
Interview: Konstantin Chermnykh

Russian elections will not be democratic

Konstantin Chermnykh, a journalist from St. Petersburg, was interviewed by telephone by Gabriele Liebig on Oct. 11.

EIR: One week after Bloody Sunday in Moscow, what is the situation in the region of St. Petersburg?

Chermnykh: The first reaction to the events in Moscow was two public rallies last Monday, Oct. 4—one by Yeltsin supporters, and another by the opposition. Neither was very numerous. While the opposition got a crowd of 6-7,000, the others were about 4,000. The followers of the opposition called Yeltsin a murderer, while the others carried ready-made cartoons of [Russian Vice President Aleksandr] Rutskoy and [Russian Parliament President Ruslan] Khasbulatov.

The next day the situation changed, because all movements and parties linked to Rutskoy and Khasbulatov were banned. Since then they have been very cautious, because they want to avoid being drawn into any provocation. On Friday, I was near the city *sovet* [council], where about 300 opposition members had gathered. About 30 to 40 policemen arrived. A man in plainclothes approached the demonstrators and gave a small package to one of them. I don't know what was in it, but the effect was that the crowd left the place within a few minutes.

After the Justice Ministry had ordered a stop to the activity of nine political parties, the head of the justice department in St. Petersburg added two more parties to this list of forbidden organizations: the Russian National Congress and the People's Social Party. This was done, despite the fact that the situation in St. Petersburg was quiet and there was no reason to declare any state of emergency.

The place where the opposition press was usually sold, near the Gostinni Dvor supermarket, is now empty, because the police just don't allow anything to be sold there. This also means that newspapers which belong neither to the nationalist nor the communist opposition, like the paper of the Democratic Union party, are not allowed to be sold there. As this was basically the only place where such papers had been sold, many of them will disappear altogether. This is a kind of indirect censorship.

I should also report that the deputy mayor of St. Petersburg, Vyacheslav Shcherbakov, who had been appointed by Rutskoy and who opposed Yeltsin, was for a while not al-

lowed to come to the city government in Smolny Institute by Mayor [Anatoly] Sobchak. But on Oct. 4, this guy was back in Smolny working quite closely with Sobchak. Shcherbakov is involved in some commercial enterprises and doesn't want to "spit against the wind," especially because those enterprises also involve some former party officials.

EIR: Yeltsin has dissolved the regional soviets. Is the St. Petersburg city sovet also dissolved?

Chermnykh: No, only the regional and district councils were dissolved, the so-called subjects of the Russian Federation. The St. Petersburg city council was not dissolved, but it reversed its previous decision opposing Yeltsin's decree under which he had dissolved the parliament. This [original] decision was taken by 30 members of the city sovet, the so-called "Small Soviet," which is now dissolved. And the city councillors abolished this resolution, because they wanted the city sovet to continue to exist.

Aleksandr Belyayev, representing the City Council, explained today that, after reading Yeltsin's decree concerning the regional soviets, he concluded that it means that those soviets will lose their powers, but they can continue to work, talk to electors, and so forth if they accept the overall decision.

The dissolution of the regional soviets is a way to take control over them. For example, in Moscow, the city administration had been accused by the city sovet many times of corruption, and therefore had to be shut down. In St. Petersburg, the city sovet still exists, but under pressure it decided to work together with Mayor Sobchak.

EIR: Two weeks ago St. Petersburg hosted a conference of the regions, and a majority of their representatives came out for the so-called "zero option," which basically meant that Yeltsin should take back his ukaz to dissolve the parliament. Will St. Petersburg, the second biggest city in Russia, play any role in some type of opposition in the future?

Chermnykh: The zero option was proposed by the head of the Constitutional Court, Valeri Zorkin. But now, Zorkin is no longer head of the Constitutional Court, and even the court itself no longer exists.

