

Authoritarian regime is coming to Russia

by Konstantin George

The first anniversary of the Aug. 19 failed putsch in Moscow was anything but a joyful occasion for the people of Russia. One year of a Russian regime implementing a shock therapy package dictated by the International Monetary Fund has dashed the mood of euphoria and hope that had prevailed at the end of August last year. Russian television commentaries spoke of "the year of lost opportunities." Russian Vice President Aleksandr Rutskoy called for the declaration of an "economic state of emergency," warning that the situation is "about to go out of control," through the continual collapse of production, and with popular patience near its limit.

The social and economic chaos generated by shock therapy policies has brought Russia to the point where it is moving inexorably toward an authoritarian regime by year's end. What are called the "democratic forces" are finished politically. Through their support or tolerance of shock therapy, they have thrown away in one year the huge popular support they once enjoyed. This phenomenon was graphically portrayed when a mere 1,000 people turned out in Moscow on the coup anniversary to celebrate the crushing of the coup. The word "democracy" was notably absent in the huge banners put up for the occasion. The gigantic banners read "Resurrect Russia" and "Long Live Russia." An irresistible combination of forces, both outside and within the camp of President Boris Yeltsin, is demanding an authoritarian regime. The only open questions are: exactly when, and by whom?

Power shift ahead

Insights into what can be expected in the coming power shift were provided in a mid-August question and answer session, held in Germany, with Russian presidential candidate Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, head of the Liberal Democratic Party. With 85,000 members in the former Soviet Union, the party is an important political force. Zhirinovskiy, who ran against Yeltsin in 1991 and received over 6 million votes, was touring Germany, granting interviews to the German media.

His blunt statements show that the national humiliation of economic and social dismantling caused by shock therapy, has unleashed a huge "Great Russian" backlash, moving in the direction of imperial restoration policies. "Russia is being plundered, robbed," he said. "Under shock therapy, the state

is exploding . . . brought to the brink of catastrophe . . . leading to disaster and civil war. . . . The democratic system can't solve the crisis." The last straw for him is the threat of the Russian Federation, "which contains 130 different nationalities," fragmenting along ethnic lines.

Zhirinovskiy and a large section of the Russian elite, while condemning any attempt to break up Russia, insist that the only way to save the nation is to reestablish a Russian state encompassing most of what was formerly in the Soviet Union, by re-creating the czarist empire's "territorial-based" system of administrative bodies. This position, if adhered to, would, rather than end chaos, introduce new variants to enhance the chaos.

Zhirinovskiy stressed that a power shift is coming soon, and presented several variants as to how it could occur. One variant was that "Yeltsin will try to move to an authoritarian regime. . . . He will certainly try in any case, but it will not work." Another variant is the possibility of a "military coup . . . not like the August 1991 coup, which was not a real coup, but only a rehearsal." The "most positive variant" would be "for the government to resign and free elections" to be held. Finally, Zhirinovskiy warned that one could not rule out "the collapse of the state," followed by "civil war."

Whatever variant occurs, he said, the end result will definitely be an authoritarian regime, as the only means to "pull the country out of the crisis."

Zhirinovskiy presented his view, and that of much of the Russian military, on the security threat to Russia posed by outside powers, waiting to grab pieces of a fragmented Russia, and/or the former Soviet Union. Japan and China were portrayed as waiting to seize territory in the Far East and Siberia, while in Central Asia, a massive destabilization is being pursued through operations by Turkey and Pakistan, he said, where "the U.S.A. and Israel profit," the Israeli rationale being "to push Islamic extremism away from Israel, north into Central Asia." The situation in Central Asia was described as "an explosive danger," threatening a mass expulsion of millions of Russians from the region.

Juxtaposed to Zhirinovskiy's strident calls for empire restoration, was a very lucid appreciation of the need for emergency measures to direct state credit at low interest to "stimulate production," to re-enact the pre-Bolshevik economic development policies of Sergei Witte and Pyotr Stolypin. "Yes, naturally, Witte and Stolypin. Their economic reforms were the best economic reforms in Russian history, but unfortunately the October Revolution destroyed this. . . . The top priority is . . . we have to stimulate production. Now, goods are only being exchanged, the same goods over and over again . . . we are not producing . . . so, naturally we must make use of the Witte National Bank [funding of production and infrastructure projects] policies . . . low-interest credits to stimulate production. Nothing can be accomplished with 70% interest rates. This is destroying the state sector and the very foundations of the economy."