

## Russia shifts Balkan policy, 'Great Powers' clash looms

by Konstantin George

The Aug. 4 announcement in the Bulgarian capital of Sofia by Russian President Boris Yeltsin that Russia will extend immediate, unconditional recognition to the Republic of Macedonia, in unison with Bulgarian foreign policy, inaugurates a decisive shift in Russian Balkan policy. The shift is, roughly speaking, along the traditional 19th-century lines of Czar Alexander II (1855-81), which was Bulgaria-centered in opposition to the powerful factions inside Russia who promoted a "Greater Serbia." Until Yeltsin's announcement, the Republic of Macedonia had only been extended recognition by Bulgaria and Turkey. The announcement was coupled with a joint statement by Yeltsin and Bulgarian President Zhelyu Zhelev, demanding that the European Community (EC) reverse its disastrous policy of refusing to recognize the Macedonia republic unless it changes its name.

The Yeltsin statements in Sofia have ended the Russian Serbia-centered policy, which reflected both a continuation of the Bolshevik policy when the U.S.S.R. existed, and, more importantly, the Russian side of the Anglo-American condominium policy of backing Serbia. It has also ended the "backstage" role that Russia had taken over the last year vis-à-vis the Balkans as a whole.

To fully understand the importance of the Yeltsin decision, which was tantamount to a coup on Balkan policy against the Foreign Ministry of Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev, one must recall the pre-Aug. 4 Russian policy under Kozyrev towards former Yugoslavia. In addition to backing Serbia, Russia was, with the exception of the United States, the last of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) states to establish diplomatic relations with Slovenia and Croatia, and it has still not recognized Bosnia.

What were the reasons for this foreign policy coup? Military-security considerations were paramount in the decision,

which was arrived at by Yeltsin's Security Council, the main policy-making body of Russia, which has been in place since June. The very creation of this organ was a coup in its own right. Unlike earlier "security council" models under Mikhail Gorbachov, it is almost exclusively an arm of the military, security, and military-industrial apparatus, and notably excludes any Foreign Ministry representation. Its six members, who in many ways operate like a post-Bolshevik "politburo," include, beside Yeltsin: Acting Prime Minister Yegor Gaidar; Vice President Gen. Maj. Aleksandr Rutskoy; Gen. Pavel Grachev, the defense minister; Viktor Barannikov, minister of security; and Yuri Skokov, responsible for the arms industry.

### The 'Southern Belt'

The Russian leadership has been looking with mounting alarm at the extremely volatile "southern crisis belt" in the Balkans, an arc at or near the point of explosion extending from Albania on the Adriatic coast, across Kosovo and the Republic of Macedonia, through Bulgaria. The Kosovo situation alone, which could erupt at any time into a Serbia-Albania war that would rapidly involve all Balkan countries, suffices to make this entire region an explosive zone. Even if Kosovo didn't exist, this area would be extremely unstable.

Besides Kosovo, three factors have brought this region to the boiling point, only one of which is the war in former Yugoslavia. The main overriding factor has been the application of International Monetary Fund (IMF) "shock therapy" programs in their most vicious, concentrated form anywhere in the former East bloc, to Bulgaria and Albania. Shock therapy architect, Harvard Prof. Jeffrey Sachs, has trumpeted these two countries as being the models for shock therapy in the East. The international isolation of the Republic of

Macedonia has accomplished the same ends without the formalities of a shock therapy program as such. The other factor has been the impact of the collapse of the former Comecon trade bloc on these countries, above all Bulgaria.

In Albania, for example, a new round of shock therapy which began on July 1 has dropped living standards to near-starvation levels. In early August, the price of bread increased again fivefold, the cost of utilities increased dramatically, the cost of water increased tenfold, and rents doubled. Crowds stormed bakeries in the capital, Tirana, and provincial cities, which is only a foretaste of what is to come.

