

## Russia faces new tribulations by April

by Rachel Douglas

A new crisis of political power in Russia is exploding, well in advance of the referendum on Russia's form of government, which last December's Seventh Congress of People's Deputies scheduled to take place in April 1993. Skirmishes over the referendum have been so fierce and are being played out against the backdrop of such economic disasters, that the normally reserved Chancellor Helmut Kohl of Germany sounded an alarm.

Speaking at a conference of the Wehrkunde society held in Munich the weekend of Feb. 6-7, Kohl said, "It is a terrible thing to state, but in spite of all the cruelties happening in the Balkans, it is not a real threat to our security, it does not mean the beginning of World War III. The real threat is looming in the East, on the territory of the former Soviet Union."

The April referendum was supposed to resolve a power stalemate between President Boris Yeltsin, and the majority of deputies of the Congress of People's Deputies (CPD) and its smaller, sitting group of parliamentarians, the Supreme Soviet. Both were elected in 1991, before the collapse of the Communist Party and the Soviet Union.

The chance to select either a presidential or a parliamentary system has failed to capture the imagination of Russia's people, who have just had one-third of the already eroded purchasing power of their money wiped out by inflation in the space of one month. The press is full of talk about a possible "failure of the referendum," if, disgusted as people are by the politicking, fewer than 50% of registered voters turn out. A cartoon in the daily *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* on Jan. 29 showed emaciated Russian voters, dressed in rags, being asked to come and vote.

While the wording of the referendum is not yet decided—

whether it should be a simple choice of a system of government, or an array of votes on politics, economics, and statehood—each passing day poses more starkly the broader question, of whether the Russian state will continue to exist at all. Will it rupture, in a firestorm of local wars that collectively dwarf the horrors in former Yugoslavia? Or will military and other forces attempt to hold Russia together, and restore the Soviet empire, by force?

Statements from Russian military and other spokesmen, including condemnations of the latest U.S. bombing of Iraq, show that a more adversarial strategic posture is being adopted during this crisis.

The mood of uncertainty was heightened, when a Major Kislov of the Russia Army, said to be mentally deranged, was arrested on Jan. 30 for plotting to assassinate Yeltsin. Some Russian press promptly carried front-page features on political assassinations as a way of life in Russia throughout the 20th century.

### The referendum

On Jan. 27, when Yeltsin was in India, parliamentary speaker Ruslan Khasbulatov moved to change the 1993 political agenda. Alluding to the specter of "failure of the referendum," Khasbulatov said, "I am constantly thinking about how to attract the people to the referendum on the Constitution. Perhaps the last question should be formulated as follows: Do you agree that general elections of the President and the entire corps of deputies should be held in the spring of 1994?" In this way, as *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* reported, Khasbulatov "put the idea of a referendum in doubt and called for preparations for general elections."

Khasbulatov cultivates the image of an unpredictable

maverick, jousting with Yeltsin. He hails from Chechnya, within Russia's borders in the strife-torn North Caucasus region, and goes surrounded by rumors, such as unconfirmed reports that he commands a large, private armed force in Moscow, tied in with business interests of himself and his family. For his Jan. 27 overture, Khasbulatov used a speech to Forum-90, a group of young businessmen aligned with the Civic Union coalition and the new Union for the Rebirth of Russia, both of which oppose Yeltsin and command support in the Supreme Soviet and the CPD.

By Feb. 3, Yeltsin's chief of cabinet, Sergei Filatov, began to distance the President from an ironclad commitment to the referendum. He told Russian TV that the referendum might have been poorly conceived, and would better be focused less on constitutional questions and more on economic reform. Valeri Zorkin, head of Russia's Constitutional Court and architect of the Yeltsin-Khasbulatov compromise that set the referendum, told the daily *Pravda* he hoped Russia would soon "abandon the referendum."

The simmering power struggle boiled over at the first session of Round Table talks on Feb. 5, convened by Yeltsin to find a consensus among his staff, the government, the parliament, and regional leaders on the referendum and on "recommendations for an anti-crisis program." Khasbulatov promptly demanded that the referendum be cancelled. He formalized his call for elections, presidential as well as parliamentary, to be held in 1994. The more militant so-called "national-patriotic" opposition, grouped in the National Salvation Front, wants elections even sooner, in the autumn of this year.

