

Russian imperialism on the march in wake of coup

by Konstantin George

Since early October, Russia has become a de facto military dictatorship, under the mask of a presidential dictatorship of Boris Yeltsin. Its policy matrix is a restored Great Russian Empire, a modern version of the messianic Russian doctrine that Moscow is the Third and Final Rome. The lightning speed with which the first phase of empire restoration has been secured has been largely missed in the West, where not only have the key events in Russia been overlooked, but also developments in what Russian foreign policy calls "The Near Abroad," the non-Russian ex-Soviet republics.

Two news items have been hung out to gull the credulous into viewing the Oct. 4 bloodbath in Moscow as a "tragic interlude" in a democratic process. These are the Oct. 18 lifting of the state of emergency imposed in Moscow on Oct. 4, and the scheduling of parliamentary elections for Dec. 12.

Ethnic cleansing of the capital

During the 14-day state of emergency, according to official Russian Interior Ministry statistics, 100,000 people were arrested. While 35,000 were picked up at night for curfew violations, the other 65,000 were arrested in daytime sweeps by Interior Ministry forces led by OMON special units, including house searches and raids on the city's cooperative markets, hotels, railway stations, and airports, and at checkpoints installed on all roads to and from Moscow.

The net result was the "ethnic cleansing" of the capital. Ten thousand of those arrested were vendors from the Caucasus: Georgians, Armenians, Azerbaijanis, some Central Asians. Their cash and possessions confiscated, they were dumped onto trains and "sent home," under the technicality of not having a Moscow residence permit. Tens of thousands of others from those republics fled the city to avoid this fate. Since Oct. 18, nothing has changed. Heavy police and

OMON patrols remain in Moscow. All access roads remain controlled. The arrests go on.

As to the Dec. 12 "elections," one obvious aim is to get them over with fast, under conditions where the opposition has no access to mass media, and little time to campaign. The regime and its "Russia's Choice" electoral bloc, led by shock therapy architect Yegor Gaidar, have made no secret of this strategy. Deputy Prime Ministers Yegor Gaidar and Vladimir Shumeiko, and Finance Minister Boris Fyodorov, the regime's core International Monetary Fund stooges, have stressed the need to "get the elections behind us before the year is out." With living standards sinking by the day, they know that any delay ensures a crushing defeat for their clique.

Should they lose in December, the dictatorship is ready: It has put on the Dec. 12 ballot a referendum on a new constitution, being drafted in Kremlin backrooms, which sets up a dictatorial presidency alongside a rump parliament. It will be unveiled Nov. 5. Under it, the President may dissolve the new parliament, or State Duma as it is called, whenever it becomes "obstructive." Russia will not have a parliamentary democracy, whatever the "election" results, but a re-make of the impotent Duma of the late czarist period.

Army commands, Yeltsin decrees

Yeltsin's role as captive of a military dictatorship has been clear since the Oct. 3-4 coup. He announced a new military doctrine in his Oct. 6 TV address. He went out of his way to pay homage to the Armed Forces as "the guarantor of Russia's life and death interests," and the embodiment of "Russian statehood." A day later, he put out a decree ending draft exemptions for full-time students. While conscription had always formally existed, since 1991 student exemptions, combined with widespread draft dodging by urban youth,

had led to a large shortfall in enlisted men. Worse still were the huge gaps in enlisted men with the required educational and technical skills to man the modern Armed Forces.

The new Russian military doctrine was unveiled Oct. 15 after a meeting of the Russian Security Council, whose kingpins are Defense Minister Pavel Grachev, Interior Minister Viktor Yerin, and the "ex-KGB" Security Minister Nikolai Golushko. Under this doctrine, for the first time in modern Russian history, the Armed Forces' role of defending the country from foreign aggression has been augmented with the mission of securing internal stability and unity.

After this meeting, Yeltsin suddenly cancelled his announced plan to address the founding convention in Moscow on Oct. 16-17, of the Russia's Choice electoral bloc, led by Gaidar. Instead, Yeltsin's prepared statement was read to the convention, saying that as "the President of all the 150 million citizens of Russia," he could not be identified with any political party and he would not engage in any election campaigning.

