

# After Chechnya: Threats to Russian Democracy and U.S.-Russian Relations

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## **Introduction: All Politics Is Local, All Foreign Policy Is Domestic**

Half a year after Russian tanks rolled into Chechnya, the future of Russian democracy and free markets is under threat. The internal situation in Russia bears a direct influence on Russia's relations with the outside world and the United States. While the world's leaders gather in Moscow to celebrate the victory over Nazism, Russian Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev is calling for the use of force to "protect" Russian co-ethnics living outside the borders of the Russian Federation.

Kozyrev's declarations go beyond mere rhetoric. Russia is introducing its new 58th field army in the Northern Caucasus, in clear and conscious violation of the Conventional Forces Europe (CFE) Treaty, a centerpiece of post-Cold War European security. If Russia is not planning an aggressive action either against Ukraine or its Transcaucasus neighbors, why does it need to revise upwards the CFE limitations of 164 tanks and 414 artillery systems? Why was General Alexander Lebed, a self-proclaimed restorer of the old Soviet Union and Commander of the 14th Army in Moldova, applauding Kozyrev?

Chechnya became the testing ground for the new Russian policy, both foreign and domestic. The people who engineered it, the so-called Party of War in Moscow, are watching for reactions at home and abroad to this version of the "last thrust South." The West is facing its greatest challenge since the collapse of communism: how to deal with the Russia that is emerging from under the rubble. How to ensure freedom and democracy for all the peoples of the former Soviet Union. How to foster security and cooperation in Europe.

## **Democracy at Risk**

The inability of contemporary Russia to reinvent itself as a modern free market, democratic nation-state is at the root of the current crisis. The dangers to the democratic development of the Russian Federation include:

### ***Bureaucratic Empowerment and the Threat of Communist Restoration.***

Ten years after the beginning of Mikhail Gorbachev's *perestroika*, remnants of the Communist Party elite still control the levers of power in the Moscow government as well as in the provinces. They are also in charge of the vast property and natural resources of Russia. Only now this control is not only *de facto*, but it is also *de jure*, through privatization.<sup>1</sup>

The old Soviet bureaucracy, with some additions from the lower levels of society, including criminals, is now controlling economic life in Russia. This extends to foreign trade, privatization, and the issuing of business licenses. Russians often say that government bureaucrats, not entrepreneurs, are the richest people in the land. This ex-Communist, bureaucratic elite

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may have given up Marxist slogans, but it remains deeply committed to state intervention, government regulation, and the unbridled exercise of power. More often than not, Russian nationalism is being touted in place of Marxist internationalism as a cover-up for the same old thing: personal greed.

Unsurprisingly, ordinary Russians are deeply disenchanted with the direction the reforms have taken. The majority of the population has lost interest in the political process, as evidenced by the low turnout in the most

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recent local and regional elections (less than 25 percent).

Support for political extremists on both the left and right is growing. Moreover, an increasing number of voters have cast their ballots for Russian Communist Party (RCP) candidates in recent elections. The orthodox communists are running on an anti-government, anti-establishment

and anti-corruption platform. The RCP is a favorite for the elections to the Duma, the lower house of the Parliament, upcoming in December of 1995.

### ***The Military Wild Card.***

The Russian military is also disenchanted with the reform process. It strongly opposes a Western-style democracy for Russia and yearns for a ruler with a “strong hand.” Military troops voted heavily for ultra-nationalist Vladimir Zhirinovskiy in December 1993. Today, the military is polarized between the majority of the officer corps and a small (and resented) group of generals around Defense Minister Pavel Grachev who are seen as unprofessional and self-serving.