The ruination of these countries, coupled with Russia's economic and political disappearance from the scene over the past year, has created a political and strategic power vacuum in the region, leaving it open to be easily filled by the NATO member that London and Washington have groomed to be the new "regional power," namely, Turkey. In the context of calls for Turkish intervention—Bosnian Foreign Minister Haris Silajdzic has appealed to both Turkey and Organization of the Islamic Conference for aid to stop the Serbian attacks—time to fill the vacuum was fast running out. To do so, and thus limit to the maximum extent possible the Balkan "land grab" being planned by the Anglo-Americans through their Turkish surrogate, Russia reverted to a Balkan policy based on trying to stabilize and strengthen Bulgaria.

### **The historical parallels**

Thus, we are witnessing a repeat of the classic Balkan policy fights of the last decades of the 19th century within Russia, between the moderates of the Russian Foreign Office around Gorchakov, who pushed a Bulgaria-centered policy, as opposed to the slavophiles who actively encouraged, financed, and armed the cause of Serbian expansionism. These fights, however, were not only within Russia, but Russia pitted against the British Foreign Office.

A key historical reference point to these phenomena was the years 1876-78. In 1876, a Serbian war and insurrection against the Ottoman Empire began. It was financed and materially supported by the radical pan-Slavic lobby in Russia, and the Russian General Chernayev, a warlord who epitomized messianic pan-Slavism, arrived in Serbia to command the Serbian forces. Bulgarian uprisings against the Ottomans followed. Czar Alexander II wisely refused to heed the calls by Chernayev and the Serbians for a Russian military intervention, as Serbia had begun the war. The uprisings were crushed by the Ottomans, and above all in Bulgaria, with a brutality by the Turks very similar to what is being practiced by Serbian forces nowadays. The scale of the massacres created an outcry in Russia that forced the hand of the czar and, in 1877, war was declared on Turkey.

That war and its final outcome proved ultimately to be a historical turning point. The Russian forces were victorious and were on the verge of ending the Ottoman presence on the

European continent when the first British-led Great Powers' intervention occurred, which forced Russia to stop its armies as they were approaching Constantinople. However, Russian arms had liberated the area including present Bulgaria and the Republic of Macedonia. Czar Alexander II dictated the Treaty of San Stefano, which created a Bulgarian nation whose boundaries included what is now Bulgaria, the Republic of Macedonia (whose inhabitants speak a dialect of Bulgarian), and the Greek province of Thrace. Serbia was kept within the bounds of Serbia proper.

### **London's 'casus belli'**

The Treaty of San Stefano was for London a *casus belli*. Russia was given an ultimatum by a British-led "concert of powers" to declare San Stefano null and void, and to attend a European conference, the notorious 1878 Congress of Berlin which was convened at the joint initiative of Britain and Austria, to redraw the map of the Balkans and reestablish the Ottoman presence in the Balkans. This was in 1878. British policy was then, as it had been throughout the 19th century, to artificially prop up the Ottoman Empire. The later British policy to dismantle the Ottoman Empire only became operational when Britain was certain that it could steer the dissolution in conformity with British imperial interests.

The new Russian policy orientation towards Bulgaria and the Republic of Macedonia will produce in time, if it is followed through with deeds and not internally sabotaged, as happened in the late 1870s, a major strategic clash with Anglo-American imperial interests.

### **Treaty of Friendship signed**

It appears Russia will follow through. Yeltsin and Zhelev signed a Treaty of Friendship, focused on economic and cultural cooperation, but also, significantly, ensuring cooperation in the field of armaments. In the talks, priority was attached to restoring the collapsed Russo-Bulgarian trade relations, which for Bulgaria is a life and death matter. Up through 1990, when trade was still normal, 60% of Bulgaria's entire foreign trade had been with the former Soviet Union, and the collapse of this flow of goods has been the main factor in the catastrophic decline in Bulgarian industrial production over the past two years. The other main factor, as we stressed above, has been the imposition of shock therapy and its consequent widespread impoverishment of the Bulgarian population. According to statistics released at the end of July by the Bulgarian regime, 40% of the population is living at the "biological minimum" level of existence, and an additional 40-45% are living at what is termed the "social existence minimum."

This economic front in the Russo-Bulgarian relationship will be decisive, as Bulgaria, shown by the dismal situation we have portrayed, is teetering on the brink of complete socio-economic breakdown, with incalculable political consequences.