

Russia's Shield Union vows to defend democratic gains

An interview with Lt. Col. Ilya Fedotovich Vasilyev (ret.)

Lt. Col. Ilya Fedotovich Vasilyev (ret.) is deputy chairman of the Moscow Shchit ("Shield") Union, the organization of younger officers in Russia, Ukraine, and other states of the Community of Independent States. A programmatic resolution passed by a Shield conference in January was published in EIR on Feb. 7. Colonel Vasilyev was interviewed by EIR correspondents Michael Liebig and Karl Michael Vitt in Moscow in January. The answers were translated from the Russian by Rachel Douglas.

EIR: When was Shield founded? What were the specific circumstances which led to the formation of Shield?

Vasilyev: By the end of 1988, it had become clear to the politically active part of Soviet society, that [former Soviet President Mikhail] Gorbachov's perestroika [restructuring], glasnost [publicization], and "democratization" were the latest attempt by the CPSU [Communist Party of the Soviet Union] ruling elite to deceive the working people "for the sake of the bright communist future." There was no longer any sense in expecting serious reforms from above, and the progressive layers of society started forming popular fronts, movements, and parties.

Meetings of these public organizations took place almost daily in various regions of Moscow, Leningrad, and other major cities. A furious process of politicization of society was under way, which also touched the progressive part of the officer corps of the Armed Forces.

A great number of "unofficial" editions of leaflets and proclamations appeared, which exposed the totalitarian essence of the state structure of the CPSU, which called itself a party, and of the political organs in the ranks of the Armed Forces. Instances were exposed of the decay of the high standards of authority, as well as corruption and the protection of the humiliating treatment of rank and file workers and

servicemen in the Army and Navy. Inside the CPSU, there arose the "Communists for Perestroika" movement, which subsequently grew into the "Democratic Platform in the CPSU."

Those enrolled at the higher [military] academies, reserve and retired officers, and *afgantsy* soldiers [Afghanistan war veterans] frequented all of these unofficial organizations and movements, but they gradually became convinced that there had to be a special organization of military servicemen, in order to take into account the peculiarities of army life. The massive persecutions, launched by the command and the political organs against servicemen who participated in the democratic movements, helped them reach this conclusion.

Thus, in March 1989, at premises where the Coordination Council of the Moscow Popular Front usually met, a group of enthusiasts initiated the formation of a Union for the social defense of servicemen, reservists, and members of their families, which at its constituent meeting on March 29, 1989 was named Shchit [Shield].

From the first days of its existence, the Shield Union posed the task of achieving deep democratic reforms in the Armed Forces: abolition of the political organs and CPSU party organizations in the Army and Navy, and a gradual transition from obligatory military conscription to a professional army, formed on a voluntary, contractual basis.

The main goal of the Shield Union at that stage, however, remained the social defense of servicemen, since the ideas of perestroika, glasnost, and "democratization" had absolutely not affected the Armed Forces.

The CPSU political organs played the role of ideological gendarme in the army. The slightest free thinking was crushed, and the free press did not penetrate the military towns.

Officers who had been in the capital and found out about

the broad democratic movement “from below,” and about the Shield Union, disseminated information about them all over the country. There emerged local formations of Unions of servicemen in various regions, which united into the All-Army Shield Union.

As of Oct. 1, 1991, the Shield Union is a full member of Euromil—the Association of Military Unions of Europe—and is receiving observer status in EKKO—the European Organization of Unions for the Defense of the Rights of Soldiers and Sailors.

In the Shield Union there are no divisions according to military ranks or duties; everyone is equal.

At the present time, by decision of the conference of the Moscow Shield Union, which took place Jan. 11, 1992, a decision has been adopted on creating a mass organization for servicemen, a trade union. An analytical group has been formed, to prepare the whole legal basis for this organization, on the foundation of the Shield Union.

The constituent conference is scheduled for next fall, but already now there are grounds to assume that all the preparatory work will be finished by spring.

