

Russia begins reconquest of the Baltic republics

by Konstantin George

The "Great Russian" policy to restore the empire, first reflected in Moscow's de facto support for the secession of the Abkhazia region from the Republic of Georgia, has struck the three Baltic republics of Estonia, Latvia, and, in a somewhat different form, Lithuania. The intention to reconquer at least the first two of these republics was signaled in an Oct. 20 Russian Defense Ministry announcement canceling the withdrawal of some 25,000 Russian troops and 15,000 dependents from Estonia and Latvia which had been scheduled between late October and the end of the year.

Much of the western media covers this as soap opera, describing the Baltic events as Russian President Boris Yeltsin being "overruled" by the Army, or whatever. This coverage misses the fundamental point. Personalities may come or go, but the Russian power shift toward a policy of recreating Russian rule or a Russian sphere of influence in most or all of the former Soviet Union is proceeding. The power shift has Yeltsin's tacit backing, and has been the policy of Russia's real ruling body, the Russian Security Council, a veritable post-Bolshevik "Politburo," created by a Yeltsin decree back in June, and given its extensive powers, again by a Yeltsin decree, in July.

The escalation of the Baltic crisis began with the Estonian elections in early October, when the Estonian Parliament elected Lennart Meri, who had received only 29% of the popular vote in the first round, as President. Meri was installed on a platform of implementing an enforced emigration of more than 200,000 of Estonia's 500,000 Russian inhabitants, a provocation which provided Moscow with an ideal pretext to adopt a tough policy against the Baltic republics.

The Russian Defense Ministry announcement was not taken independently of Yeltsin. In an Oct. 20 statement issued immediately after the Defense Ministry announcement, Yeltsin backed the suspension of the withdrawal, saying that no agreement with Estonia and Latvia on withdrawal was possible "as long as they do not pass legislation in accordance with international standards" concerning minority rights. His adviser, Sergei Stankevich, announced a Russian campaign to mobilize "international public opinion and especially the Council of Europe in restoring normal life to the 1.5 million Russians in Latvia and Estonia."

After the Estonian elections, the Russian "Officers Assembly" (the officers belonging to the Northwest Group of Forces, as the Baltic Military District had been renamed after

August 1991), had appealed to the Russian Constitutional Court to overrule the planned withdrawals out of Estonia and Latvia. Should the withdrawal not be halted, the officers threatened, they would refuse to have their units leave the Baltic. That their demand had been agreed to by Moscow at least a week before the Defense Ministry announcement, was indicated in two mid-October developments.

Kozyrev a lame duck

On Oct. 14, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Fyodor Shelov-Kovedyayev was forced to resign following accusations that he was "too soft" on the Baltic republics. The resignation was the start of a shakeup in the Russian Foreign Ministry, expected to culminate in the ouster of Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev by year's end. The Shelov resignation certified the lame duck status of Kozyrev, which had been the case since he was denied membership on the all-important Russian Security Council last summer. The Shelov resignation also followed threats by Russian Vice President Aleksandr Rutskoy for a total embargo against Estonia, if it refused to grant full citizenship rights to its 500,000 Russians. "In that case, the Estonian economy will come to a halt within one week," Rutskoy said in an Oct. 13 interview with BBC television.

The link between the Rutskoy threats and the Shelov resignation was provided by a Rutskoy spokesman who hailed the resignation as "the first step along the path of very major, serious changes in the Foreign Ministry," which will bring the Foreign Ministry in line with the policy of reconquest of the former Soviet republics.

Further evidence of the power shift, was an Oct. 14 Yeltsin decree, timed with the Shelov departure, naming Yuri Skokov, the secretary of the Russian Security Council, to the additional post of head of the newly created Council of Leaders of the Russian Federation's autonomous republics, such as Tatarstan, Bashkiria, Yakutia, and the various North Caucasus republics. The staff of the new body, handpicked by Skokov, is being drawn from the staff of the Security Council.

