

# Russia at a crucial juncture, as Yeltsin meets the military brass

by Mark Burdman

Events in Russia took a dramatic turn March 3, when 25 senior Russian officers held a private meeting with President Boris Yeltsin, and demanded that he take firm action to bring an end to the political crisis that is paralyzing the country. The 25 included Chief of the General Staff Kolesnikov, the commanders of all the service branches, and the commanders of the military districts and the fleets. According to an account in the daily *Izvestia*, "During the meeting, the military expressed concern about the development of the political crisis in the country and demanded that the President take resolute measures to end it."

The meeting took place in the context of a session of the Russian Security Council, an influential entity headed by the shadowy but powerful Yuri Skokov, which has assumed a determining role in strategic deliberations over the past months. Like all Security Council meetings, the session was attended by the foreign, justice, and security ministers, as well as by Foreign Intelligence Service head Yevgeny Primakov and other senior officials. But the attendance of the 25 generals and admirals is unprecedented since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and underscores how serious the situation has become. The formal explanation for such a senior armed forces gathering in Moscow, was that the Security Council had to formulate a new foreign and defense strategy for Russia, and could not do so without consulting all relevant military layers. But this doctrinal consultation was followed by a closed-door session with the President, at which the sentiments described by *Izvestia* were expressed.

The significance of this has nothing to do with the idle speculation from some western commentators about a "bonapartist" threat by certain officers or a threatened new putsch. Neither is on the agenda. Rather, what the events of March 3 graphically demonstrate, is that the military has become, *by default*, the one remaining institutional arbiter for Russia, at a time when the country is going through economic, social, and moral-cultural disintegration. While events are slipping out of Yeltsin's control, it has become clear that neither the opposition Civic Union group of top industrial managers and entrepreneurs headed by Arkady Volsky, nor Yeltsin's most persistent and vocal opponent, Parliament Speaker Ruslan Khasbulatov, is going to provide a workable alternative to the current regime.

Meanwhile, the situation is more and more resembling

the period of 1990-91 preceding the fall of Mikhail Gorbachev and the collapse of the Soviet Union. On March 1, miners at the key coal-producing districts of Vorkuta and Kuzbass held a one-day warning strike, and reports from Russia are that a full miners' strike is planned for March 10. The food and health situation has degenerated to the point that a senior Russian Public Health Ministry official, Elmira Pogorelova, told the journal *Argumenty i Fakty* that millions will die from hunger and/or malnutrition-related disease over the next two to three years, because they have been reduced to a "hunger diet" by the central government's promotion of a completely inadequate "minimum diet," and by the effects of food price inflation (see *Agriculture*, p. 16).

## Yeltsin maneuvers

Yeltsin himself is becoming ever-more frenzied in his efforts to save his own authority in the days before the extraordinary session of the Congress of People's Deputies beginning March 10, at which session Khasbulatov and his allies could effectively torpedo the April 11 national constitutional referendum on which Yeltsin has staked his prestige. On March 2, Yeltsin gave an interview to the daily *Pravda*, in which he welcomed an alliance with "moderate communists," thereby reversing his months of expressed bitter antagonism toward what he has derided as the "brown-red" forces in Russia.

Yeltsin is opportunistically trying to exploit his meeting with the military to his own advantage, and is hinting that he would have won its backing for declaring a state of emergency and "presidential rule." There is a huge element of bluff in this, and it may backfire. On March 4, the Congress of People's Deputies demanded that the President appear and give a full accounting of what he had discussed with the Armed Forces leaders the day before. The Officers' Assembly, which claims to represent 60% of Russian officers and which is bitterly opposed to the Yeltsin regime's International Monetary Fund (IMF)-mandated "reforms," and to what they see as the dismantling of Russian military capabilities, charged that Yeltsin was "planning a coup."

In a further indication of how far matters have degenerated, Yeltsin warned, in a speech before Russian women's leaders March 3, that a failure to come to a reconciliation with his opposition in the Congress could "blow Russia apart,"

creating conditions for Russia to split into 50 or 60 separate principalities, and "there would be war among them for centuries to come."

