

EIRFeature

Grim Russian winter dwarfs Yeltsin's election charade

by Konstantin George

General Winter, the most fearsome commander, has arrived in Russia. The country, like much of eastern Europe, is suffering its coldest early winter in some 50 years. This is the context within which the first-hand reports from Russia, provided to *EIR* by two leading dissidents must be read. The already crippled Russian economy can hardly take a further blow from the weather: Strikes crippling the energy sector threaten to assume nationwide proportions. Coal miners of the Kuzbass fields in Siberia, Vorkuta in the far north, and the Rostov-on-Don region are threatening unlimited strikes, unless the government pays months of back wages. A strike by 7,000 natural gas workers, under way in western Siberia since Nov. 22, was joined by local construction workers, teachers and doctors, showing how unrest can spread. Many strikers were last paid in April, and the families have run out of money even for food. They are threatening to reduce gas deliveries to central Russia, starting Dec. 1, which would cause widespread industrial plant shutdowns.

In late November, Deputy Prime Minister Yegor Gaidar and other officials scurried around these regions, trying to buy off the miners with pledges to pay back wages, in order to prevent a social eruption before the elections on Dec. 12. But the onset of the winter overshadows the electoral charade, which many western commentators continue to portray as a triumph for democracy.

The specter of social unrest has raised the in-fighting in Yeltsin's government to a fever pitch. Allies of Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin demand the dismissal of Finance Minister Boris Fyodorov, whose cost-cutting measures left 400 billion rubles owing in back wages for coal miners alone. On Nov. 26, Energy Minister Shafranik accused the Finance Ministry of having allocated only 40% of the funds set aside by the government for winter energy needs, leaving the state energy sector with 8 trillion rubles in unpaid accounts.

The winter will see the military-based dictatorship in action inside the Russian Federation, and in an escalated drive to restore the Empire, through reconquest of the former Soviet republics that became independent in 1991. The main target will



Famine-stricken villagers who have left their homes on the way to St. Petersburg: a scene from the past, but only too timely. Inset: Front-man Boris Yeltsin applauds.

be Ukraine. Moscow will also put the finishing touches on its reconquest of the Caucasus, largely completed during 1993. In the Russian North Caucasus, it is moving to terminate the “independence” of the “Republic of Chechnya,” which seceded from the Russian Federation in the autumn of 1991.

The reality of Russia as a dictatorship, with the military calling the shots, can be seen by the events of Nov. 17. The day began with the publication of a series of decrees from Yeltsin, expanding the powers of the police and troops of the Interior Ministry to stop and search passengers and baggage of any private vehicle or public transportation, as well as railway stations, airports, etc. Homes can be raided and searched for “illegal firearms,” to round up “rowdies” and “anti-social elements.” Another decree provided for rounding up the homeless and drunks, for “hygienic” and “medical” checks. The decrees legalize indefinite “preventive detention” of individuals, without formal charges. Within a week, thousands of homeless people disappeared from the streets, subways, and railway stations of Moscow and other cities.

Also on Nov. 17, the Interior and Security ministries were instructed to work out stricter controls on “anti-social manifestations among youth and adolescents.” Deputy Security Minister Stepashin announced the creation of a new unit in the Department to Combat Terror, to stop or prevent “anti-constitutional actions by extremist groups.” On Nov. 22, this was buttressed by a newly created commission to “ensure

order” on election day. It is nominally headed by First Deputy Prime Minister Vladimir Shumeiko, but its five members are chiefly deputy ministers of defense, security and interior.

Rounding out the day, on Nov. 17, Yeltsin, in military uniform (a rarity), toured military industry facilities in the city of Tula, south of Moscow. He visited the elite Airborne Division based at Tula, where he observed demonstrations of assault tactics and hand-to-hand combat.

In Tula, Yeltsin showed himself as the front man for a military-based dictatorship. He promised that spending for military R&D will be increased, and that Russia will remain an internationally competitive arms producer, keeping a world class military-industrial complex: “Russia cannot be allowed to fall behind the [western] industrial states in this sector,” above all in “research and technology.” Yeltsin demonstratively adopted the military-industrial complex’s position on conversion to civilian production, denouncing the conversion of high-technology military facilities to produce low-technology consumer goods. “We won’t get very far by producing samovars,” he said, referring to one of the Tula military plants that had switched to samovar production.

In discussing Tula with *EIR*, senior Russian strategic experts confirmed that the military has become the arbiter of Russian policy. They stressed that the term “military” should not be misconstrued to mean the person of Defense Minister Pavel Grachov. Most important, they said, is what they term the “Defense Ministry Collegium”—the General Staff, the five deputy defense ministers who head the five branches of

the Armed Forces, and Deputy Defense Minister Gen. Boris Gromov, who is pivotal in this collegium. These sources acknowledged the singular importance of Yeltsin's trip to Tula, as a public signal of a decision for a long-term rearmament program, running into the next century, with emphasis on advanced weaponry. Heavy attention will go to developing ballistic missile defenses, a crucial, unpublicized part of the new Russian military doctrine proclaimed in October.