EIR: Can you tell us about the activities of Shield concerning corruption and the inhuman treatment of soldiers in the armed forces?

Vasilyev: Concretely about corruption in the army and the brutal treatment of servicemen, so much has been written in the democratic press, including in the journal *Ogonyok*, that I will have to repeat.

If you want to receive a service promotion, the next military rank, and especially an accelerated promotion, know how to play up to a senior commander. I will give examples from my own 33 years of service. I spent 10 years as a platoon commander, eight of them with the rank of junior lieutenant—I did not know how to “play up.”

Before my discharge into the reserve (in 1975), I worked in one of the communications NII’s [Scientific Research Institutes], and was the author of 10 inventions. Not one of them was adopted and applied; my arm could not be twisted to write in senior commanders as co-authors.

For 15 out of my 33 years of service, I had no place to live—“If you don’t grease up, you won’t go anywhere!” [Russian proverb: *Ne podmazhesh, ne poyedesh!*]

And what would happen on entrance examination days at the Academy? The entire square in front of the Communications Academy in Leningrad was filled for a month with black Volgas [cars]: The competition of high-ranking bureaucrats, of papas whose sons were “taking” the competitive exams, was under way. Some papas pressured [*davili*] with their general’s rank; others simply “gave” [*davali*, bribes].

And how does military inspection get along at defense plants, if its outcome depends on the boss, the factory director?

And how does one obtain privileges during army draft

days? And how is a trip pass to a good sanatorium obtained, if you have excellent health? And so forth. . . .

EIR: What are conditions in the service like?

Vasilyev: The mail received daily by the Shield Union, from the parents of soldiers doing their stint in the service, bears witness to the complete lack of restraint in the army. The tyranny sometimes reaches the point of outright violence and even murders. Fighting is an ordinary occurrence in remote garrisons.

During the past 20 years, we have also found out about *dedovshchina*. This is a unique phenomenon. A soldier with service seniority or a sergeant becomes the “master,” and the young soldiers are the slaves. Such a system frees unscrupulous commanders from having to bother with the new recruits. If you are a literate or, even more, an intelligent soldier, if you make an attempt to defend your human dignity, then a black life in the unit is assured for you. Often such servicemen perish from “accidents” or are forced to flee the ranks of the Armed Forces.

It is no accident, that up to 10,000 servicemen die in the army every year. It is not from living the good life, that thousands of mothers and fathers of servicemen have united in the Union for the defense of their sons from army tyranny.

Without radical military reform, without legal defense of the honor, dignity, and human rights of the person in uniform, we will not obtain a combat-ready army, capable of defending democratic society.

The Shield Union is applying every effort to solve this problem, but so far its forces are significantly less than the organized resistance of the army’s administrative system.

As is known, even after the failure of the August putsch, all its rank and file participants within the Armed Forces command remained in their positions.

All the political organs occupy the key posts they did before, in the hierarchical structure of the army. The party organizations of the Communists have only formally been dissolved, but in reality they exist and are conducting anti-democratic work.

An example of this is the conference that took place Jan. 17, of so-called representatives of officers’ assemblies, who in fact are the political workers in epaulets, who tried to present an ultimatum even to the defense minister of the CIS [Commonwealth of Independent States].

EIR: How did the Afghan War affect the condition of the Soviet Armed Forces? What effect did the Afghan War have on the self-conception of Soviet soldiers?

Vasilyev: The Afghan War is a classic example of communist expansion. Turning to history, the Bolsheviks took advantage of the hardships of World War I and the weakness of democratic forces in Russia, and using the populist slogans “Factories to the workers,” “Land to the peasants,” they seized power and established a so-called dictatorship of the

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proletariat, i.e., a dictatorship of the Bolshevik Party, under cover of the Soviets [workers' councils], which they monopolized.