The Russian Orthodox Church had also supported that option. Yesterday I attended a meeting with the Russian Orthodox Metropolitan Ioann of St. Petersburg. He was asked why the church was not able to prevent the bloodshed in Moscow. He said that they did their best, but that the government did not even obey the Constitutional Court. Furthermore, he said that when he was in Moscow on Oct. 3 discussing a possible solution to the conflict with [Patriarch] Aleksii II and other representatives of the church, someone suddenly came in with the information that the President had already signed a statement that the White House should be attacked, and that this statement had been signed late at night on Oct. 2.

But you have asked about resistance from the regions. Several regional soviets have been dissolved. Others insist on continuing to function until March of next year, for instance the Krasnoyarsk regional soviet, and they are not going to retract their earlier statement against Yeltsin. Another resisting region is the Kalmykskaya Republic under elected President Kirsan Ilyumzhinov. On Sept. 26, he said, "If Yeltsin today dissolves the Supreme Soviet, he could as well dissolve me." Then he supported the zero option, he talked to the opposition in Moscow, he was present at the White House, and then he left for Kalmyk and held a press conference in which he declared that he is not supporting Yeltsin and will not obey him. Of course, Ilyumzhinov himself had already dissolved the soviets half a year ago, but without bloodshed and to everybody's satisfaction. He doesn't agree with Yeltsin and with the dissolution of the Supreme Soviet.

In respect to the media, it is interesting that just after the old opposition [Rutskoy] has disappeared, a new opposition is emerging here in St. Petersburg. There was a TV program in Moscow called "Itogi." On the eve of the events in Moscow, this group split from the Ostankino company and moved to St. Petersburg. And now they work here, and their point of view doesn't coincide with the view of the Yeltsin administration. They criticize his measures of Oct. 3-4. They reported on the one hand that Rutskoy gave the order to occupy the mayor's building, but they also showed that the first shots against the demonstrators came from there, and that the people who came to Ostankino were shot at from different sides.

This program works for something they call the "Third Force." It is centrist, and I am quite sure that they work for the Secretary of the Security Council, Yuri Skokov, although Skokov has not emerged personally yet. Apparently they are not censored. They are backed by certain commercial circles, especially industrial directors.

EIR: Today I read a statement by Sergei Vasilyev, the director of the economic policy staff of the Russian Council of Ministers and a close associate of [Deputy Prime Minister Yegor] Gaidar, that the International Monetary Fund had been "too soft toward Russia," that agricultural subsidies especially had to be cut, and if the farmers starve, this was "their problem." Will there be resistance from the St. Petersburg region against this harsher "shock therapy" in Russia?

Cheremnykh: Of course, today's winners could do anything they would like, but as far as we understand now, there will be also presidential elections. Also, Sobchak and the other advocates of shock therapy are going to participate in the election. That puts a certain constraint on what they can do. They will certainly go for more price liberalization, for example the price of oil. They have already lifted the price ceiling for bread. The intent is to "buy" the countryside in this way, because the population of the cities will suffer most from this policy. Sobchak, however, has announced that the price of bread won't increase until December—after the



The St. Petersburg city council was not dissolved because it backtracked on its opposition to Yeltsin's dissolution of parliament. Shown here is the Smolny Institute, seat of the city government.

elections, of course.

EIR: So, elections will take place in December, but they will be manipulated?

Cheremnykh: I am sure that there will be elections in December, and I think Yeltsin will take part in them. But the opposition parties are deprived of their civil rights. Just today, the presidential order about the elections was changed to the effect that the upper house of parliament will also be elected. Previously the upper house was supposed to consist of the appointed federal administrators and federal soviets. This was criticized and then changed.

Concerning the nature of the coming elections, I can only say what is happening in our town. The candidates for the upper house are appointed by the city administration in Smolny Institute. And these candidates, such as Aleksandr Shchelkanov, Aleksandr Belyayev, and Pyotr Filipov, are even more radical shock-therapy advocates than Sobchak himself. There are some other financial circles close to Sobchak who now are imposing their candidates. Some of these people are coming directly from certain banks.

There might also be other candidates, if some other political blocs dare to put up candidates for the upper house. For the elections of the lower house, there are many candidates from different political blocs; for example centrists, followers of [Arkady] Volsky.

But I am sure, the elections won't be postponed. Yeltsin is in a hurry; he wants elections as soon as possible.