Finally, these sources confirmed that Russia will use the winter crises in neighboring countries to force these former Soviet republics back into the Great Russian fold. The prime target would be Ukraine, which—in their words—has been subjected to “a joint NATO-Russian squeeze,” using the pretext of Ukrainian administrative possession of nuclear weapons.

Ukraine being readied for reconquest

The first portent of what Ukraine can expect came on Nov. 21 from Russian Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev. He appeared on TV, nominally to respond to the Nov. 18 decision by the Ukrainian Parliament to ratify the Start I Treaty, while keeping the more modern part of the ICBM arsenal on its territory, the SS-24 ICBMs, for some years. The next day, the U.S. State Department condemned the Ukrainian move as threatening to delay implementation of Start I. This extended the U.S. policy of internationally isolating and boycotting Ukraine, to soften it for reconquest by Russia. On Nov. 13, when it was announced that President Clinton would visit both Moscow and Minsk, the capital of Belarus, in January, and that President Nursultan Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan had been invited to visit the United States in early 1994, Ukraine was the only one of the four Community of Independent States (CIS) republics with nuclear weapons on their territory to be excluded from Washington's diplomatic agenda.

Kozyrev employed unprecedented invective against Ukraine. He thundered that Ukraine's decision had created “an extremely serious situation for the entire system of international relations.” Therefore “we are forced to speak of” the rise of “a new atomic power.” In an allusion to further American-Russian action against Ukraine, he added that Russia is investigating the situation, and “in this regard, is in regular contact with other leading countries of the world.” The next day, Kozyrev even compared Ukraine to the dictatorship of North Korea.

The bluster about nuclear weapons, however, conceals the main axis of Russian pressure on Ukraine: economic blackmail. Suffering an American-led western boycott, Ukraine depends nearly totally on Russia for energy supplies, above all for oil and gas, but also for nuclear fuel for its reactors. Russia is confident that its ability to curtail or cut off energy supplies at will, will force Ukraine to capitulate.

Following Kozyrev's denunciations, Russia threatened to limit or stop energy supplies, citing the ruble equivalent of \$700 million Ukraine owes Russia for past deliveries. Theoretically, Ukraine could raise the funds to pay this ruble

sum by adjusting domestic electricity and fuel prices to match the high—70% of world market—prices it pays for Russian oil and gas. But this would finish off its economy, already hit by hyperinflation, running at 100% per month in the second half of 1993. The energy crisis has been compounded by strikes by ethnic Russian miners in the eastern Ukraine Donetsk coal basin. These strikes are led by strike committees controlled by pro-separatist ethnic Russians.

Ukraine, too, is going through the worst winter since World War II. In late November, daytime temperatures fluctuated from -10° to -20° C [$+14^{\circ}$ to -4° F]. Heating and electricity use is rationed and subject to repeated cuts.

Moscow meddling in the Caucasus

Kozyrev also delivered a virtual ultimatum against Armenia. The issue was an alleged Nov. 20 attack by Armenian forces just outside the region of Karabakh on an Azerbaijani convoy carrying a Russian “peace mediator.” Armenia admitted that local self-defense forces had shot at the convoy, but in response to a provocation by Azerbaijan. The attacks were neither ordered by nor known to the Armenian government in Yerevan. But Moscow, having broken the independence of neighboring Georgia, wanted to turn its attention to Armenia. Kozyrev demanded an official Armenian apology for the incident, and “security guarantees” for Russian officials traveling in combat areas. He denounced Armenian “territorial aggrandizement” against Azerbaijan.

Russia's tilt toward Azerbaijan is related to events in the North Caucasus, in the Russian Federation, where Moscow plans to end the secession of the Chechen Republic and crush proto-separatist movements among other Muslim tribes of the region. Russia requires the support of the two Caucasus republics bordering on the North Caucasus: Georgia and Azerbaijan. Even with Moscow stooge President Haidar Aliyev ruling Azerbaijan, it would be impossible to get Azerbaijani backing for campaigns against North Caucasus Muslims, without first appearing as anti-Armenian by supporting Azerbaijani demands for Armenia to withdraw from the parts of Azerbaijan it has occupied.

Signs of Russian plans for a military conquest of Chechenya emerged simultaneous with the convoy incident. The Russian State Electoral Commission reported that Chechenya will boycott the Dec. 12 elections, and said that it had turned the matter over to Yeltsin for further action. As if on cue, a wave of bombings hit government buildings in the Chechen capital of Grozny, on Nov. 22. Evidently one reason for the large-scale transfer of Russian combat forces from the Kaliningrad region on the Baltic coast to the North Caucasus is preparation of a military option to terminate the secession of Chechenya. The bombings began to create the pretext for such a move. These coming Russian troop transfers will concentrate more Russian forces in the Caucasus, opposite the southeast flank of NATO, than at any time during the Cold War.