V.I. Lenin, however, understood perfectly, that the victory of socialism in one country was difficult, and then the slogan was put forward, "Proletarians of all countries, unite," which became the basic strategy of the Bolsheviks in all the years that followed. It is no secret, that from the first days of Soviet power, the Communist Party spent substantial funds on creating an extensive network of communist parties in all the countries in the world, and maintained and subsidized the party leaders in all countries.

The scheme to establish totalitarian communist regimes almost everywhere was the same: A group of communist plotters, supported by voluntarily deluded or simply deceived people, seizes power, and then appeals to the CPSU for "fraternal" assistance, and its leaders willingly extend such assistance.

Cuba was an exception, but there, too, "fraternal assistance" was not lacking.

Military servicemen who went through the Afghan meat-grinder became convinced that they were carrying out a gendarme function in Afghanistan, and were fighting against the people for the corporate interests of the henchmen of the CPSU.

Many *afgantsy* soldiers are now Shield Union activists. Throughout the Soviet Armed Forces, despite the conservatism of its upper leadership, the idea is asserted and actively supported, of non-participation by the Armed Forces in national conflicts, either in the CIS countries or outside the borders of the former U.S.S.R.

Even at the Conference of Representatives of Officers' Assemblies, organized by former staffers of the Main Political Directorate, a resolution was adopted on the impermissibility of using the Armed Forces to resolve political and national conflicts. The army is only for defense against the direct attack of an aggressor.

EIR: What role did Shield play during the August 1991 putsch by the communist *nomenklatura*? What did you do during those days?

Vasilyev: During the first hours of the August putsch, the chairman of the Shield Union, People's Deputy of Russia V.G. Urazhtsev, was arrested, but the members of the Union, on orders from their conscience and their duty, went out on their own to build the barricades around the White House

[Russian Parliament building]. And those who were on duty with the troops, having received information by radio or from tapes, which were put out by the Defense Staff, gave briefings to the soldiers and officers.

Staffers of the executive committee of the Shield Union directed the formation of the "living chain" around the White House, and of detachments on the barricades.

On Aug. 19, I personally was at my dacha in Tver Oblast, 160 kilometers from Moscow. I found out about the putsch from listening to Radio Liberty, and my wife and I immediately left our elderly parents in the care of neighbors, made tracks, and by 11 p.m. we were in Moscow. I put on my military uniform, my wife brewed tea and made sandwiches, and we went to Volokolamsk Highway to talk with the servicemen, who were stationed at various points in armored personnel carriers.

Having received assurances from the commanders that if they were sent to the White House the soldiers would not open fire against its defenders, we went to the Defense Staff, where we reported on the situation, and then we conducted intelligence until daybreak, traveling up and down Leningrad Prospect on the route of the tank columns.

Rather later, we found out that many members of the Union had worked as agitators and intelligence officers in other locations. We also learned that the KGB unit "Alpha," known for its punitive operations, on the night of Aug. 19-20 for the first time ever did not carry out an order, and refused to storm the White House on the very night that the number of defenders of the White House was comparatively small—no more than 3-5,000, in my estimation.

EIR: The Armed Forces seem to be split. Can you tell us more about the factional lines between flag officers shaped by the CPSU and younger officers much less conditioned by the party? What happened to those tens of thousands of communist officers?

Vasilyev: Those few higher officers and generals who understand the necessity of democratic reforms in the army, are involved in preparation of the legal basis for such reforms and are assisting parliamentarians in this, but the majority of the high command is conservatively inclined and is waging a struggle to preserve its privileges and perquisites.

There is particularly strong resistance to military reforms on the part of the former political workers and employees of the Main Political Directorate, the military section of the

CC [Central Committee of the] CPSU. They changed their signboards, but they are firmly ensconced in the Armed Forces and are not the least bit interested in Armed Forces reforms, since they are the first ones who will have to go look for a new job.

