

Strasbourg parliament delays decision on Russia's Chechnya war

by Mark Burdman

On Jan. 28, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), meeting in Strasbourg, France, resolved, after what it billed as an “urgent debate” on the war in Chechnya, to postpone any substantive decision on Russia’s conduct of that war until early April, when it will hold its second of four scheduled sessions for the year 2000. The decision to postpone was an anti-climax, after emotional debates and speculation that the PACE was going to, in the words of a Dec. 13, 1999 statement by the Assembly’s Bureau, “put under question Russian participation in the Assembly’s work and in the Council of Europe in general.”

The PACE comprises 582 parliamentarians—not all of whom were there during the Jan. 24-28 session—from the 41 member-countries of the Council of Europe. The Council of Europe was formed after World War II, as the first of the organizations to include a wide range of western European countries; its formation preceded by years, the creation of the European Economic Community. In recent years, it has expanded to include a significant number of the countries that, prior to the 1989-91 period of vast political transformation in Europe, made up the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact communist alliance.

The PACE is an unwieldy instrument for doing anything effective. Its debates are largely taken up in generalized statements, by parliamentarians each speaking for a few moments about “democracy” and “human rights,” without taking into account the real economic and social devastation that many countries are going through because of ill-conceived monetarist “reform” policies, International Monetary Fund dictates, and so on. On certain issues, like the death penalty, the PACE and the Council of Europe play a useful role, in opposing capital punishment, and putting pressure on the few Western countries—Belarus and the United States, for example—where capital punishment is still practiced.

But, on an issue with so many strategic, historical, and political dimensions, like the war in Chechnya, the PACE role is of little use, and in some ways, is counterproductive.

British Lords playing tricks

The decision to postpone any decision until April, is undoubtedly based, to a large extent, on the cynical calculation

that the war, and/or the massive Russian attacks on civilian infrastructure in Grozny, the Chechen capital, will be over by then, and so the Council of Europe will, in the end, have to do nothing. In any case, no formal set of rules, regulations, and guidelines is going to affect what the Russians do, or don’t do, in the Caucasus.

The final PACE resolution approved on Jan. 28, tries to strike a somewhat even-handed tone, between criticizing, on the one side, Russia, for violating “the provision of international humanitarian law” and the European Convention on Human Rights (to which Russia is a signatory), and, on the other side, the Chechens, for “terrorist acts, abductions, hostage-taking, banditism,” and so on. Russia’s right to “preserve its territorial integrity, to fight terrorism and crime, and to protect its population,” is recognized.

However, the broader strategic dimensions of the war are axiomatically omitted. No matter what anyone might think of how the Russians have conducted this war, the fact is that a crucial consideration on the minds of Russian leaders and military planners, is that there has been an extensive *outside* involvement in the Chechen war, teleguided by Anglo-American strategists such as Zbigniew Brzezinski and his friends in London, versed in centuries-old “Great Game” maneuvers against Russia in Central Asia and the Caucasus.

It is not surprising that this element was “overlooked” in PACE position papers and resolutions, given that guiding lights in the formulation of PACE policy toward the Chechen war, have been formulated by senior British operatives. PACE president Lord Russell-Johnston is a man with a British intelligence background in West Berlin in the 1950s. In mid-January of this year, he led a PACE delegation to Russia and the Caucasus. According to Russian and other press accounts at the time, he made statements at press conferences evidently tailored to the audience to which he was speaking, denouncing Russia at one moment, and expressing sympathy with it at the next.

In Strasbourg during the week of Jan. 24, Russell-Johnston was evidently up to his typically devious tricks. During his introductory Jan. 24 press conference, for example, he let slip that he had just met a Chechen diplomatic delegation in Paris, and that that delegation was now in Strasbourg and was receiving private backing from an unnamed “former Polish Prime Minister”—something that would obviously infuriate the Russians, who are already in a tense diplomatic situation with the Poles. Yet, at a Jan. 26 press conference, when a senior Russian delegation of parliamentarians and regional governors were asked by this correspondent whether they would meet the visiting Chechens, a Russian spokesman complained that nobody had informed them of the presence of that delegation.

During his press conference, this correspondent asked Russell-Johnston about outside involvement in the conflict, not only from the Afghan Taliban and related Islamic-extremist elements, but also from high-level Britons, given the

known links of former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and others in her circle, to a top funder of Chechen operations, former Chechen Deputy Prime Minister Khoj-Ahmed Nukhayev. His lordship feigned ignorance of all this, weakly countering with the quip that “maybe Pinochet is also involved.”