Khasbulatov is also threatening to convene the Eighth Congress of People's Deputies before the referendum, in which case it could scratch the vote and make a new assault on Yeltsin's presidency. Vice President Aleksandr Rutskoy, in his address to the Round Table, termed the Executive branch of Russia's government "fragile, unstable, and impossible to control," and said that "political convulsions could be immediately ahead."

### **A government without optimism**

Economic convulsions are ahead, behind, and on all sides. At the Round Table, Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin lamented that "there are no grounds for optimism" about the economy, for "the fall of production can no longer be stopped."

During January, government economists admitted during the talks, inflation was not the 30% previously estimated, but 50% just for that month. Yeltsin himself called the economic situation "desperate."

On the eve of the Round Table, Yeltsin lashed out at the Ministry of Economics for allowing the inflation and the plunge of production during 1992. The economics minister is Andrei Nechayev, a supporter of Yeltsin's own preferred reformer, Yegor Gaidar, whom the CPD ousted as acting

prime minister in December.

At a Feb. 4 press conference, Nechayev admitted that his and Gaidar's "harsh financial policy" led not to "financial stabilization," but to a crisis of payments among enterprises that stalled out industry. Then, "a sharp deviation toward abrupt softening of the credit policy was made," as the central bank and the government both churned out money and credits to rescue production.

For a short-term remedy, however, Nechayev pledged to resume the credit crunch, and launch "phased reduction of subsidies . . . to food producers, to the coal industry and other . . . inefficient production facilities." This would yield more results when the Law on Bankruptcies goes into effect March 1, he said—as if the main stumbling block in the Russian economy had been the absence of procedures for loss-making facilities to be shut down or reorganized! He said that Yeltsin wanted bankruptcies to be shown on television, so that deadbeats would believe this can happen and not sit waiting for subsidies. Nechayev had no explanation of how orderly profit-making is supposed to occur when hyperinflation reigns.

Bankruptcies and unemployment on a huge scale are expected, when subsidies are cut to such sectors as coal mining. For miners in Vorkuta, in far northern Russia, "the danger of becoming a city of unemployed miners, whom nobody wants in the south either, is very real," reported *Izvestia* on Jan. 13. When coal mines are reorganized into share societies, as is supposed to take place before March 31 according to a decree by Yeltsin, "the state will guarantee them no subsidies, and . . . many mines, above all those in Vorkuta, will go bankrupt because of the high cost of mining coal in the Arctic."

In Vorkuta, as elsewhere in Russia, criminality is at an all-time high. In past strikes, the coal miners won the right to freely sell part of their product for hard currency, "so Vorkuta today is saturated . . . with imported cars and electronic equipment. Like flies to honey, these goods have attracted dealers from all ends of the country. There is a flood of thievery, and criminals are settling accounts and dividing up booty by means of shootouts on the street." There is talk of setting up armed workers' militias.

The Kuzbass mining region in western Siberia, *Izvestia* reported on Jan. 25, experienced three murders of businessmen in the span of a few days. The victims were the director of a refining factory, a branch director of the Kuzbass Industrial Bank, and the chairman of a cooperative lumber company, together with his 13-year-old son and a worker.

At the turn of the year, a banker and his bodyguard were shot dead on the streets of Moscow, which has its own Wild West atmosphere.

### **Will Russia splinter?**

"Will Russia Fall Apart?" headlined *Argumenty i Fakty*, a 12-million circulation weekly, in January. "The breakup of

the Russian state must be stopped," trumpeted *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* over an interview with a Russian general in charge of crisis management in North Ossetia and Ingushetia, in the North Caucasus. The headlines refer to another burning question, whether the Russian Federation will splinter as the Soviet Union did.

According to *Argumenty i Fakty*, Article 59 of the new constitution of the Tatarstan Republic "declares the supremacy of its laws on its territory," and defines the republic as "a state associated with Russia." The draft constitution of Bashkortostan states that "the Bashkortostan Republic preserves the right freely to exit from the Russian Federation."

The Tatar and Bashkir entities, situated near the southern end of the Ural Mountains and endowed with rich petroleum resources, were "Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republics" within the Russian Federation, under the Soviet Union. The Tatars and Bashkirs, descended from the Mongol occupiers of Russia in the 12th-14th centuries, are not the ethnic majority within those "autonomies." But their bid for statehood is no joke.

