
Moscow

Power shift against IMF takes effect, but imperial danger grows

by Konstantin George

A power shift in Moscow, leading to a break with International Monetary Fund-dictated policies but also to an overt Great Russian imperial policy, began to take effect in the first week of October. The tone was set by Russian President Boris Yeltsin in his address to the Russian Parliament on Oct. 6. Although he pledged to keep his pro-IMF acting prime minister, Yegor Gaidar, he also made it clear that Gaidar's team would be purged, giving Russia a cabinet committed to ignoring IMF conditionalities and pursuing industrial protection policies as demanded by the Russian Civic Union, the industry lobby headed by Arkadi Volsky.

Such a break with the IMF's disastrous "shock therapy" is absolutely necessary to prevent the economy from plunging beyond the point of no return, with unpredictable political and social consequences. But the situation is fraught with tremendous danger, as the more western governments insist that Yeltsin go along with IMF dictates, the more likely is a fascist-imperialist backlash that could lead down the road to World War III.

Along these lines, Yeltsin belligerently asserted "the rights of Russians" which are being "trampled on" in the Baltic republics, above all in Estonia, and in the Georgian region of Abkhazia. He heralded Russian military intervention on behalf of "endangered" Russian minorities in any state, regardless of whether or not they are a member of the Community of Independent States (CIS).

'Corrections must be made'

The Yeltsin speech was a funeral oration for the Gaidar team. The Russian President told the Parliament that "corrections must be made in the reforms. That is a demand from the President." Yeltsin blasted Gaidar, the "Gaidar team," and singled out Economics Minister Aleksandr Nechayev and Foreign Economic Relations Minister Pyotr Aven by name for not considering the proposals of Volsky's Civic Union: "These ideas must be used and not rejected only because they were devised and proposed by people other than Gaidar." Yeltsin declared that he was "profoundly dissatisfied" with Aven's ministry, which "lacks competence, promptness and resolution, and consistency in defending Russia's interests."

Yeltsin stopped just short of accusing the Gaidar group of

working for western interests to sabotage Russia. He denounced the takeover of Russia by "the dollar" and the destruction of the ruble. Turning to the Gaidar government, Yeltsin declared that "it must finally be made clear" whether "we support the ruble or foreign currencies. . . . We must stop paying for goods and services in foreign currencies. The ruble must become the sole means of payment in Russia. . . . The conditions for a realistic exchange course must be created."

The anti-Gaidar forces immediately acknowledged the power shift in their favor. Speaking to factory workers in the Ukrainian capital of Kiev later that day, Civic Union head Volsky commented: "It is pleasant that Mr. Yeltsin echoed our views." But, he demanded, Yeltsin must follow up with deeds if he wants Civic Union support.

Imperial rebirth

The imperial thrust of the Moscow power shift was marked by Yeltsin's announcement that Russia was sending additional troops to the Georgian region of Abkhazia, to "protect" the "railroad line" and "the coastal region." These formulations were tantamount to announcing that Abkhazia had become a Russian protectorate, as every city and town of any importance lies either along the rail line or in the coastal region.

The imperial restoration policy was also symbolized in a very Russian manner by the second major Yeltsin appearance on Oct. 6, carried live by Russian TV, and, in contrast to the importance of the event, ignored by nearly all western media. In the Kremlin, Yeltsin gave a state reception on the occasion of the 600th anniversary of the death of St. Sergius of Radonezh, the Russian Orthodox monk who led the anti-western Hesychastic movement and the monastic revival in 14th-century Russia, and its companion political policy where the monks of the lands to the north and east of Kiev supported the ascendancy of Muscovy and the unification of all the Russian principalities under Moscow in the successful overthrow of the Tatar yoke. The Kremlin ceremony, where Yeltsin was flanked by Moscow Patriarch Aleksii II, exile Russian Orthodox Patriarch of America and Canada Feodosius, and the Holy Synod ruling group of the Russian Orthodox Church, stressed the role of St. Sergius, renowned in the Muscovite Russian Chronicles as the "builder of Russia" and

for having united “all the Russias,” i.e., all the eastern Slavs, Russians, Ukrainians, and Belorussians, and having liberated Russians from foreign rule.

Some of Georgia may be seized

The first Russian military intervention that will lead to an area bordering on Russia being incorporated into the Russian state, is under way in the Georgian region of Abkhazia, an ethnically mixed region which includes non-Russians and Russians. As Yeltsin was addressing the Parliament, Abkhazian irregulars, backed by thousands of Muslim tribal “volunteers” from the Russian North Caucasus and several hundred Russian Cossack “volunteers,” and all liberally supplied with weapons, armor, and ammunition from the Russian Army, in astonishingly well-coordinated attacks for “irregulars,” administered the second crushing defeat to Georgian forces in northern Abkhazia within five days. In the first defeat on Oct. 2, the key city of Gagra was taken in heavy fighting and over 100 Georgian troops were killed.

