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THE INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

POLITICAL CHAOS IN RUSSIA: WILL EQUAL REPRESENTATION MEAN EQUAL RIGHTS FOR FEDERAL SUBJECTS IN THE RUSSIAN FAR EAST?

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Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky
Russia

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Dear Peter,

Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky, and the Kamchatka Region, stayed calm during the October 3rd strife in Moscow. The news reached most Kamchatka residents as they woke up and turned on their televisions and saw, instead of the usual morning news, bland reports about Russian cultural monuments and national parks. "I knew something was wrong when I saw that museum at 8 am," one of my friends told me. "It was just the same in August 1991, and during the invasion of Czechoslovakia. No news is bad news here."

Local reaction, by and large, seemed to be 'oh, no, not again.' There was a small demonstration, or 'meeting' (as Russians say), downtown in front of the Regional Administration Building on October 4th at 6 pm, and even though the weather was gorgeous, only about 150 people turned out to show their political colors. Local political activists and People's Deputies lectured the crowd, and the speakers ranged from articulate to incoherent; there was no consensus, but plenty of emotion. One well-spoken People's Deputy calmly called for national reconciliation and an examination of the root causes of the bloodshed. He was replaced the next moment by a fat man who, waving his fists in the air, fulminated first against Rutskoi and Khasbulatov, and then against Yeltsin. He eventually reached a crescendo, concluding, "Those who started the violence in Moscow, and anybody who starts violence, should be hunted down and killed like a dog!" This seemed to be a signal to the crowd that political passions had reached their peak; near me, two little old ladies began swinging their bags at each other and yelling "shame!" until they were finally pulled apart by some amused militiamen.

The randomness and comparative quiet in Russia's provinces may well turn out to be deceptive, however. While there is now very little consensus anywhere on how to reconstruct the nation, Russia's distant provinces--especially those in Siberia and the Russian Far East--are emerging from their slumber as a political force to be reckoned with as the Yeltsin Administration struggles to reconstruct a nation on the ruins of the Soviet Union. President Yeltsin first called for the formation of a representative body for the provinces, or federal subjects, on August 20, 1993, in Petrozavodsk, Karelia (north of St. Petersburg). The body, known as the Federal Council ('*Soviet Federatsii*' in Russian) was officially created on September 18, 1993, in Moscow.

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Since 1925 the Institute of Current World Affairs (the Crane-Rogers Foundation) has provided long-term fellowships to enable outstanding young adults to live outside the United States and write about international areas and issues. Endowed by the late Charles R. Crane, the Institute is also supported by contributions from like-minded individuals and foundations.

The breathtaking speed of recent events in Russian politics have given the newly-formed Federation Council great potential influence on how Russia is to be rebuilt. When President Yeltsin dismissed the Russian Federation Congress of People's Deputies and the Russian Federation Supreme Court on September 21, 1993, he simultaneously issued Presidential Decree No. 1400, 'On The Federal Institutions of Authority During the Transitional Period.' The decree creates a strong presidential government, with two parliamentary 'houses'. The Federation Council was made a part of the new parliament, and Governmental Duma (*Gosydarstvennaya Duma*) was created as the other house. Together the two comprise the Federal Assembly (*Federalnoye Sobraniye*). While the Duma will feature strong representation by political parties, the Federation Council will have direct representation from each federal subject by its elected and administrative officials. The Federation Council has two representatives from each of the Russian Federation's 88 federal subjects, for a total 176 representatives.

The representatives from federal subjects will exercise a broad range of powers during the 'transition period', including confirming borders between federal subjects, affirming any Presidential declaration of a state of emergency or declaration of war, and use of military force beyond Russia's borders. Other political powers granted to the Federation Council are appointing presidential elections and confirming or impeaching (at the president's initiative) the Russian Republic Attorney General. One commentator from the 'Moscow News' writes about the Federation Council,

"Founded in the [present] conditions, the Federation Council has ceased to be a purely representative body. It now realistically aspires to the status of a 'third column' standing between the legislative and executive branches [of government]. The reaction of republics, krais, and oblasts to the dismissal of parliament and the declaration of early elections testifies to the fact that victory by one or another political force definitely depends on them. This understanding dictates the federal subjects' policy and behavior." ¹

Perhaps the most important effect of subsuming the Federation Council into the transitional government is that, at a stroke, all federal subjects--republics, oblasts, krais, territories, and autonomous okrugs--now have equal representation before the federal government, and with that, an opportunity to gain equal rights within the Russian Federation. The Gordian Knot of legal confusion binding federal subjects has been cut at a single stroke. However, there has been criticism for giving federal subjects too much power through the Federation Council. Writes one Moscow commentator,

"The Federation Council is exclusively regional. And if 2/3 of the Duma will be elected from territorial regions, then the centralist [forces], [which began by] defending the interests of Russia as a whole, will be significantly weakened in the new parliament. This is a dangerous prospect..." ²

