

Western inaction in Balkans war encourages 'Great Russia' expansion

by Konstantin George

The warnings conveyed in March of this year by imprisoned statesman Lyndon LaRouche and former West German military intelligence chief Gen. Paul Scherer (ret.), that a western capitulation in the Balkans would cause Moscow to pursue an aggressive policy in the Baltics and elsewhere, have become reality. During April and May, Russia was already making aggressive moves against the Baltic republics, but the western media did not bother to report the news. By June, however, the Russian moves had become so blatant, in the Baltic, the Caucasus, and Ukraine, that the lid could no longer be kept on.

On June 20, Swedish Radio reported that from April through early June, Russia had conducted three sets of combined forces military exercises, rehearsing a Russian military takeover of the Baltic republics. The last set of exercises was held on June 5-6. The next day, Swedish Defense Minister Anders Bjorck confirmed the reports.

Bjorck said that these acts by Russia irritated not only the Baltic region, "but all of Europe." Soon after the third set of exercises, Russian President Boris Yeltsin met with the military leadership on June 10, and issued a declaration that *all troop withdrawals from the Baltic republics had been stopped*. The main immediate targets of the exercises and the Yeltsin declaration were Estonia and Latvia. Estonian Defense Minister Hain Rebas had protested the exercises, receiving from Russia the standard response that the exercises had been planned long ago, and there were no grounds for concern. In Latvia, too, concern is growing. On June 21, the country's leading daily, *Diena*, quoted Ilgonis Upmalis, head of the Latvian Commission for Arms Control: "Russia has in effect stopped both the withdrawal of units and the transfer of military facilities." Russian-Estonian talks on troop withdrawal have meanwhile broken down.

West seen as a 'paper tiger'

Western interests bear the main blame for the rise of a "Great Russian" imperial tendency in the post-Bolshevik era. Western policy, and particularly Anglo-American financial policy, has been to promote the destabilization of the former Soviet republics. Added to this has been the capitulation in the Balkans to Serbia's aggression, convincing Moscow that

it or its surrogates can do as they please, without any fear of a western response.

As a leading Swiss expert on Russia, who had returned from a lengthy stay there in mid-June, told *EIR*: "The West is seen as a paper tiger not only in Serbia but in Russia as well, and as a result, the Greater Russian or 'Eurasian' tendencies in Russia will grow and be strengthened." He emphasized that the "Greater Russian" dynamic would increase, as a backlash against the threatened "disintegration" within the Russian Federation, a possibility that "should not be excluded." The Russian elite sees a "western destabilization" as behind Russia's problems.

Pressures on Ukraine

The Russian pressure on the Baltic republics is escalating in tandem with Moscow's backing for regional separatist tendencies in Ukraine and Georgia.

In Ukraine, Russia has exploited that country's near total dependency on Russian oil and natural gas, and Russia's leverage with the ethnic-Russian-dominated Donetsk coal miners and other eastern Ukraine strike committees, to enforce a protracted Ukrainian capitulation to Great Russian strategic demands. The word "protracted" is key, because Russia does not wish to undermine its position of strength by pushing Ukrainian capitulation too far too fast, and thus risking a backlash there.

The first phase of this program was enacted at the June 17 summit meeting between Russian President Yeltsin and Ukrainian President Leonid Kravchuk. In exchange for Russian oil supplies, and an under-the-table arrangement whereby Moscow used its influence to have the crippling miners' strike called off, Ukraine signed a communiqué acknowledging Russia's "right" to maintain naval and air bases at Sevastopol and "other points" in the Ukrainian region of Crimea. The highly publicized agreement allegedly dividing the Black Sea Fleet "50-50" was simply for Ukraine a face-saving way to mask another piecemeal capitulation. As the communiqué specified, the 50-50 clause referred to the "fleet and assets," meaning that 50% of everything associated with the Black Sea Fleet—ships, aircraft, naval bases, air bases, ammunition and stores, etc.—would be divided. Aside from

numbers, qualitatively speaking, the 50% "that counts" went to Russia.

The Russian combination of favors and threats has been pursued in the week following that summit. As attested to in statements by the Donetsk strike committees on June 21, the strikes could resume at any time, and in any case, 20% of the mines were still on strike as of June 23. The strike leaders warned that the strike, which had reached the level of a general strike in eastern Ukraine, would begin again unless their economic demands were immediately implemented.