On Oct. 6, all other towns and villages between the Abkhazian capital of Sukhumi and the Russian border had fallen to the Abkhazians. In addition to the 200 Georgian troops killed in the several days of fighting, between 800 and 1,000 Georgian civilians living in and around Gagra were massacred. The atrocities produced their intended effect—a mass exodus of the Georgian population, who made up 40% of Abkhazia’s inhabitants, out of Abkhazia. Hundreds of Georgian troops and thousands of Georgian civilians fled in panic across the border into Russia, while others fled south into Georgia. In Sukhumi, where overland escape routes were either blocked or dangerous, thousands streamed to the airport awaiting Russian and Georgian planes and helicopters to fly them out. By Oct. 8, the “Abkhazian” forces were just outside Sukhumi, and its fall was imminent.

The situation has reached the point where a Russian-Georgian war is imminent. This danger was clear on Oct. 3, after the fall of Gagra, where Georgian planes bombed the town as part of a failed attempt to retake it. Yeltsin emerged that day from a meeting of the Russian Security Council, warning that any attacks by Georgians on Russian forces or civilians in Abkhazia or anywhere in Georgia would produce a Russian military intervention, and one not confined to Abkhazia. Yeltsin announced that Russia “reserved for itself” the right to take “appropriate measures” to protect Russians in Abkhazia.

The Georgian State Council, in a meeting on Oct. 4 presided over by Defense Minister Ioseliani, responded to the Yeltsin warning by ordering a general mobilization in Georgia of some 40,000 reservists, and placed all military hardware of the Russian Transcaucasus Military District on the territory of Georgia under Georgian jurisdiction. The State Council further announced that it was considering demanding the expulsion of all Russian troops based in Georgia. Any such attempt, or move to enforce the hardware decree could easily trigger an all-out war between Georgian forces and the

100,000 Russian troops based there. The Georgian statement produced a blunt warning later that day from Russian Defense Minister Gen. Pavel Grachev, that if Russian bases were attacked, the troops would shoot back.

Moscow made sure that the Georgian leadership had gotten the message that the Russians were not bluffing. On Oct. 3, a helicopter carrying Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze to a meeting with Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Yuri Vorobyov in the border town of Gantiadi, was shot at by a Russian Mi-24 helicopter gunship.

From the Abkhazia conflict, Russia will gain territory and Georgia will be truncated—the only question is by how much. Georgia could even break apart into several mini-states, which would become Russian protectorates.

Baltic states next

The next Russian conflict with a small former Soviet republic neighboring state will be with Estonia in the Baltic region. The die for this was cast through the election—by Parliament, not popular vote—of Estonia’s new nationalist-populist President, Lennart Meri. In the presidential elections in late September, Estonian incumbent President Arnold Ruutel received nearly half the vote in a multi-candidate field, with Meri coming in second with less than 25% of the vote. Had Estonia practiced the same popular runoff procedure used in every western democracy, Estonia’s new President today would be Arnold Ruutel, and this on the basis of the popular vote where only ethnic Estonians are allowed to vote. But, under the Estonian Constitution, if no one attains 50% in the first round, the Parliament decides who will be President. Since the nationalists command a majority in Parliament, they voted in “their man.” Through this de facto coup which played straight into the hands of the imperialists in Moscow, disaster now looms over Estonia.

The Yeltsin statement during his Oct. 6 speech, that Russia would not allow Russians in the Baltic states to be “trampled on,” was directed above all at Estonia and Lennart Meri, who is a proponent of “ethnic cleansing.” Meri, both during the campaign and notably following his election by Parliament, declared that he would “expel 200,000 Russians” from Estonia, or about half the ethnic Russian population residing there. While leading forces in Moscow clearly have the goal of eventually retaking the Baltic states (certainly Estonia and Latvia, at least), there is still no popular Russian support for such policies. Should popular Russian support for imperial restoration in the Baltics materialize, then the independence of the Baltic states would be doomed.

Should Meri expel the Russians, Moscow will have a pretext and immense popular support to militarily intervene in the Baltics. During the election campaign, allegations appeared that Meri’s father had worked for the Soviet NKVD, the KGB predecessor. True or not, no one knows. But a KGB plant could not do a better job to pave the way for Russian action against the Baltics than Meri is doing with his ethnic cleansing program.