During his Russia-Caucasus mission, Russell-Johnston had been accompanied by Lord Judd, head of the PACE Political Affairs Committee, the group which prepared the official PACE position-paper on the Chechen conflict.

Warnings from Russia

Although sidestepped by the PACE, the matter of “outside involvement” was very much on the minds of high-level Russians who were in Strasbourg for the debate. Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov had taken the unusual step of coming to Strasbourg, where he delivered an address on Jan. 27, warning that the Chechen fighters and their allies were bringing “barbarism” to the doors of Europe. A position paper submitted by Ivanov’s Foreign Ministry, charged that “2,000 foreign mercenaries” were fighting on the Chechen side.

Among other Russians in Strasbourg, was Russian Communist Party head Gennadi Zyuganov, who spoke at a Jan. 27 press conference. The day before, regional Governor Mikhail Prusak warned ominously, that what is unfolding in Chechnya is the signpost of a coming wider “North-South conflict.” He pointed out the Taliban involvement in the war, and stressed the support given to the Taliban by Saudi Arabia.

The most violently worded declarations about the wider implications of the Chechen war, were made by Russian State Duma (lower house of Parliament) Deputy Speaker Vladimir Zhirinovskiy. In the midst of the often rambling and sometimes incoherent comments for which he is notorious, Zhirinovskiy told a Jan. 26 press conference that the war was part of a broader attempt to “weaken Russia,” similar to the use by Britain and France, in the 1930s, of Nazi Germany against the Soviet Union. He expressed bitterness against Denmark and the Netherlands, in particular, for being in the forefront of current Strasbourg-centered diplomatic moves against Russia.

Zhirinovskiy insisted that there is a plan by NATO to intervene in the Caucasus by 2002, and to provoke conflicts in Central Asia and along the Russian-Chinese border. He said that such plans were “known to our Defense Ministry and security forces,” and would backfire against the perpetrators.

Russians of more moderate views have told *EIR* that there is considerable resentment in Russia against PACE delegations, particularly those from Scandinavia and the Baltic states, for fomenting an “anti-Russian mood” in Strasbourg, and that, should the PACE actually take moves against Russia later in the year, this would produce an “anti-European backlash” in Russian society.

Obituary

Craxi fought ‘Clean Hands’ attack on Italy

by Claudio Celani

This writer is probably the last person in the world who could be accused of harboring political sympathies for Bettino Craxi, the Socialist leader and former Italian Prime Minister who died on Jan. 19. I was the first, in 1981, to portray Craxi in political cartoons as a would-be Mussolini, a characterization which, in the following years, was copied by more celebrated Italian cartoonists. The fact that Craxi and I were political adversaries should entitle me to expose, as I have for *EIR* and other publications, the infamous “Clean Hands” investigation that targeted and politically eliminated Craxi starting in 1992.

“Clean Hands” was a discriminatory political operation, in the context of a general attack against the traditional party system in Italy, similar to the one being carried out today against former Chancellor Helmut Kohl and the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) in Germany. Craxi was a victim of a political persecution whose pretext was illegal party financing, but whose real target was the institutions of the nation-state.

Craxi died at the end of a long illness which, if not triggered by, was surely aggravated by the psychological effects of his political fate. Although formally a fugitive from Italian justice, his funeral in Tunisia, where he had exiled himself, brought together a crowd of Italian politicians, including representatives of the government. In Rome, the Parliament held a special commemorative session. And in the media, a debate broke out on Craxi’s role in Italian political history, and on the real meaning of the “Clean Hands” operation.

The merits of his policies

Although Craxi’s historical role cannot be separated from his persecution, the fact that he was the victim of a jacobin assault must not influence an objective judgment on the merits of his policies.

Bettino Craxi’s rise to power started in 1976, when he became general secretary of the Italian Socialist Party (PSI). He steered the party on an anti-communist, neo-liberal economic course, and opposed the policy of dialogue between the Christian Democratic Party (DC) and the Italian Communist Party (PCI), led by Aldo Moro, in 1978. After the kidnap/murder of Moro and the failure of the DC-PCI dialogue, Craxi succeeded, in 1983, in becoming Italy’s first Socialist Prime Minister. His cabinets lasted for more than three years, still a