals. Moscow News columnist Evgeniya Albats, famous for her attacks on the "red-brown opposition" and the KGB, now suspects Yeltsin of anti-Semitism, her reason being that Yeltsin has never denounced anti-Semitism and, secondly, he praised the work of painter Ilya Glazunov, recently exhibited in Moscow.

The real story with Glazunov was that the artist, while touring Yeltsin around the exhibition, pointed to a new painting that features sinister Jewish-looking faces in the center of the composition, and asked Yeltsin, "Shall we let enemies ruin our country?" The TV cameras were already on the President and the artist. Even if he were quite drunk, he could not have replied, "Okay, let them," thus satisfying the expectations of the "anti-fascist" intelligentsia. He answered, "No," providing a pretext for a campaign against him.

This is typical of the trap Yeltsin fell into after the tragedy of October 1993, when his power struggle with the Russian Supreme Soviet ended with the Parliament building in flames. More and more of his allies have betrayed him to launch their own political games. The most powerful of these, Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov, controls several newspapers and a TV station. He exploits the President's dependence on him and his banks and firms (which resulted from the Yeltsin-Luzhkov alliance against the Supreme Soviet in October 1993) for his own advantage.

The "autumn of the patriarch" has arrived. But fall 1994

is a time of total crisis for the entire political and economic system in Russia; and, paradoxically, the chaos in policy and in the public mind is saving Yeltsin, buying him a certain amount of time to play out his game. None of his opponents, each pursuing his own interests, can prevail at this time.

The atmosphere of uncertainty and lack of confidence produces public apathy and a belief that any administrative measures adopted will be inadequate to change the course of events. Sensing this, politicians are turning to mysticism and astrology, as it was in czarist Russia before World War I. The famous Assyrian Pavel Globa, who was previously used by the Yeltsinites during their struggle against Supreme Soviet Speaker Ruslan Khasbulatov, has brought his gift of prophecy into play again. Globa recently predicted that there would be a scandal around Vladimir Shumeiko, Speaker of the Federation Council, and warned Yuri Luzhkov against "incautious measures" during October.

Indeed, Yeltsin's hypothetical successor Shumeiko became a laughingstock, thanks to *Izvestia*. Shumeiko reported that his new "all-Russia state ideology," which he had promised a year ago to invent, was ready. The "new strategic idea," he said, consists of three fundamental elements: 1) supremacy of spiritual over material interests, 2) preference of a normal material income to luxury, and 3) supremacy of good over evil. *Izvestia* journalist Valeri Vyzhutovich found out that these "elements" were not invented by Shumeiko himself, but copied from a brochure written by trained engineer and amateur philosopher Vladimir Potyomkin. The author had sent the brochure to Shumeiko, adding that he, Vladimir Potyomkin, was a great scientist who had discovered some unknown particles called "matrices of cognition." So Shumeiko emerged as not only a plagiarist, but as someone unable to distinguish a concept from the writings of a mentally ill "inventor."

One of astrologer Globa's predictions having come true, it may be reason for Luzhkov to heed his warning and be cautious, refraining from plots against Yeltsin until he is out of the October danger zone.

The social democracy gambit

In fact, there are more serious reasons for Yuri Luzhkov to wait for better times to spring a plot. During the summer, his position was very strong. He had control over almost every significant political group able to struggle for real power. He created several puppet parties, and was pretty sure that he could manage the whole political process like a chess player. But he started to play too fast, as if all the figures were made of the same material. That was a mistake.

The main gambit Luzhkov was going to play was called "social democracy." The reason is clear enough. Russian political experts had managed to convince U.S. specialists (at Harvard, the Heritage Foundation, and so forth) that the Gaidar-like radical liberal ideology was too dangerous to be further implemented in Russia, because its results might lead

to an upsurge in nationalism. Therefore, social-democratic views suddenly became very popular among the Russian elite; former Soviet Communist Party Central Committee members M. Gorbachov and A. Yakovlev, who now hate each other, started to develop rival social-democratic conceptions.

There are three variants of the "pink" [meaning social-democratic, as opposed to the "red" communists—ed.] ideology for Russia already, and all came into view. Luzhkov helped Yakovlev to form his Social Democratic Alliance, and granted him a 1,000 square meter office in Moscow. But then he moved too fast. Luzhkov proposed that the nominal leader of the Alliance, Marshal Yevgeni Shaposhnikov, be a "charismatic" candidate for the presidency from all democratic and centrist forces. This idea was supported by Gavriil Popov's Movement for Democratic Reforms and Lev Ponomaryov's Democratic Russia federal party. But Yegor Gaidar, having bad relations with both Ponomaryov and Popov, refused to recognize Shaposhnikov's candidacy, and insisted in a public speech that "democrats should support Yeltsin."