Skokov himself epitomizes the power shift since the Security Council was created. As leading Russian dailies, such as *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, have pointed out, Skokov has emerged as the second most powerful man in Russia. As secretary of the Russian Security Council, he runs all its day-

to-day activities. Skokov is the man in the shadows—he shuns media attention, never makes speeches, never grants interviews. An October request by the Russian weekly *Novoye Vremya* (*New Times*) for an interview was not only turned down, but his office refused even to supply biographical data. Though many details of his life are classified, enough is known to certify his profile as one of the top figures in the high-tech realm of the Russian military-industrial complex. Skokov, 54, had spent almost 30 years in secret military R&D programs, before being appointed a U.S.S.R. deputy prime minister in 1990.

Since July, under his direction, the Russian Security Council has established local branches all across Russia to supervise local affairs in close cooperation with the Russian Interior and Security Ministries, recreating what could become a future police-state apparatus. He has also been in charge of military personnel policy. His additional post as secretary of the new Council of Leaders of republics has given him the pivotal position in shaping policies toward inter-ethnic conflicts, which is key in directing the course of empire restoration. This was acknowledged by *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* in a commentary after his appointment: “Skokov, having received *carte blanche* from the leaders of the Russian republic, is extending the Security Council’s influence, and his own, to the entire Russian Federation. At last, Moscow will have the chance to exercise rigid control over the ethnic situation in the republics.”

Another piece in this picture was the tour of the North Caucasus by Russian Defense Minister Gen. Pavel Grachev. His itinerary included talks with the leaders of the Russian Cossack paramilitary units which are fighting alongside the Abkhazians against Georgia, and he was otherwise involved in preparations to send in larger forces to help detach both Abkhazia and South Ossetia from Georgia. The talks centered on plans to transform the Cossack forces, from authorized irregulars into Cossack units within the Russian Army, in the Czarist tradition. This was fully consistent with a little-noticed decree (reported by *EIR* at the time), issued by Yeltsin in June, reinstating the Cossack self-government laws of the Russian Empire and “instructing the Ministry of Defense” to study the integration of the Cossacks into the Russian Army.

Moves against the Crimea

Moscow also has its eyes on the Black Sea coast of Ukraine, starting with the Crimea. However, Ukraine, in contrast to Georgia and the Baltic republics, is a large, populous nation, and Moscow must tread carefully. Moscow needs a crisis where it will appear that it is not intervening against Ukrainians, but against a “common enemy” of the two Slavic peoples of Crimea—its Russian majority and Ukrainian minority. This “common enemy” may turn out to be Crimea’s third ethnic group, the Crimean Tatars. Violence by Crimean Tatars could trigger a Russia-Ukraine crisis over the Black Sea peninsula.

The Transcaucasus



Crimea’s Russians fear that they will soon be subject to attacks by the Crimean Tatars, who comprise less than 10% of Crimea’s 2.5 million population. The Crimean Tatars had lived in Crimea until 1944-45 when Stalin deported them to Uzbekistan in Central Asia. In 1989, Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachov issued a decree permitting them to return to Crimea, which nearly all Crimean Tatars have done. An explosive situation has been building up among the 220,000 Crimean Tatars now residing in Crimea, as about 140,000 of them are now facing their second winter in tent encampments, living as destitute refugees in what was once their ancestral homeland. They have become victims of neglect where, given Ukraine’s severe economic crisis, a housing program for Crimean Tatars is low on the republic’s list of priorities, and, under the widespread autonomy Ukraine was forced to give Crimea (making it virtually a Russian autonomous republic on Ukrainian soil), Ukraine has very little real say or control over events there. Under these circumstances, Crimea has become ripe for inter-ethnic conflict.

In mid-October, Crimean Tatars tried to storm the regional parliament in Simferopol, heavily damaging the building after battles with the local, Russian police, which caused many injuries. Threats against Russian civilians have been mounting. Should attacks break out, Russia would intervene, as it has in Abkhazia, to “protect Russian lives,” claiming that the action was not directed against Ukraine. As in the case of Abkhazia, which, aside from a few areas still held by Georgian forces, Russia has de facto occupied as a protectorate, Crimea might still belong to Ukraine on paper, but in reality will become the next territory grabbed by Moscow.