The 'Near Abroad'

The coup that produced the dictatorship was formally launched with Yeltsin's Sept. 21 decree abolishing parliament. In the few short weeks since, Russia has solidified its uncontested dominance of the "Near Abroad." On Sept. 23, the heads of state of all former U.S.S.R. republics, minus only Georgia and the Baltics, arrived in Moscow and signed the Community of Independent States (CIS) Economic Union Treaty, surrendering at a stroke their sovereignty in financial, monetary, and economic policy to the Russian Central Bank. The Caucasian republic of Azerbaijan, under its dictator "President" Haidar Aliyev, brought to power in a Russian-directed coup in June, rejoined the CIS.

In the week after this summit, the Russian Army with its proxy "Abkhazian separatist" forces completed the conquest of the Georgian region of Abkhazia. Twenty percent of Georgia's territory, and more importantly, 60% of its Black Sea coastline, were now an extension of the Russian Federation. There was no difference between this aggression and the Serbian conquests of large parts of Croatia and Bosnia, yet western powers have not even bothered to express any outrage. As in Croatia and Bosnia, aggression in Abkhazia was accompanied by drastic ethnic cleansing. The entire Georgian population of Abkhazia, before the war the largest group with about 250,000 people, or 47%, were expelled. Tens of thousands fled on foot through the freezing mountains of the Caucasus. The death toll from the cold stands between 500 and 1,000.

The real scope of the tragedy is far greater. As the conquest of Abkhazia was being completed, mercenary forces of ex-Georgian President Zviad Gamsakhurdia launched a civil war, occupying much of the West Georgia region of Mingrelia, which contains the port of Poti and the next largest stretch of coastline after Abkhazia. These operations have

cut off the Georgian heartland and the capital, Tbilisi. This blockade threatens the refugee-swelled 2 million population of Tbilisi with famine. With no hope for any real help from the West, this situation has forced Georgia into an across-the-board capitulation to Moscow.

A Russian protectorate

Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze, who reached Moscow on Oct. 8 for a summit with Yeltsin and the Presidents of Armenia and Azerbaijan, announced that Georgia was joining the CIS and its Economic Union, something that he could not have gotten away with even a few weeks earlier, so outraged are Georgians over the Russian conquest of Abkhazia. A day later, a Russian-Georgian treaty was signed by the Russian and Georgian Chiefs of the General Staff, Gen. Mikhail Kolesnikov and Gen. Avtandil Tskitishvili. The treaty effectively makes Georgia a Russian protectorate. It grants Russia a lease in perpetuity for the Black Sea Fleet naval base at Poti and the Bambora Air Base, the largest in Georgia, and the option to permanently lease all other key facilities, including the garrisons at Tbilisi, the Black Sea port of Batumi, and the large forward base at Akhalkalaki on the Turkish border. In exchange, Russia agreed to supply Georgia with food, energy, and electricity.

Georgia's plight has since worsened. On Oct. 17, the Gamsakhurdia forces completed their conquest of West Georgia by taking the strategic junction of Samtredia and the town of Khoni, and advanced to within 12 miles of Kutaisi, the country's second largest city, and only 100 miles from the capital, Tbilisi. Urgent appeals by Shevardnadze Oct. 18, for a Russian military intervention against the rebels, were nixed by Moscow.

This does not mean there will be no Russian involvement. Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev stated that Russia was ready to lead a CIS force to escort road and rail supplies through West Georgia to offset the supply catastrophe in the heartland. This statement betrays the essence of the Russian policy: to simultaneously maximize the dismemberment of Georgia *and* Russian control over the fragments, including the rump Georgian state remaining.

Georgia's fate affords obvious lessons for other republics which still have sovereignty, above all Ukraine and the Baltic states. It is only a matter of time before Russia uses its economic blackmail to extract from them permanent leasing agreements for air and naval bases, as in Georgia. It will also escalate the splintering of Ukraine, Estonia, and Latvia, using the pretext of "regional self-rule" where ethnic Russians predominate.

A major concession in this regard, after threats of economic cutoffs and strikes by ethnic Russian-dominated strike committees, has been squeezed from Ukraine. On Oct. 19, Ukrainian President Leonid Kravchuk announced that besides Crimea, the regions of Donetsk, Odessa, and Zaporozhe can practice "broader self-rule."