On the other hand, Yuri Skokov, chairman of the Federation of Producers, was not satisfied with such a project, either. He didn't recognize Shaposhnikov as a serious figure, and wanted to have nothing (not even a marshal) in common with liberal democrats. The Luzhkov-Skokov alliance cracked.

On Aug. 22, Shaposhnikov spoke at a conference devoted to the anniversary of the 1991 "revolution," where he tried to outline social-democratic ideas for reform in Russia. Since then, he has not been introduced as a potential "progressive leader," while his friend, Gen. Nikolai Stolyarov, held secret talks with another mutual friend, former Vice President Aleksandr Rutskoy.

Opposition maneuvers

In September, Rutskoy was elected at a meeting in Kaliningrad (Königsberg) as "coordinator" of the united opposition under the motto, "Accord for Russia." (The opposition bloc of this name was originally designed for Valeri Zorkin, another would-be candidate for the presidency.) At the congress in Kaliningrad, several speakers mentioned a project for a State Council. The idea of removing Yeltsin and summoning a State Council had been raised before in Luzhkov's circles; having no hope for being elected President, Luzhkov was going to play a "Georgian variant" in Russia.

Luzhkov's idea was to replace Viktor Chernomyrdin with Yuri Skokov as prime minister. This may be why Skokov's name has been mentioned in connection with the Kaliningrad Congress, although he was not present. But soon Skokov made clear he was playing his own game. He held separate talks with Gennadi Zyuganov, leader of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, and then disseminated a rumor that he, Skokov, was going to run for President in 1996 himself.

The failure of the Luzhkov-Skokov alliance was promptly used by Chernomyrdin, whose position, rather weak during the summer, strengthened before Yeltsin's visit to Great Brit-

ain and the United States. One of the reasons was that Yeltsin was going to have talks on American investment in the Russian oil industry, which is Chernomyrdin's base.

Yeltsin returned from the United States at the end of September, whereupon new rumors were spread about personnel changes in the government. In his Oct. 4 speech, Yeltsin said he would not object to including some opposition political figures in the government. First Vice Premier Shokhin said in a TV interview that it would be quite possible to collaborate with Skokov and some other "good old specialists."

According to sources, Chernomyrdin had talks with both Zyuganov and Sergei Glazyev, the head of the Economics Commission in the State Duma and a signer with Rutskoy on the original Accord for Russia statement last winter. Both were allegedly expected to agree to take cabinet posts. Chernomyrdin was evidently trying to sign an agreement with Skokov, but he did not succeed. After a flood of negative news reports in which the opposition, especially the Communists, were treated with disdain, both Zyuganov and Rutskoy declared they would not work for the Yeltsin-Chernomyrdin regime.

This outcome, however, does not end the fierce struggle under the Kremlin carpets. It only proves once again that not ideas, but the naked interests of corrupt politicians, are determining the situation in the Russian elite. Those who actually rule don't care who their allies are; those who have plans to gain power readily change their views when they see a change for themselves; and if someone declines to share power, it usually means he does not want to share responsibility for the economic catastrophe. There are also corporate interests involved. The rivalry of Chernomyrdin and Shaposhnikov, for example, reflects the fight between the mining and petroleum industry and military industry.

Yuri Skokov, who is now keeping his distance from both of them and openly opposing Yeltsin, is less popular than any of them today and less popular than many other prominent politicians, including Zyuganov, Zhirinovsky, and Rutskoy. Will he gain popularity? It doesn't seem so. His latest interview, in *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, is dull and uninteresting, full of expressions like "social partnership" and so forth. Perhaps he's going to win not in an election campaign, but in some other way—is anything to be excluded in Russia? But his opponents and rivals have more money and more possibilities to protect themselves. And Skokov doesn't resemble Jack the Giant-killer. It may be that the only chance for Skokov is to exploit the contradictions between rival groups.

Autumn 1994 is sad and windy. Gloomy workers do not know when they will be fired from their suffering industrial plants, tomorrow or the day after. Gloomy engineers are trying hard to retrain as black market speculators. Gloomy officials don't know whose orders to obey. Gloomy political leaders have no language in which to speak to the people, no brains to rule them, no heart to work for them. Yet their struggle goes on.