The Russian military feels defeated, and nostalgic for the Soviet period when it enjoyed high status and large budgets. This has been made worse by the war in Chechnya. Tens of thousands of Russian soldiers have participated in killing and marauding citizens of their own country. In the 1980s, veterans of the Afghan war contributed to the swelling ranks of Russian organized crime. They flooded the extremist nationalist movements. This could well be repeated after Chechnya, further destabilizing the feeble Russian democracy.<sup>2</sup>

### ***Authoritarian Renaissance.***

The Yeltsin administration has done very little to promote the rule of law in Russia. It pushed through the 1993 Constitution establishing an “imperial” presidency, with little but an advisory role for the parliament.<sup>3</sup>

Democratic reformers, such as former Acting Prime Minister Yegor Gaidar, Finance Minister Boris Federov, Vice Prime Minister Gennadii Burbulis, Human Rights Commissioner Sergei Kovalev, Ethnic Policy Advisor Galina Starovoitova and many others have been pushed out of the government.<sup>4</sup> Today, the most influential group in the Kremlin includes Yeltsin’s chief of bodyguards, General Alexander Kozhakov, and First Deputy Prime Minister Oleg Soskovets, in charge of the military-industrial complex. Even Yeltsin’s Chief of Staff, Sergei Filatov, has complained that

presidential aides are forced to communicate by writing notes to each other, as their phones and rooms are wire-tapped.<sup>5</sup>

The political role and powers of Russia's historically strong spy agencies are growing. In September 1994, the External Intelligence Service (*Sluzhba Vneshnei Razvedki*, or SVR), headed by KGB veteran General Evgenii Primakov, published its own policy statement, advocating strengthened Russian domination of the whole area of the former Soviet Union, the so-called "near abroad." According to Primakov's agency, Russia must re-consolidate all the Newly Independent States under its tutelage regardless of the West's position on this issue.

On 6 April 1995, President Yeltsin signed the State Duma law reorganizing the secret police (then called the Federal Counterintelligence Service and known by its Russian acronym, FSK—*Federalnaya Sluzhba Kontrazvedki*). This agency, successor to the Second Chief Directorate of the KGB, is now called the Fe-

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deral Security Service (*Federalnaya Sluzhba Bezopasnosti*, or FSB). It has been granted wide powers to conduct investigations and perform surveillance in total secrecy. The scope of its activities has been broadened to cover a wide range of internal security threats from organized crime to political extremism and corruption.

#### ***Threats to the Free Media.***

Veteran analyst Julia Wishnevsky has pointed out the Yeltsin administration's success in controlling the electronic media, especially central television. The provincial media is also under heavy pressure from the local chiefs of administration appointed by Yeltsin to toe the line. In late 1993, a former *Pravda* journalist, Boris Mironov, was appointed chairman of the State Committee on the Press. Before he was fired in the fall of 1994, Mironov funneled huge subsidies to hard-line ultranationalist newspapers. "If to be a Russian nationalist means to be a fascist, then I am a fascist," said Mironov.<sup>6</sup>

Vlad Listyev, Director General of the largest Russian TV network and a popular talk show host, was gunned down in the entrance to his apartment building on 1 March 1995. On 17 October 1994, investigative reporter Dmitrii Kholodov of *Moskovskii Komsomolets* was murdered with an exploding briefcase. Kholodov was in the midst of investigating corruption in the military at the time. Others have been slain while investigating organized crime. Journalists in the regions have been tortured and killed. The print media is coming under increasing pressure, as the Moscow government owns the printing presses and manipulates the prices of newsprint and subsidies to newspapers.

The Russian government is continuing to play a dubious role in the media scene. It refuses to fully privatize TV stations and printing plants. The official *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* publishes anonymous attacks on Yeltsin's opponents, such as media tycoon Vladimir Gusinsky, who has been accused of organizing a "putsch" against Yeltsin. The State Duma has thus far failed to eliminate the right of the government to establish its own media outlets,

while expanding the list of circumstances under which the government is empowered to shut down independent outlets.<sup>7</sup>

### ***The Criminalization of Politics.***

Criminal ties were evident in the recent gangland-style murder of three Duma deputies. Moreover, Russian Interior Ministry experts warn against the ever-growing influence of Russian mafiosi:

among law enforcement organs and other organs of power. After [civilian] dispute settlements by criminals, they are befriended by local leaders of the executive and judiciary powers. . . . For example in the Far East and South of Russia, prominent criminals managed to negatively influence the the majority of organs of internal affairs, the DA's offices, and the local administration apparatus.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, whole areas of Russia are becoming the domain of organized crime. But the Yeltsin administration is notoriously ineffective in fighting crime and corruption. Despite draconian decrees, known criminal figures remain unpunished and free to promote their incendiary political causes.

