

Yeltsin regime enters breakdown phase

by Konstantin George

The Boris Yeltsin regime in Russia, which came into being in 1991, has entered a process of disintegration. The clinical symptom of a fast-approaching end to the regime and to the economically ruinous "reforms" it implemented, is Russian President Boris Yeltsin's growing detachment from any contact with the reality of the Russian crisis.

The regime is kept afloat for the time being by the absence of a political opposition that could replace the government on short notice. The civilian political opposition lacks coherence and unity. Yet the unchecked economic breakdown and the mental condition of the President have made the question of fashioning a post-Yeltsin order urgent for wide sections of the political class.

Yeltsin's state of mind is also worrying western governments, since Russia, despite all its problems, remains a nuclear superpower. This became all too evident on Jan. 26, during Yeltsin's tour of the Russian city of Lipetsk, when the Russian President reacted to the misfired launching of a Norwegian weather satellite, by declaring that he had been "ready to activate the nuclear briefcase" in response. He went on to absurdly label the mishap an attempt to "test" Russia's military readiness. The bizarre incident forced many in western governments to launch an overdue reappraisal of the "consensus" policy of unqualified support for Yeltsin and the "reforms."

The "nuclear briefcase" incident was no aberration. The Lipetsk tour documented over and over the pattern of unreality. The itinerary was organized by the Yeltsin camarilla in the manner of showing to the "czar" the make-believe world of the "Potemkin Village." Yeltsin visited two plants, a sausage factory and a steel works, both of which are anomalies in present-day Russia, as they still produce at capacity. In the manner reminiscent of the Communist era, when General Secretaries visited factory workers, the factory shops were suddenly and miraculously filled with meats, chicken, and fish.

"Czar" Boris saw the Lipetsk "Potemkin Village" and proclaimed all his subjects to be happy. While touring the sausage factory, he declared: "In general, the people are in a good mood. No slogans, no extremism, no attacks."

Further insights into Yeltsin's fragile state of mind were provided by his press spokesman, Vyacheslav Kostikov. Kostikov stated that the Lipetsk trip was for Yeltsin a diver-

sion from the war in Chechnya, and affirmed the presidential impression that everything is going fine for the Russian people: "In recent times, the focus has been on Chechnya. Though the events there are very serious and dramatic, it is important to show the Russia of working people and that the majority of the country is stable and calm, where people live normally, without violence."

As the war in Chechnya itself was a flight-forward diversion for Yeltsin, he is now in the psychological state of launching diversions to distract from diversions. Heralding more such spectacles, Yeltsin announced that the Lipetsk trip is the start of monthly one-day outings to the provinces.

The war in Chechnya

Russia is already paying a colossal price for Yeltsin and his camarilla's lunacy. As the war in Chechnya shows, this group is prepared to do anything, including mass slaughter, to buy time to postpone its demise. The scale of killing and destruction in Chechnya, after only seven weeks, exceeds anything seen in the European theater since the Second World War. According to reasonably reliable estimates compiled by the CSCE successor organization, the OSCE, which has observer teams operating in Chechnya, about 40,000-50,000 civilians have been killed during December and January. In the Chechen capital of Grozny, where destruction is at World War II levels, up to 30,000 civilians have been killed. Even allowing for a somewhat "inflated" figure, more than twice as many civilians have been killed in Grozny to date as have been killed in the Bosnian capital of Sarajevo in almost three years of war. In addition, about 5,000 armed Chechen fighters and between 2,000 and 3,000 Russian soldiers have died.

The war in Chechnya, moreover, has only begun. By Feb. 1, Russian Army and Interior Troops had still not even completed the conquest of Grozny, holding about 60% of the city. One of the Russian commanders in Grozny, Gen. Maj. Ivan Babichev, declared on Jan. 30 that the war will continue for quite some time. He also drew urgent attention to the fact that the war's high human price will not "only" be the product of bullets, shells, and bombs. General Babichev denounced the callous inhumanity of the government in Moscow for having never even responded to his repeated and urgent requests to send food, medicines, blankets, and shelter, for the helpless civilians. Babichev warned that the estimated 150,000 civilians trapped in Grozny, with no water, no food, no electricity, and no heat, were now faced with the imminent danger of epidemics, due to the "thousands" of decaying corpses lying in the streets and rubble.

Adding to the anger of the military and many others in Russia is the fact that most of these civilians are ethnic Russians. Many of Grozny's Chechen civilians had relatives living elsewhere in Chechnya, and fled the city during the war to take refuge with them in villages. Most of Grozny's ethnic Russians had no such recourse, and remained in Grozny throughout the fighting.