

# Russia's military flexes muscle; Ukraine independence threatened

by Konstantin George

Events in Moscow during February, reaching a peak around Armed Forces Day on Feb. 23, show that Russian President Boris Yeltsin's position is being steadily undermined in favor of an ineluctable trend toward restoring a "Great Russian" empire. The brutal Russian energy blockade against Ukraine, and Russian conduct toward Georgia in the Transcaucasus, express a stunning agreement among all power factions in Moscow to pursue this policy.

The sea-change in Moscow is already very far advanced, and it is likely to make expendable both personalities whose "duel" for power has been the subject of exaggerated western media attention: President Yeltsin and Parliament Speaker Ruslan Khasbulatov.

It is not really a question of a revived Soviet Union—which was, after all, only the last incarnation of Great Russia. Thus, while media coverage of Feb. 23 centered on the noise of 10-20,000 mostly elderly Communist and nationalist demonstrators in Moscow, the real news of the day was more ominous. The demonstrators demanded the firing of Yeltsin as an "enemy of the people," invoked a Russian policy aimed at restoring the Soviet Union, and called for the Army to play the decisive role in Russian politics and to champion this cause. Yet, as acknowledged by Yeltsin in an Armed Forces Day interview with the Defense Ministry daily *Krasnaya Zvezda* and openly hailed by Defense Minister Gen. Pavel Grachev on Russian TV, the Army already is calling the shots.

## Army as 'guarantor'

Yeltsin in *Krasnaya Zvezda* called the Army "the guarantor of stability in society." General Grachev went further in his TV address, praising the Army, despite problems concerning the officer corps, as "the only reliable and well-organized force in society."

Grachev, citing the presence of Russian officers at a Feb. 20-21 weekend conference of old Communists and ultra-

nationalists, declared that the Army command won't allow the Army to be misused for political purposes, and that all attempts to "split the Army" will be quashed. Grachev announced that disciplinary action will be taken against 3,000 officers on counts of "corruption," and formal charges will be pressed against 46 "generals and other officers" for the illegal sale of military aircraft.

If that was the "stick," Yeltsin underscored the "carrot" in his interview. He reported that in January the basic pay for soldiers had been tripled, and the basic pay for officers increased fivefold. He also said that from now on, "members of the Armed Forces" will have "priority" in receiving apartments.

## Security Council draws the line

It is not the Army alone, but the tightly interconnected institutional alliance of the Army, the related security services, and allied military-industry complex and industry directors, who are running the show in Moscow. These forces together control the true organ of power, the Russian Security Council.

The Security Council, the post-Bolshevik "Politburo" set up in May 1992, is chaired by military industry "tsar" Yuri Skokov, an *éminence grise* of Russian policy-making. Its members include Vice President Rutskoy, Defense Minister Grachev, and the security and interior ministers. The Security Council also has the support of the powerful Civic Union industrial directors' lobby.

On Feb. 15 the Security Council issued an ultimatum to Boris Yeltsin to end the political chaos in Russia by calling off his threatened April 11 constitutional referendum. This action forced Yeltsin to meet Khasbulatov Feb. 16 to work out an agreement ending the political brawl in Moscow. The council warned Yeltsin that the "very precarious" economic situation would plunge over the brink unless he acted to prevent Russia from "sliding into total political chaos," by

calling off the referendum.

Quoted in the Feb. 18 *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, council staff member Andronik Migranian declared: "Given the sharply deteriorating economic situation, it is suicidal to push the masses into a struggle." The referendum would "not only deepen the political crisis and polarize the various forces in the center, but it will also further the disintegration of the state."

Yeltsin backed down initially on the referendum, but this concession has not stopped the erosion of his powers. Khasbulatov appeared in Novosibirsk, Siberia, Feb. 19, openly challenging the legitimacy of the Yeltsin presidency. Khasbulatov asserted that Yeltsin had been elected President of a Russian Republic of the former Soviet Union, but never of Russia as an independent state. He demanded that Yeltsin surrender all of his presidential powers, and allow a "new leadership" of what he called "the creators" to come to power.