### 'Pax Russica' and its backers in the West

Yeltsin's statement reflects the fact that Russia is facing an historical "crisis of existence." How this will be resolved, is impossible to forecast with certainty. However, it is certain that many influentials in Russia, across the political spectrum, are increasingly tempted to try to unify the country around a "restorationist" notion of creating a new "Russian empire," which would establish its sway over the peoples who comprise the territory of the former Soviet Union and which would take a more aggressively "interventionist" pro-Serbian line in the Balkans. This temptation is made all the greater, as an anti-western backlash grows against at the devastation that has been caused by adopting the "shock therapy" measures demanded by the IMF and Harvard University thug Jeffrey Sachs.

Going with the prevailing winds, Yeltsin told a meeting of the Civic Union on Feb. 28: "I think the moment has come when responsible international organizations, including the United Nations, should grant Russia special powers as a guarantor of peace and stability in the region of the former Soviet Union. Russia has a heartfelt interest in stopping all armed conflicts on the territory of the former Soviet Union. . . . The world community is increasingly coming to understand Russia's special responsibility in this difficult task."

Yeltsin was seconded on March 1 by Marshal Yevgeny Shaposhnikov, Chief of Staff of the Commonwealth of Independent States, who insisted that Russia be seen as the "pivot" of a new NATO-like defense structure comprising several, if not all of the CIS republics. He declared: "Russia is the pivot of the CIS on all levels, economic, natural resources, defense capacities—this is a secret to no one. Russia will have the role, besides, of nuclear umbrella for the other states; it is necessary that it become the guarantor of peace in the ex-U.S.S.R."

Yeltsin's statement raised eyebrows, since it extends the notion of Russian "guarantor of peace and stability" beyond the regions of Central Asia (especially Tajikistan) and the Transcaucasus, where Russian forces have been involved in "peacekeeping" actions during the past months. Read literally, it would mean Russian pressure for the "world community" to recognize its "guarantor" role vis-à-vis Ukraine and the Baltic states.

Statements and threats against Ukraine are the most ominous. Defense Minister Pavel Grachev is threatening to issue an "important declaration" on the matter of "Soviet" strategic nuclear weapons located on Ukrainian territory, if the Ukrainians refuse to recognize Russian claims on ultimate control over these weapons. Russian leaders are reportedly prepared to further blackmail Ukraine by cutting back yet more on gas supplies to Ukraine, and by lobbying western countries for a

full aid cutoff to Ukraine, unless it concedes on the nuclear question.

What makes this "neo-imperialist" or "restorationist" trend all the more ominous, is that there are various western idiots and lunatics who are *encouraging* the Russians to act in this way. This is ostensibly motivated by a "geopolitical" belief that the Russians could become effective partners in containing Germany and in fashioning a new "Yalta" spheres-of-influence division in Europe. In France, for example, former President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing recently opined that Ukraine and Belarus are, from a historical standpoint, really part of Russia.

From the British side, the influential Royal Institute of International Affairs has published a new study by London School of Economics professor Jonathon Aves, on "Post-Soviet Transcaucasia," which purports to document Russia's historical role as a force of stability in the crisis-torn region comprising Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia. Reviewing Aves's work March 3, the *Financial Times's* senior commentator Edward Mortimer stated that "Pax Russica is, after all, the only peace that Transcaucasia has known in the last two centuries, and the chances of its peoples making peace spontaneously among themselves seem very slight."

### 'Worse than former Yugoslavia'

In response to Yeltsin's Feb. 27-28 "guarantor" statement, Ukraine has launched an official protest to the United Nations.

In an interview with the German weekly *Der Spiegel* of March 1, Ukrainian President Leonid Kravchuk stated: "Again and again, I learn that the West would prefer the Soviet Union to be still around. This is not showing much of a sympathy for those nations that were forced to live in the Soviet empire. But the attempt to recreate something like the Soviet Union would lead to a horrible war, which would be worse than that in the former Yugoslavia."

Kravchuk is absolutely right. It is not only that the formerly captive peoples of the Soviet Union will fight to the death to prevent being brought under Russian imperial hegemony. Given the economic and social realities of Russia, there is no basis for Russia to play such a "restorationist" role, without creating new breakdown processes within Russia itself. Those processes would only make the Russians more desperate. In fact, the more astute Russians may come to the conclusion that those western geopoliticians "encouraging" the new Russian empire are actually seeking Russia's destruction, especially as it is no secret that those now so seemingly favorable to "Russian ambitions," have done nothing to help the Russian economy over the past couple of years, but have acted to bring about Russia's economic collapse. Given that Russia still possesses 30,000 nuclear warheads, the western idiots playing the game that Kravchuk is warning against, may actually be laying the basis for a third world war.