

Yeltsin maneuvers to keep his regime's lease on life

by Konstantin George

With Russia's Presidential elections just over two months away, President Boris Yeltsin has reached deep into his bag of tricks during April, in hopes of prolonging his regime's lease on life. His opponents, whether by blunder or provocation, gave him some additional assistance, with the State Duma (lower house of Parliament) resolution of March 15, declaring the dissolution of the Soviet Union "null and void."

While rumors flew in Moscow, about Yeltsin's nearly opting for the "force solution" (to dissolve this Duma as he did the Supreme Soviet in bloody October 1993), Yeltsin chose rather to steal the Communist-led opposition's thunder, by securing a series of "integration" agreements with the former Soviet republics of Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan. He thereby cast himself as the man achieving "real" integration, leading to a union of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) republics, in contrast to the mere rhetoric of the Communists and the vociferous extremist party of Vladimir Zhirinovskiy. (Zhirinovskiy's Liberal Democratic Party of Russia has voted with Yeltsin so many times, that the LD-PR's joining the Communists in support of the March 15 resolution prompted some observers to wonder aloud, if the resolution had not been a provocation from the outset.)

Yeltsin has also put forward an array of pre-election populist measures to put money into the hands of the poor. Last but not least, he has trumpeted maneuvers to create the impression of having ended the war in Chechnya.

'Developing integration'

Capitalizing on the Duma debacle, Yeltsin advanced toward a new, Russia-dominated union of former Soviet republics. On April 2, a Treaty of Union was signed by Russia and Belarus, and, on March 29, Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan signed an agreement on "developing integration." The more far-reaching of the two is the Russia-Belarus

treaty, under which Belarus is united economically and militarily with Russia, and is awaiting the politically and tactically appropriate moment to move on to a *de jure* political union.

Yeltsin and Belarus President Aleksandr Lukashenko signed the treaty in a Kremlin ceremony, attended and blessed by Moscow Patriarch Aleksii II of the Russian Orthodox Church. In proceedings broadcast live on Russian TV, Yeltsin hailed the treaty as "a historical moment," and Lukashenko called it "the undoing of the historical mistake of dissolving the Soviet Union in December 1991." The legal fiction of "national sovereignty" will be maintained by both republics. The treaty stipulates, however, that policy will be determined by the Russian-dominated supranational bodies it creates. The controlling body is the Russia-Belarus Supreme Council, consisting of the two republics' Presidents, prime ministers, and parliament chairmen. This "50-50" division is a farce, as the three Belarus personalities on it are all on the record as advocates of a political union with Russia. The treaty provides for a two-year transition to a common currency and a "common constitution." There will be a joint Russia-Belarus "inter-parliamentary congress."

There is opposition to the treaty in Belarus, but chances of reversing the union are zero. A protest of 30,000 against the treaty was staged in Minsk, the Belarus capital, on March 24, and a smaller protest by some 10,000 persons followed on April 3. In Belarus, as these relatively small numbers indicate, opposition to union with Russia is confined to a minority of the population, in contrast to Ukraine, the strategically more important non-Russian Slavic former Soviet republic. The Lukashenko regime's contempt for the opposition protests was shown by the fact that no Belarus media even mentioned that a demonstration had occurred on April 3.

The "developing integration" agreement was signed at a Kremlin ceremony by the Presidents of Russia, Belarus,

Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan—Yeltsin, Lukashenko, Nursultan Nazarbayev, and Askar Akayev, respectively. While this agreement has little content, it is rightly considered a first step toward extending the Union of Russia and Belarus to include, at some point, these two Central Asian republics. Thus it was another feather in Yeltsin's cap, to make him the man perceived by the Russian population as taking concrete steps toward a new Russian-dominated "union."

The 'peace plan'

The other front of the integration process is in the Transcaucasus. Shortly after the March 15 Duma vote, Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze met Yeltsin in Moscow and proposed a "grand deal": In exchange for Russia supporting Georgia's re-acquisition of its two breakaway regions, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Georgia would join with Russia in a much "deeper integration," and would extend, at least through the first quarter of the next century, the presence of the Russian Armed Forces and Border Troops in Georgia. This would, effectively, make permanent Georgia's status as a Russian protectorate.

In addition, Shevardnadze pledged support for the Russian position in Chechnya, and, by implication, in the entire North Caucasus. Parallel to these developments, well-informed Moscow sources report that Azerbaijan President Heydar Aliyev has let it be known that he, too, would agree to the permanent stationing of Russian troops in Azerbaijan and to "deeper integration" with Russia, if Russia tilted more toward supporting Azerbaijan's position in its conflict with Armenia over the Karabakh region.