Ethnic Russian regional separatist operations also escalated in the wake of the Yeltsin-Kravchuk summit. In the autonomous Crimea, with its ethnic Russian majority, the chairman of its parliament, Nikolai Bagrov, on June 19 denounced the fleet agreement as a sellout to Ukraine, because it had not codified, in treaty form, Russian base rights in Sevastopol and elsewhere. He announced that Crimea would take further steps in breaking away from Ukraine, by establishing its own banking system and its own customs posts along what he called its "border" with Ukraine.

The same pattern was visible in the eastern Ukraine Donetsk region. On the weekend of June 19-20, the Communist Party of Ukraine held a Congress in the city of Donetsk, officially reconstituting itself, and incorporated in its platform quasi-separatist demands for regional autonomy for eastern Ukraine. The next round of Russian favors and threats, and likely Ukrainian piecemeal capitulation, will probably be in place before June ends. On June 24, Russian Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin was due to arrive in Kiev, and one centerpiece of the talks will be an agreement regulating resumption of desperately needed Russian natural gas supplies.

Russia moves in the Caucasus

Sometimes in political affairs, apparently little actions can establish very big and dangerous precedents. That describes exactly the import of little-noticed Russian military operations in mid-June on the territory of the Republic of Georgia in the Caucasus, and a subsequent Russian government demand aimed at that republic. In mid-June, Moscow set an extremely important precedent for acts by its military forces anywhere on the territory of the former Soviet Union.

The operation in question was the use of Russian Black Sea Fleet amphibious ships to land trucks and escorting Russian ground combat forces in the Georgian-controlled southern part of the Georgian region of Abkhazia (the northern part is controlled by Russian-backed Abkhazian separatist forces). From there, the convoy, escorted by troops and armored vehicles, proceeded inland to the town of Ochamchira, an Abkhazian separatist-controlled pocket surrounded by the Georgian Army, to evacuate some 3,000 Russian civilians trapped there. The evacuation back to the coast and loading of the civilians onto ships for transport to the Russian port of Sochi were all conducted without incident.

The Georgian government was informed of the operation in advance, but was never asked for permission to allow Russian troops to cross its territory, as if the Soviet Union still existed.

Thus Russia set a staggering precedent, showing that whenever it chooses, it will deploy military forces onto the territory of any former Soviet republic, using the convenient banner of "ethnic Russians in danger" as the pretext. The precedent is doubly significant because Georgia, like the three Baltic republics, is not a member of the so-called Community of Independent States (CIS).

On June 21, the ministry-level Russian State Committee for Nationality Questions formally demanded that Georgia grant "real autonomy" to Abkhazia and Southern Ossetia, the two regions of that republic which have attempted to break away from Georgia and join the Russian Federation, which they both border on. The statement, authored by Sergei Shakhrai, head of the State Committee and close adviser to Yeltsin, was a declaration of Russian government policy. Nominally dealing with regions of Georgia, it set an extremely important Russian policy precedent.

The declaration announced that Russia was ready to serve as the "guarantor power" for enforcing the "real autonomy" of Abkhazia and Southern Ossetia. It also contained a thinly veiled threat against Georgia, that "the only way out of the crisis" was through Georgia's complying with Russia's demands. In a further trampling on Georgian national sovereignty, the Russian statement demanded that Georgia become a "federal system," through granting "real autonomy" to these regions. However, the formulation "federal system" meant, even for Georgia, the creation of "autonomous" entities extending beyond Abkhazia and Southern Ossetia, as it implied a return to the pre-independence internal borders in Georgia, which had contained three "autonomous" regions. Besides Abkhazia and Southern Ossetia, there was the Black Sea coast region of Adzharia, containing the port of Batumi.

Since Georgia is not and never was in the CIS, any imposition of Russian demands creating "autonomous" regions and a "federal system" in Georgia, plus Russia's assertion of itself as the "guarantor power" over Georgia, form a dangerous precedent not only for all the former Soviet republics affiliated with the CIS, but for the Baltic republics as well. The demands all add up to Russia establishing a protectorate status over other republics.

This was a common form for Russian expansionism during the czarist era, where the victim of imperial expansion first became a protectorate, and somewhat later was formally annexed. That was how Russia, for example, acquired Georgia the first time, when it was made a protectorate in 1783. Finally, the precedent of serving as "guarantor power" to "protect" autonomous regions, could easily be expanded and applied beyond the borders of the former U.S.S.R., into areas like the Balkans.