EIR: What is the position of Shield concerning those sections of the armed forces that are being transferred back from Germany and eastern Europe?

Vasilyev: The military units transferred from outside the borders of our Motherland ought to be disbanded, and the majority of the servicemen from these units discharged into the reserve.

Concerning the major naval bases on the Baltic and Black Seas, in our opinion, treaties should be concluded for their territory to be leased by the CIS countries or the Russian Federation, at least for the next 3-5 years, until all disputed questions are settled and the economic situation is stabilized.

EIR: What is the program of Shield for soldiers and officers who are being demobilized? What plans do you have concerning their integration into society and economy?

Vasilyev: By decision of the Second Conference of the Moscow Shield Union, supported by the Coordination Council of the Russian Union, a packet of legislative bills will be presented to the Supreme Soviet of Russia, which would guarantee normal starting conditions for servicemen discharged into the reserve, to adapt to the free market.

Among such conditions, the following can be listed:

- the right to professional retraining at state expense;
- a severance allowance adequate for putting one's affairs in order;
- credit on preferential terms;
- the right to receive land, agricultural machinery, and materials necessary for organizing a farm, free of charge;
- exemption from all taxes for the first three years.

At the conference, an economic group was formed which is already working actively to prepare such a draft packet of legislation, which we will present to the Supreme Soviet of Russia.

At the same time, we will make efforts to have considered a packet of laws intended to reform the Armed Forces and create a Russian Guard.

The President already has these proposals, and they are waiting for their time to come.

Work has commenced on creating a Military Trade Union. The documents for its constituent congress are being elaborated.

EIR: Shield seems to emphasize a role in agriculture for demobilized members of the armed forces. Can you elaborate on this?

Vasilyev: The same Shield Union analytical group is studying as a single complex, questions of the utilization of dis-

charged servicemen in the agrarian sector, for instance, by means of creating groups of farmers comprised of veterans of the same unit, and other forms of collective group utilization of servicemen in agriculture.

We hope that parliamentarians will listen to our proposals, and that conditions will be created, which ensure the effective incorporation of discharged people into the economy.

EIR: You indicated already that Shield proposes a significant reduction of the size of the armed forces of the former Soviet Union. What do you think would be an appropriate size for the armed forces of the CIS and Russia?

Vasilyev: In our opinion, it would be sufficient for the defense of the CIS countries to have an army of 1 million, formed on a professional, contractual basis. The final decision, however, is in the hands of the Council of Presidents of the CIS countries.

Even if it proves impossible to preserve a united Armed Forces, the strategic forces, in any event, will be united.

It is our conviction, that the military themselves will not permit the strategic forces to be divided up, nor will the leaders of the CIS countries undertake this.

EIR: With the implementation of the Gaidar price float reforms along the Polish model of "shock therapy," a rather rapid pauperization of the general population seems to occur. What is your view on the economic policy of the Russian government?

Vasilyev: The way the question is posed suffers from imprecision. The impoverishment of broad layers of the population in our country has been going on for a long time.

The relative prosperity of the capital cities was achieved at the expense of relentless exploitation of the provinces and agricultural regions.

It is no accident that, before the Gaidar reforms, the capital was besieged by "bag people" from all the cities of Russia. So the population of the provinces already shifted to self-provisioning a long time ago, and the main body of the population was not hit very hard by the Gaidar reform.

If the unleashing of prices is not followed by privatization which is popular among the people, i.e., of a sort where each citizen receives initial privatized capital in the form of some kind of document, certifying his portion of the privatized property. . . . Privatization [*privatizatsiya*] in the form of "grabbing" [*prikhvatizatsiya*], which is already going on, provokes only bitterness on the part of broad layers of society, and nothing good will come of this. There can be a reverse effect. The rating of the [President Boris] Yeltsin-[Yegor] Gaidar government will fall, and without confidence, effective labor is impossible, and the same goes for further movement along the path of reform.

