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Benevolent Despotism: Russia's Role in the Former Soviet Union

The recent political developments in Russia and the deterioration of respect for human rights there form the basis of this issue of *Refugee*. Also examined are the interethnic conflicts in Moldova, Latvia, and the Ukraine. In these three regions, the treatment of ethnic minorities has ranged from local discrimination to government-sanctioned persecution. In all three cases there are internal reasons for the ethnic conflict, however Russia continues to apply additional, external pressures by interfering in the economic and political activities of these newly formed countries.

The consolidation of power in the hands of Russian President, Boris Yeltsin, demonstrated by his recent crackdown on the Russian Parliament on October 3–4, could potentially destabilize Russia and the entire territory of the former Soviet Union, forcing even more refugees to escape the current disintegration of civil society. The dissolution of Parliament on September 21, 1993 and the subsequent confrontation have unleashed the processes of political repression and censorship, and have increased xeno-

phobia among the general population. Yeltsin's victory over the opposition, cheered by Western governments and unopposed by most people inside the country, has bolstered his popular support and has allowed him to formally assume virtually total control over the former Soviet Union.

The articles in this issue repeatedly demonstrate that the increasingly autocratic rule of Yeltsin is allowing numerous violations of human rights to occur and is creating a political environment conducive to state persecution of minorities. It seems obvious that Yeltsin aspires to extend his sphere of dominance not only to rebellious regions of the Russian Federation, but to all other former Republics of the USSR. One of his objectives is to

re-establish the economic ties that existed in the former Soviet Union but under even tighter central control than in the past. Another role in which Yeltsin's government sees itself is that of gendarme of the CIS. Russia's attitude towards the rest of CIS members is clearly expressed by Yevgeny Ambartsumov, former chairman of the Supreme Soviet's Joint Committee on International Affairs and Foreign Economic Relations:

As the internationally recognized legal successor to the USSR, the Russian Federation should base its foreign policy on a doctrine declaring the entire geopolitical space of the former Soviet Union to be the sphere of its vital interests... and should strive to achieve understand-

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ing and recognition from the world community of its special interests in this space (Eggert 1992).

Russia insists on playing the role of peacekeeper throughout the former Soviet Union. In an interview with *Izvestia*, Foreign Minister Andrey Kozyrev stated that Russia was particularly interested in using peacekeeping forces in the "near abroad," emphasizing the danger of "losing geopolitical positions that took centuries to conquer" (Crow 1993, October 8). Experts from the human rights group, Helsinki Watch, have raised concerns about Russia's role as a peacekeeper in the former USSR. They have cited abuses by the peacekeepers in Moldova, Georgia and Tajikistan, claiming that Russian authorities have been providing military and financial support to breakaway groups in parts of the former Soviet Union. Helsinki Watch added that "Russia considerably overstepped the limits of its goodwill mission in Georgia, Moldova, Azerbaijan, North Ossetia and Tajikistan" (Crow 1993, November 2). The Russian military has also been accused of using chemical weapons against Georgians in Abkhazia (UNHCR 1993).

Russia has assumed a partisan position in many regions. It has provided weapons, soldiers and "volunteers" to the self-proclaimed Transdniestrian Republic (see the article on Moldova in this issue), to Abkhaz separatists in Georgia and to Armenia in support of its struggle against Azerbaijan over the control of Nagorni Kharabakh. Ukraine's Foreign Minister, Anatolii Zlenko, has adamantly opposed grant-

ing special status for Russian peacekeeping operations as proposed by Andrey Kozyrev at the 48th UN General Assembly Session (Markus 1993). Similar opposition has been raised by other government officials from the neighbouring countries of the "near abroad."

Increased control over the former Soviet Union is not sufficient for Russia. Yeltsin wrote to NATO leaders urging them not to extend membership to Eastern European countries (Whitney 1993). Instead, he suggested that Russia and NATO together should guarantee the security of Eastern Europe. This suggestion could have been prompted by the military, who, in exchange for its support in helping Yeltsin crush the resistance by Parliament members, wishes to see its former status and prestige restored both at home and abroad (Gray 1993).

The imperialist policy being pursued by Russia has the potential to intensify existing interethnic and territorial conflicts in the former Soviet Union and neighbouring countries. These countries have already experienced the trauma of displacement of people caught in the crossfire. The further concentration of power in Moscow will, in all likelihood, complicate interethnic relations in these and other regions of the former USSR, forcibly uprooting even more people in the coming months and years. ■

Tanya Basok and Alexander Benifand

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