In a televised address on March 31, Yeltsin unveiled his peace plan to end the war in Chechnya. It is a hoax.

Yeltsin promised Chechnya "free and democratic elections" and a "special status within the Russian Federation," but under no conditions would independence be granted. He announced the start of Russian troop withdrawals from what he called the "safe regions" of Chechnya, meaning the northern half of the republic, which has allegedly been pacified. Yeltsin also offered indirect negotiations with rebel leader Gen. Jokhar Dudayev. Since the speech, two "Islamic" intermediaries have volunteered their services in this regard: Mintimer Shaimiyev, President of the Russian Federation autonomous republic of Tatarstan, and Kazakhstan's Nazarbayev.

As of April 10, negotiations of any kind have yet to begin. Furthermore, in the ten days since the TV address, Russian air and artillery bombardment of rebel-held villages in southwest and southeast Chechnya has dramatically increased. At least a dozen Chechen villages and towns were heavily damaged or destroyed, and tens of thousands more civilians have become homeless refugees (at least half of Chechnya's pre-war population are now refugees). All this, while the Russian side was daily reporting how the Yeltsin cease-fire was being upheld.

Another component of the hoax, was the announcement that troop withdrawals would start "in April." On April 1, the Russian commander in Chechnya, Gen. Vyacheslav Tikho-

mirov, declared that the cease-fire did not involve what he called "special operations," and that Russian troops "will remain where they are." Russian forces will only begin some token withdrawals "at the end of this month," and any withdrawals would only be from the northern, "pacified" regions. The effect of this on the war will be nil, because most of the Russian forces and nearly all the fighting are in the southern, mountainous part of Chechnya.

But behind the charade of Yeltsin's peace plan, lies the prospect of a Yeltsin-Dudayev deal, giving the appearance of the war having ended in time for the June 16 Russian elections. On April 8, according to the London *Guardian*, Dudayev in effect joined Yeltsin's election campaign. In a reversal of previous declarations, in which he had underscored Yeltsin's role in prolonging the war, Dudayev denounced a "third force" in Moscow as responsible for the war and its continuation, and said that this "third force" was undermining Yeltsin's efforts to end the war.

Dudayev named Gen. Boris Gromov and Gen. Aleksandr Lebed as alleged key figures in this "third force." Lebed, an opponent of the war in Chechnya from its inception, happens to be a candidate in the Presidential election—from a coalition known as the Third Force. Also mentioned by Dudayev were Mikhail Gorbachov and Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov. Dudayev accused this group of masterminding the assassination attempts in Chechnya last autumn against Oleg Lobov, secretary of the Russian Security Council, and General Romanov, at the time commander of Russian forces in Chechnya.

Despite the ludicrous nature of his peace plan, Yeltsin again out-maneuvered the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF) opposition, with some help from inside the Communist leadership. After Yeltsin's March 31 address, Communist Presidential candidate Gennadi Zyuganov attacked the plan as something that should have been put forward before the war started, which now was too little, too late. The next day, however, CPRF Duma Chairman Gennadi Seleznyov in effect endorsed Yeltsin's plan, saying it held the "promise of being successful." (As in maneuvers around the Duma resolution on the dissolution of the Soviet Union being "null and void," which Seleznyov engineered, he and Zyuganov seemed to be working at cross-purposes.)

On April 1, Zyuganov issued an updated reaction to Yeltsin's peace plan, this time saying that it was good because everything Yeltsin proposed had already been proposed by the CPRF. The Communist Party thus threw away its credibility as the opposition to Yeltsin's Chechnya policy, saying, in effect, that Communist policy was broadly identical to the Yeltsin scheme.

Tough posture against Ukraine

Yeltsin also out-maneuvered his opposition in escalating pressure against Ukraine, punishing it for its refusal to follow the example of Belarus and join a "happy Pan-Slavic family" under Russian domination. The Russian handling of Belarus and Ukraine is a Pavlovian method of reward and punishment,

as Moscow's handling of the energy issue exemplifies.

Even before the April 2 treaty, Belarus had been rewarded for its pro-union position by a write-off of all its back debt to Russia for gas and oil deliveries. Future supplies have also been ensured at preferential prices. For Ukraine, the oil and gas back debts, as well as the status of future deliveries, are used as pressure to obtain strategic concessions to Moscow on other fronts.