Organized crime is reaching the highest echelons of power in Russia. In the summer of 1994, a Moscow mafia don, Otari Kvantrishvili, was killed by a sniper's bullet. Kvantrishvili headed a political party, the "Sportsmen of Russia," which was better organized and financed than some represented in the Duma. A prominent alleged crime figure, Vladimir Podatev from Khabarovsk, nicknamed "the Poodle," became a member of the Presidential Public Chamber Human Rights Commission. Podatev is also the leader of a local political movement called "Unity"—the first step to attaining office in a national election.<sup>9</sup>

### ***The Fascist Threat.***

Extremist Russian nationalism, often identified as neo-Nazism or fascism, is another serious threat to Russian democratic development.<sup>10</sup> The nationalists comprise a broad spectrum, from Vladimir Zhirinovskiy's "Liberal Democratic Party," well represented in the Duma, to the National Republican Party of Nicholas Lysenko, who was elected from a St. Petersburg district.

Nationalists also find political support among Gennadii Ziuganov's communists and Vladimir Barkashov's Russian National Unity. Some of them don black shirts and boots, while others prefer suits. Nazi literature is freely sold in the streets of Moscow and St. Petersburg as Russia prepares itself to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the victory over Nazi Germany that cost the USSR alone twenty-six million lives. The nationalists are united in their xenophobia, especially in their hatred of the United States and the West. Some are of a more anti-Semitic persuasion, while others passionately hate dark-skinned "Caucasians"—Azeris, Armenians, and Georgians, as well as Central Asians.<sup>11</sup>

Russian fascists are inimical to Russia's democratic future. They are involved in extensive paramilitary training programs, with the full knowledge and complacent inaction of the authorities. One of their most important leaders, Barkashov, claims to have 10,000 well-trained fighters

under his command. The Russian security services put this number at 2,000. Other organizations, such as "Zhirinovsky's Falcons," the Werewolf Legion, the National Republicans, *Pamyat*, and others have from several dozen to several hundred stormtroopers each.

Unfortunately, Russian law enforcement organs, including KGB spin-offs, the police and even the prosecutor's office, sympathize with and support political extremists. Defectors from Barkashov's organization claim that a deliberate attempt to penetrate the military and security services by the neo-Nazis is under way.<sup>12</sup>

Russian law enforcement and security services, impotent in their fight against organized crime, are equally ineffectual when it comes to the ultranationalists. For example, they failed to keep Alexei Vedenkin, a prominent Russian fascist, in pre-trial detention after he pledged on national television to personally execute Duma Human Rights Chairman Sergei A. Kovalev. After two weeks in jail, a Moscow judge released him on a technicality.<sup>13</sup> Meanwhile, Vedenkin's Russian National Movement has bought a large packet of shares in the "Siren Three" consortium, which will control plane ticket reservations all over Russia and the former Soviet Union.<sup>14</sup>

In St. Petersburg, Victor Bezverkhy, a fascist leader and publisher of *Mein Kampf*, was tried and acquitted. The leaders of the so-called Werewolf Legion who ran a virtual slave farm, killed homeless workers, and publicly displayed their ears, are still awaiting trial.<sup>15</sup> In Siberia, former state prosecutor Nikolai Nebudchikov launched a neo-Nazi Siberian Liberation Movement. Posing as a private security firm, the neo-Nazis murdered several "Caucasians" and ethnic Russians who happened to be business competitors. Nebudchikov reportedly plans to recruit KGB officers and Cossacks, and to assemble a small air force component.<sup>16</sup>

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### **Foreign Policy Crises**

Since 1993, Russia has been conducting an increasingly assertive foreign policy that threatens its immediate neighbors in the former Soviet space. Russia brought pressure against its neighbors to allow Russian Army bases to be located in the Transcaucasus and Central Asia. Russian-Ukrainian relations are uneasy over the issues of Crimea and the Black Sea Fleet. Foreign Minister Kozyrev called for the use of force to defend the newly invented ethnic group, the "Russian-speakers" in the so-called "near abroad." This at the time when Russian speakers in Chechnya, both ethnic Russians and Chechens, were being killed by the thousands.