In Russia today, as in the last years of the U.S.S.R., the two negative dynamics of political and economic disintegration are feeding each other. The Russian elite, reflected in the Security Council and the Civic Union, knows that the March-April period marks the last chance to impose political stability and buy time before the economic crisis spins out of control. This was most pointedly expressed in mid-February statements of Civic Union leader Arkady Volsky, cited by Vienna sources. Volski told Austrian industry leaders that "the situation will deteriorate as long as there is no resolution to the political wars in Moscow," and that both Yeltsin and Khasbulatov will eventually have to "agree to stop this process of disintegration," or else Russia itself will begin to disintegrate.

## Strong-arming Ukraine

Moscow's prime response to the Russian crisis is an iron-fisted policy aimed at reconquering the non-Russian republics of the former Soviet Union. The future of Ukraine, the most populous of these, and a potential economic powerhouse by western European standards, will be decisive in determining whether the post-Bolshevik independence of any of the republics survives this decade. Ukraine is being subjected to a level of economic chaos that makes Russia look tame.

When German Foreign Minister Klaus Kinkel was in the Ukraine capital, Kiev, on Feb. 16, he was told by Prime Minister Leonid Kuchma: "The situation in Ukraine is getting desperate. If present trends continue, the country could easily slide back into the old system. The people have had it. They can't take any more. They are faced with an endless downslide into pauperization. People say that in the past, we at least had bread and meat. That is no longer the case."

Kuchma said that the Russian oil embargo, joined by a natural gas cutoff set for Feb. 25, threatens a "full paralysis" of Ukraine, which is nearly totally dependent on Russia for oil and gas. In January, at the Moscow summit of Yeltsin and

Ukrainian President Kravchuk, Russia had promised Ukraine 20 million tons of oil for 1993. But during the entire month of January, Ukraine received not a single drop. On Feb. 16, Russian Deputy Prime Minister Shokhin announced an overnight natural gas price increase of 2,500%. Shokhin "offered" Ukraine a return to subsidized prices on the humiliating condition that Ukraine grant Russia permanent military bases on Ukrainian territory, and surrender all but minimal claims to a part of the Black Sea naval fleet. On Feb. 20, the Russian state gas company, Gazprom, ordered a complete stop of natural gas to Ukraine, pending Ukrainian payment of 165 billion rubles owed for January deliveries.

As the Russia leadership knows, Ukraine will get around this by tapping into the pipelines that traverse its territory before they reach Slovakia and then western Europe. Russia and its European gas customers will then blame Ukraine for Russian non-deliveries of gas—a malicious lie, since Russia has, if it chooses to let it flow, more than enough natural gas to cover both West European and Ukrainian demand.

Kinkel's visit illustrated how Ukraine is being strangled in concert by the West and Moscow. He responded to Ukraine's predicament by arrogantly upholding the Anglo-American policy of a total credit embargo against Ukraine. Under this policy, Ukraine must first ratify the START-1 and Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaties, and agree to assume its "share" of the former Soviet debt, while renouncing its claims to a share of former Soviet assets. Ukraine's last foreign hope to break this vise was Germany; Kinkel scuttled it, and added insult to injury by treating Ukraine as like a Russian colony, so brazenly that his Ukrainian hosts were forced to publicly admonish him for "seeing Ukraine through the eyes of Moscow."

The other front where the Russian Empire restoration is moving apace is in the Transcaucasus Republic of Georgia. While feigning neutrality, Moscow has all along supported the separation of the Black Sea coastal region of Abkhazia from Georgia, with the aim of eventually annexing it into the Russian Federation. Last July, with Moscow's unofficial support, Abkhazia declared its independence from Georgia, and its desire to join Russia. Russian "peace-keeping" troops entered Abkhazia, acting as a screen to prevent Georgian forces from retaking the parts held by the Abkhazian separatists.

The Russian Army launched provocations designed to goad Georgia into an open battle, and thus give Moscow the pretext to drive the Georgian Army out of the part of Abkhazia it still holds. The provocations climaxed with a Russian air raid on the Abkhazian capital of Sukhumi. Georgia threatened to order a general mobilization. On Feb. 24, the Russian Defense Ministry raised the war danger threshold to its highest level yet, ordering Russian troops in Abkhazia and Georgia to "shoot to kill" any Georgian troops who got in their way. Then, Defense Minister Grachev, speaking in *Izvestia*, said that Russia can never relinquish Abkhazia because of the question of "access to the Black Sea."