There is a dual tragedy in Russian-Ukrainian relations. Were Moscow not so insistent on forcing Ukraine into some form of integration, relations might long ago have normalized. A basis for this, the bilateral Russian-Ukrainian Friendship Treaty, has existed in draft form since the summer of 1994. It was initialled in Kiev, in February 1995, and was supposed to have been signed by Yeltsin and Ukraine President Leonid Kuchma on April 4-5, during Yeltsin's scheduled State visit to Kiev. But on April 1, Yeltsin announced the "indefinite postponement" of that visit, citing the failure to reach a final agreement on Black Sea Fleet bases for Russia in the Crimean Peninsula, which is part of Ukraine. It was the sixth time since September 1994, that Yeltsin has cancelled a State visit to Kiev to sign the treaty.

The stumbling block is real. The issue is not the share of the fleet, decided long ago in Moscow's favor—every major warship goes to Russia. Nor is it whether Russia can retain bases as such. Ukraine conceded that point, too, long ago. The issue is the conditions under which Russia retains Black Sea Fleet bases, above all the main base at Sevastopol in Crimea.

The February 1995 initialling specified that the Black Sea Fleet issue was to be resolved, but outside the framework of the treaty. Then, Russia demanded that a separate agreement be reached as a condition for signing the treaty. Yeltsin cancelled three times during 1995, on those grounds. This year, after Yevgeni Primakov took over the Russian Foreign Ministry, Moscow demanded that the settlement be incorporated into the body of the treaty. Ukraine is willing to grant Russia its main bases, but not under permanent base arrangements that are legally similar to the "sovereign bases" that the British have on Cyprus.

Last-minute attempts to resolve the issue in the final days of March failed. These included two days of talks on March 28-29 in the Carpathian Mountains of western Ukraine, between Russian Defense Minister Pavel Grachov and his Ukrainian counterpart Valeri Shmarov, and parallel Moscow talks between the prime ministers of Russia and Ukraine, Viktor Chernomyrdin and Yevhen Marchuk.

British manipulation

Here again, Yeltsin has stolen the thunder from a Communist opposition that is seduced by the geopolitical axioms of empire restoration, rather than the life and death issues confronting Russia, beginning with the economy. The result is a Russian-Ukrainian tragedy "made in Moscow," which

could open Ukraine up to another round of British manipulation.

London wasted no time in suddenly proclaiming itself a "great friend" of Ukraine. Prime Minister John Major announced at the beginning of April that he will visit Kiev on April 18, just before the April 19-20 Group of Seven nuclear safety summit in Moscow. No other Western leader will join him in Kiev, so Britain may make a *coup de théâtre* as "Ukraine's true friend" in the West.

The British operation is abetted by the April 8 International Monetary Fund announcement that it has cancelled the final \$700 million of its original \$1.6 billion loan to Ukraine, citing Ukraine's inability to meet budget deficit and inflation goals set by the IMF as conditions for the loan. Unfortunately, the Ukrainian regime has bent over backwards to comply with murderous IMF demands. It implemented the 1995 austerity budget, at that time the most vicious in Ukraine's history. In March, it got parliament to pass an even worse 1996 budget.

On April 9, an IMF mission arrived in Kiev to hand Ukraine a new austerity ultimatum as the price for the \$700 million, which Ukraine desperately needs to pay for Russian oil and gas imports. Thus, when the squeeze from London (via the IMF) and Moscow is at its greatest, enter John Major as the "true friend" of Ukraine. The spectacle is even more ludicrous, considering that Britain ranks last among the major Western countries in exports to and investments in Ukraine.

The weaker Ukraine becomes, the more this plays into the hands of the integration gameplan launched by the Yeltsin regime. Any breakthroughs against Ukraine will aid Yeltsin in the run-up to the elections.

Yeltsin has also embarked on a populist drive to buy parts of the electorate. On April 8, he signed two decrees. The first guarantees that all arrears in pensions will be paid by the end of April, with the government lending 4 trillion rubles to the State pension fund for this purpose. The second promises that within three months, a "compensation mechanism" will be created to begin the partial reimbursement of the savings wiped out under shock therapy. The value of these vaporized savings is estimated at 800 trillion rubles. Given the sums involved, the actual disbursement of funds, whatever the amount, has been put off till after the elections.

Earlier, Yeltsin decreed the payment of back wages owed to State workers. And in an April 7 campaign speech, he denounced the inequitable "distribution of wealth" as Russia's worst problem, and promised he will take steps to rectify that.

Before the elections, there will also be the grandeur of international summits, including the Group of Seven Moscow summit, April 19-20, and Yeltsin's visit to China, April 24-26. There will be more pomp and ceremonies, too. The latest was announced by the Russian General Staff on April 9: On May 9, Russian V-E Day, for the first time since 1990, there will again be a big military parade in Red Square.