The second aspect of the reform is the resistance of broad layers of the party and economic *nomenklatura*, which under

market conditions will lose not only its power, but all its privileges. The population of the rural areas itself represents a special danger for the economic reform; here, drunkenness and thievery from the *kolkhoz* [collective farm] and *sovkhos* [state farm] fields is firmly rooted, the people have forgotten how to work effectively, even for themselves. It is no accident that farmer-enthusiasts get robbed, and also burned out.

In the country, my wife and I simply do a lot of good work on our garden plot, in order to obtain food for the winter. Our neighbors, who are local *sovkhos* workers, loaf around in the summertime, and come fall, they are overcome by such envy, that they are ready to burn us out.

There can only be one way out: group farming and a stiffening of administrative and legal sanctions against those who hinder the development of farming in the countryside.

EIR: The military-industrial complex of the former Soviet Union has been on a very advanced scientific-technological level. What, in your view, could be its contribution to the economic regeneration of Russia and the other CIS states?

Vasilyev: Many industrial enterprises of the military-indus-

CIS officers want action on military's problems

At the first Officers' Assembly of the Community of Independent States on Jan. 17-18, some 6,000 members of the former Soviet officers corp met to discuss the crisis in the Armed Forces, and issued a resolution demanding the passage of "laws in the shortest possible time" by the CIS states "to secure defense, military service, status of military servicemen and families, living quarters, material and financial well-being, and also for reservists and retired," and "to protect each serviceman from humiliation."

The resolution noted that "haste in dividing up the Armed Forces under conditions of an unstable political situation and economic chaos can have tragic consequences. It can devastate the security and defense ability of all CIS states, and their cooperation with the nations of the world community." The officers called on the "CIS heads of state and parliaments to maintain, for a transitional period, a unified command system of the Armed Forces, unified military-strategic space, and work out the fate of the Armed Forces through negotiations. We expect civilized, thought-out and well-founded laws and decisions, to exclude any confrontation among future armies of the republics."

trial complex (MIC) can be reoriented to the production of consumer goods, especially for the needs of agriculture. Until this has happened, I would not rush ahead with indiscriminate privatization of the MIC, but rather direct its efforts to providing technical help to enterprises engaged in food-processing and production of goods for everyday life, i.e., small goods producers, which should be under private ownership.

Later on, it will be possible to proceed to auctioning off the MIC enterprises as well.

EIR: With the price float and the radical "free market reforms," mafia-type organizations seem to have gained a dominant role in Russian economic life. These mafias seem to merge with the old communist *nomenklatura*. What danger, in your view, does this mafia-*nomenklatura* combination represent for Russia?

Vasilyev: I do not see a problem of the mafia merging with the apparat, since I am convinced that from the outset, our totalitarian system and its party and economic apparat gave birth to a mafia for the purpose of siphoning off national wealth as their personal property. The main mafia was the Politburo of the CC CPSU. That's precisely who uncontrolledly squandered not only party funds, but also the state treasury.

The latest press revelations about the secret millions of the CPSU, the KGB, and the ministries and agencies of the U.S.S.R. confirm my idea.

The appearance of commercial banks, joint enterprises, stock markets, and other commercial firms, with millions in capital—before the beginning of general privatization—also demonstrates the mafia origins of this capital. It is no accident, that on the boards of these commercial enterprises former *apparatchiki* of the party and state organs have turned up.

EIR: What is your view on the political future of Boris Yeltsin? Do you think that Yeltsin will be able to weather the economic and social storms as Russian President?

Vasilyev: I never trusted Gorbachov, since at difficult moments he always avoided taking direct responsibility and let his companions-in-arms take the heat.

Boris Nikolayevich Yeltsin, whom I have met face to face three times, is a complete opposite to Gorbachov. Him I trust. So far, the entire politicized part of the democratic movement also trusts him, and maybe that is precisely why we criticize him so freely, for all the mis-steps in his work as President and chairman of the Council of Ministers of Russia.