*Argumenty i Fakty* commented that when Yeltsin signs a planned bilateral treaty between Russia and Tatarstan, he will "de facto recognize the anti-Russian constitution of Tatarstan," and "mark the total collapse of the constitutional system." According to *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* of Jan. 23, Tatarstan was able to blackmail Yeltsin because of his commitment to his April referendum: "The Tatarstan leadership went for broke: If the treaty is not signed by April, the all-Russian referendum will not be conducted in the [Tatarstan] republic."

At least 17 "constitutional republics" have been defined within Russia, according to the article in *Argumenty i Fakty* No. 2 for 1993. In a followup in issue No. 3, the weekly quoted Supreme Soviet Deputy Yegor Shugayev: "If at the April referendum several of the Russian republics pose the question of leaving the federation, we will have to put a cross on the grave of a unified, indivisible country with a centuries-long history."

At a Feb. 9 meeting with Yeltsin, the presidents of 20 autonomies demanded a postponement of the national referendum.

### **All power to the Constituent Assembly?**

Before losing any more members, the Russian Federation has already shrunk from the 1988 full extent of the Soviet-Russian Empire, back to the area Russia controlled in the 17th century. It is no secret that people in the Army and in the old ruling *nomenklatura* would like to reverse these losses.

There is a real threat of attempts at imperial restoration as chaos spreads. It is also a specter that every politician invokes.

According to *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, Khasbulatov also "considers that there is a very real danger of an authoritarian

terrorist regime being established in the country. 'Such an attempt could occur even before the referendum,' he told [the paper]. . . . In Khasbulatov's opinion, the only way to avert the threat of dictatorship is to begin to prepare public opinion for general elections in the spring of 1994."

A column by Yuri Feofanov in the Jan. 13 *Izvestia* discussing whether the April referendum would "splinter Russia," forecast that "failure" of the referendum would delegitimize the Russian state. Thus, "the failure of the referendum could well mean the beginning of the end of the federation, and hence of Russian statehood." He compared the process with the political crises of the Weimar Republic in Germany in the 1920s, which was ended with the Nazi takeover.

At the December Third Congress of Democratic Russia, the now-fragmented coalition in which the anti-communist opposition was grouped at the beginning of the 1990s, Yeltsin's former adviser Galina Starovoitova also drew the comparison with Weimar. She called for Democratic Russia to be fully in opposition now, no longer subservient to Yeltsin.

In an article in *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* of Jan. 26, former Moscow Mayor Gavril Popov also argued that Democratic Russia and other heirs of the anti-communist "democratic" movement must not blindly equate the success of reform with support for Yeltsin's every move. In particular, Popov blasted the economic ideas of Gaidar as a disaster for Russia. "The International Monetary Fund, more accurately, was the author of these conceptions," he said. Until now, the Civic Union and the National Salvation Front were the most vocal opponents of the IMF, so that criticism of the IMF was believed by many to denote an "anti-reform" attitude.

In his article and in a Jan. 18 conference in St. Petersburg on the matter, Popov endorsed the initiative of Marina Salye of Democratic Russia to convene a Constituent Assembly, the Russian *Uchrezhditelnoye sobraniye*, to decide the constitutional basis for Russian statehood. Its delegates would represent all strata from all regions of the Russian Federation, with the proviso that participants in the Constituent Assembly could not hold office in the state they design.

Some have proposed reaching further back into Russia's past, to hold a *Zemsky sobor*, the ancient Russian "gathering of the lands." In 1613, a *Zemsky sobor* established the power of the Romanov dynasty in Russia, which ruled until 1917. The National Salvation Front has bandied about a call for a *Zemsky sobor* in its slogans, but, as writer Pavel Nevinsky asserted in *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* on Jan. 14, "to convoke such a *sobor* is the exclusive prerogative of the holder of supreme authority in the state," i.e., Yeltsin.

On Feb. 3, Yeltsin's aide Filatov also endorsed the Constituent Assembly plan, which would preempt the elections desired by Khasbulatov.

The last Constituent Assembly in Russia was in 1918. It was dissolved by the Bolsheviks, who acted under the slogan "All Power to the *Soviets*" and established the Soviet system.