Other foreign policy and bilateral U.S.-Russian outstanding issues include the sale of Russian nuclear reactors to Iran, Russia's initial refusal to sign the Partnership for Peace agreement, Russia's opposition to NATO expansion, the April disappearance without a trace of an American rescue worker, Frederick Cuny, and the expulsion of American journalist Steve

LeVine. Given this situation, the question arises, should President Clinton go to Moscow, and if yes, what should he accomplish during his visit.

### **Clinton's V-E Day Visit Should Promote Security and Cooperation in Europe**

President Clinton should not be going to Moscow on V-E Day. The president would do better if he traveled to London, not Moscow, for the celebration. The Clinton administration flip-flopped on the V-E Day trip to Russia. First, Secretary of State Warren Christopher declared the trip "highly unlikely," but then after meeting twice with his Russian counterpart in Geneva with no tangible results, Christopher reversed himself. Despite vociferous criticism from Senators Bob Dole, Mitch McConnell and William Roth, as well as from members of the House of Representatives,<sup>17</sup> the mass media, and the policy community, the president decided to go to Moscow.

The Clinton administration has declared U.S.-Russian relations as one of its greatest foreign policy successes. The White House and the State Department now proclaim that no "single event or issue" can derail U.S.-Russian cooperation. According to this view, 25,000 killed in Chechnya, the sale of reactors to Iran, and the torpedoing of NATO expansion should not be seen as damaging. The White House also denies the existence of a "Yeltsin-first" policy, which links the U.S. exclusively to Boris Yeltsin. The Clinton administration appears to be in denial of the current and very real crisis in U.S.-Russian relations.

### ***Clinton's Agenda for the V-E Summit***

Since President Clinton is going to Moscow, he should attempt to salvage the very important relations that the U.S. and Russia have been attempting to build since Mikhail Gorbachev's "rapprochement" with Ronald Reagan and Boris Yeltsin's triumphant visits to Washington. To do so, President Clinton should:

- **Recognize that there is a serious crisis in relations between Russia and the United States.** The crisis is being caused by Russia's inability to integrate successfully into the West almost four years after the collapse of the USSR. Russia is in search of a national identity and falls back on patterns of great power imperialism that were typical of its czarist and Soviet predecessors. As the 1995 parliamentary elections and the 1996 presidential elections in Russia draw near, Russian national "assertiveness" is growing, and is often unpalatable in its expression. It is easy for Russians to perceive America as an adversary due to its size and nuclear might. Russia's own potential for aggression also feeds on its own economic weakness due to half-hearted attempts at economic reform.

- **Stop Russia's nuclear deal with Iran.** The president should offer Russia an opportunity to open its markets in uranium to the U.S. nuclear power industry and for launching commercial ventures in the United States as a carrot. At the same time, the whole range of retaliatory options should be kept in mind as "sticks," including the \$6.6 billion in pending

International Monetary Fund loans, \$2.4 billion in Export-Import Bank loan guarantees, \$1.1 billion in World Bank loans, and European Union assistance programs.

- **Assure an end to the Chechen conflict.** Secure a promise from President Yeltsin to put an immediate stop to military operations in Chechnya. Russia should especially refrain from aerial and artillery bombardments that create the highest number of civilian casualties. Russia should transfer responsibility for resolution of the Chechen crisis to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). The OSCE should begin a negotiation process that would result in new elections in Chechnya.

- **Secure Russia's ascendancy to the Partnership for Peace and Moscow's acceptance of NATO expansion.** President Clinton should reiterate to Yeltsin, Grachev, and Kozyrev that NATO expansion does not threaten Russia, as the new Central European NATO members will not have borders with Russia and do not harbor aggressive intentions against Moscow. The president should secure Russia's joining the Partnership for Peace, which is a key framework for post-Cold War cooperation in Europe. In addition, he should clarify to the Russians that renunciation of the Conventional Forces in Europe treaty is unacceptable and will lead to a new arms race in Europe.

- **Ensure Russia's non-intervention in the "near abroad."** President Clinton should unequivocally state to Boris Yeltsin that Khozyrev's threats to use force in the "near abroad" are unacceptable. The so-called protection of co-ethnics unleashed World War II as well as the current war in the former Yugoslavia. Russia might bring about a catastrophe if it pursues an aggressive policy against its neighbors.