I am confident that we will be able to keep him as President to the end of his term.

EIR: If the economic plight in Russia worsens, do you think that Vice President Gen. Aleksandr Rutskoy could emerge

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as an alternative to Yeltsin?

Vasilyev: Rutskoy is not a politician, and he landed in the post of vice president due to tactical considerations, under pressure from conservative forces. Whether he will grow into an understanding of the tasks of state, and do this under conditions of a market economy—in my opinion, no. And that means that, at best, he has awaiting him the role of a pawn in the big game, which those who are now grouping themselves around Mikhail Gorbachov are playing behind the scenes.

In words, there is support for the economic reform, but in reality, sabotage is being organized.

The calculation is obvious. The reform suffers partial defeat, the Yeltsin government resigns, along with Yeltsin. Rutskoy takes his place, and Gorbachov and his renewed team assume leadership. The reform is rapidly crowned with complete victory, since the most difficult part—stabilization of the situation—will have been traversed already today, under Yeltsin and Gaidar.

Such a conclusion suggests itself, independent of the fact that I would not like this to be so.

EIR: Do you see the danger of a fascist dictatorship being established?

Vasilyev: I do not believe in the possibility of a fascist dictatorship being established in the country, but it is useful for the CPSU, the KGB, and the MIC to utilize such people as Zhirinovskiy, Nevzorov, Alksnis, Kogan, et al. to rock our half-sunk boat.

Their calculation is obvious: that the lumpenized part of the population will be instigated to robberies and pogroms, and the entire responsibility for the consequences will be dumped on the democrats—although, in reality, the democrats today are in the minority even in the Supreme Soviet of Russia, not to mention the provinces.

Zhirinovskiy and other odious figures will be taken out of the game, as soon as they have carried out their function. After all, it is no accident that behind Zhirinovskiy's demagoguery there is not the slightest serious program to be glimpsed, for taking the country out of the crisis.

Even the participants in his mobs laugh at his slogans, like in a merry comedy where everybody is both actor and audience.

EIR: What will happen to the nuclear weapons?

Vasilyev: I would like to believe that Russia will never let nuclear weapons get out of its control, and that the heads of the governments of the CIS countries will not permit this either. The consequences of the Chernobyl catastrophe were too great for anybody to think seriously about the possibility of using nuclear charges for the resolution of political conflicts. We hope that this is fully understood in the West, too.

EIR: What is the evaluation for maintaining the unity of the Armed Forces?

Vasilyev: The army has become very politicized in the recent period. This is also demonstrated by the All-Army Conference of Representatives of Officers' Assemblies. In fact, only political questions were discussed at this meeting.

Concerning the unity of the Armed Forces, I would put it this way. What is important to the officer corps is not so much the unity of the Armed Forces, as a unified approach to solving questions of service, daily life, and material provisioning, including pensions, and a unified approach to questions of citizenship upon discharge into the reserve or retirement.

The questions were posed correctly, although also somewhat aggressively. It is necessary to bear in mind, that according to the design of its organizers (former officials of the Main Political Directorate), the conference was supposed to give an ultimatum to the governments, virtually for the restoration of the U.S.S.R. in its previous form.

The arrival of B.N. Yeltsin and Marshal Shaposhnikov at the conference turned the conference into a constructive channel and everything ended well.

It is evident that in the future, the government of Russia and those of the other CIS countries will have to be more attentive to military questions.

As long as there are unified Armed Forces, there should also be a unified approach to solving all questions connected with the life of the Army and Navy. The Shield Union, although they attempted to expel its chairman from the conference, supports the above-outlined position. Moreover, our analytical group is working on a unified Charter of a Military Trade Union of Servicemen.

It is gratifying, that the conference adopted, almost unanimously, a resolution on the impermissibility of using the Armed Forces to resolve national conflicts, both inside the CIS, and abroad.