- **Express strong support for Russian democracy.** The president should meet with Russian politicians of various stripes. He also should express support for democratic reformers and human rights activists such as Elena Bonner, Sergei Kovalev, and Yegor Gaidar. In his address to the Russian people, the president should state that democratic reform in Russia is the goal of the West, not support of a particular individual. Behind closed doors, Clinton should clarify to Yeltsin and other Russians that the scheduled elections in 1995 and 1996 matter to the United States, and that their abolition would irreparably damage the relationship between the two countries.

President Clinton chose a formidable challenge when he decided to go to Moscow amidst the current crisis in U.S.-Russian relations. Much of this crisis is of his own creation, as he unequivocally backed Boris Yeltsin and failed to oppose Russian excesses in Chechnya. The president must now rise to this challenge and demonstrate that his "special relationship" with Boris Yeltsin is really working in the interests of the United States.

## Notes

1. Leonid Radzikhovsky, "Nomenklatura obmeniala 'Kapital' na kapital" (The Nomenklatura Has Exchanged *Das Kapital* for Capital) *Izvestiya*, 7 March 1995, 5.

2. James H. Brusstar and Ellen Jones, "Pessimistic, Polarized and Politicized: Attitudes Within the Russian Officer Corps." *Strategic Forum* 15 (January 1994):1.

3. Ariel Cohen, "Russian Constitutional Drafts: How Democratic Are They?" Heritage Foundation *Backgrounders* 949 (30 June 1993).

4. Fedor Shelov-Kovedayev, former first deputy foreign minister, Sergei Aleksashenko, former deputy finance minister, Pyotr Filippov, who served as director of the Presidential Information-Analytical Center, Andrey Illarionov, previously an economic advisor to the prime minister, and others have all been dealt with similarly.

5. Personal interviews, Russian government officials, March-April 1995.

6. Julia Wishnevsky, "Overview of the Media in Russia, 1994," unpublished manuscript.

7. Ibid.

8. Colonel Viacheslav Razinkin, Chief Directorate for Organized Crime, Ministry of Internal Affairs, "Avtoritety bezzakoniya" (Authorities of Lawlessness), *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, 8 March 1995, 13

9. "Kto tam, riadom s prezidentom?" (Who is there, Near the President?) *Izvestiya*, 6 January 1995, 5.

10. For a complete treatment of this subject, see Walter Laqueur, *Black Hundred: The Rise of the Extreme Right in Russia* (New York: Harper Collins, 1993), especially parts 3 and 4.

11. Jews are vilified in the nationalist press as sinister international schemers and carriers of evil. "Caucasians" are referred to as "black infection," "dirt" and "black asses." Central Asians are called "slanty eyed," "yellow peril," and other racial epithets.

12. Personal interviews in Moscow, July 1994.

13. Aleksei Chelnokov, "Kto on, brigadenführer Vedenkin?" (Who is Brigadenführer Vedenkin?) *Izvestiya*, 2 March 1995, 1.

14. Sergei Leskov, "Lefortovetz' Vedenkin mozhet vziat pod kontrol' sistemu prodazhi aviabiletov v Rossii" (Prisoner of Lefertovo jail Vedenkin can take over plane ticket sales system of Russia) *Izvestiya*, 21 March 1995, 5. Serena-3, the next generation Russian plane ticket reservation system is being built by IBM, AT&T, and American Airlines. According to the article, Vedenkin's credentials included letters from Alexander Vengerovsky, deputy chairman of the Duma from Zhirinovskiy's party, and from Alexander Rutskey's Renaissance Foundation.

15. Alla Bossart, "Nationalists Broaden the Borders of Their Existence," *Moscow News*, 24 March 1995, 14.

16. Sergei Ananyev and Vladimir Medvedyev, "I togda Znebudchikov prizval k vooruzhennomu vosstaniyu" (And Then Nebudchikov Called for Armed Uprising), *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, 23 February 1995, 2.

17. See Sen. Dole's speech at the opening of the Nixon Center, 1 March 1995; Sen. McConnell's speech at the U.S.-Russia Business Council meeting, 28 March 1995, and Sen. Roth's floor statement, 22 March 1995. House language is contained in H. Con. Res 25, 7 February 1995.