This opinion was written before the bloody events in Moscow, and entirely misses the increasingly restive mood among the federal subjects. They are demanding representation of their interests in Moscow, a free hand in deciding their role in Russia's new federal government, and far greater economic autonomy than they now enjoy. The events just before October 3 illustrate just how far the federal subjects are now willing to go to assert their rights. Note that although the Kamchatka Region voted to support Yeltsin's decision to dismiss the Congress of People's Deputies and the Supreme Court, 29 of 58 krai and oblast Congresses throughout Russia did not. East of the Urals, Tuva, Yakutiya-Sakha, and Buryatiya are already republics, while the Primorsky Krai is seriously aspiring to republic status. Five Siberian regions--Krasnoyarsk, Tomsk, Novosibirsk, and Barnaul--are on the verge of declaring themselves republics, and have worked out a plan to create a 'confederation' with Moscow. Novosibirsk further declared that it would block railway traffic to the Russian Far East

as a protest of Yeltsin's actions. Khabarovsk Krai has refused to pay its taxes to the Federal government until it gets the funds delayed by endless bureaucratic snarls.

The confusion and seemingly endless debates in Moscow fed the fires of separatism east of the Urals during the past few months; characteristically, an early September meeting of the Russian Far East Economic Cooperation Council demanded an end to the political crisis and concrete action to solve Russia's economic woes. Some locals say the demands went too far, and actually heated the political crisis to the boiling point. The drastic actions undertaken by some of these breakaway kraises and oblasts in the past few weeks earned them few friends on the Kamchatka peninsula. Kamchatka Region Governor V. A. Biryukov and Pyotr G. Premyak, Chairman of the Kamchatka Region Congress of People's Deputies flew to Moscow on October 4. Mr. Premyak had these parting words for journalists,

"I have to say that to a certain extent, the situation was exacerbated by those chairmen of local Congresses [of People's Deputies] who gathered in St. Petersburg and Novosibirsk, and by those resolutions they adopted: in particular, [the ones] declaring a 'railroad war' and a blockade of the transportation of goods. That couldn't but reflect onto the mood of the occupiers of the 'White House', who saw [in them] imaginary support. Imaginary, because it's not the will of the [Russian Far East] region." ³

As the smoke clears and the rubble gets cleared away, each of Russia's federal subjects now finds itself in the heady position of being able to negotiate its standing within the Federation. The Russian Far East's geopolitical situation--particularly that of the region's maritime federal subjects--makes it unique in its relations with Moscow. Here the main questions will be resource use, foreign trade, and regional development.

The Kamchatka Region illustrates the case. Kamchatka, despite the great strain on its regional budget, has paid its taxes faithfully to Moscow, and has gotten little in return. The Russian Federation government is all but bankrupt and in no position to help. There has been more than a little grumbling in the Regional Administration and the Council of People's Deputies about keeping taxes paid to Moscow in Kamchatka and using them for local needs. Because of the extreme transportation chaos, this winter the Kamchatka Region will likely have to import fuel from Alaska and Canada to keep its fishing fleet running, and its citizens warm during the long winter. Moscow's promises for aid and assistance sound increasingly hollow. Clearly, if the Kamchatka Region is to survive, it must have the liberty, to a certain extent, to make its own economic policy.

I visited the Regional Administration on October 3, 1993, and spoke with Viktor V. Yershov, the Chairman of the Kamchatka Region Standing Legal Commission and Acting Chairman of the Council of People's Deputies in the absence of Mr. Premyak. Mr. Yershov had been awake all night, keeping up with the latest developments in the capitol, and his face was a picture of concern and exhaustion. Still, he found some time to share his views on the situation with me.

"This is just the result of what I call 'the concentration of Moscow's dominance', he said. "During the past decades, the government has usurped power in the country from the people. And so much might and power was concentrated in one city that it led to bloodshed. The situation in Moscow is so concentrated, it led to slaughter--slaughter!--while the rest of the country is quiet. This is because Moscow's government authorities have something to lose. And something to give up. But if all the authority used to be all in one place--the Central Committee of the Communist Party--now it's divided between two camps. So they're warring among themselves, inciting

Muscovites, calling on them to come to the defence of one house or another. And so it will be, as long as all the authority is in one city...in [Russia's] regions we don't have anything to spill blood for, because so far we don't have any rights."

Mr. Yershov said that there is a democratic way out of Russia's dead-end, in "the decentralization of Moscow's dominance, by giving some authority to the territories, including the right to dispose of Russia's wealth and her resources." Mr. Yershov also said he was in the process of drafting a constitution for the Kamchatka Region.

The recent opening of an 11-million dollar fish processing plant in Ozernovsky on the coast of the Sea of Okhotsk represents Kamchatka's strong interest in going its own way. The plant, which will produce up to 300 tons per day of export quality sole, pollock, and cod fillets, was built in just over 4 months using Dutch capital. The venture is 30 percent owned by the joint-venture 'Poseidon', the kolkhoz 'Krasny Truzhenik', and the Dutch investor 'Kauffman Bis', with 10 percent ownership going to the joint-venture 'Holkam'. Profits from the venture will stay in the region. Television broadcasts of the opening stressed that the Ozernovsky plant gives Kamchatka more control over its resource base, and a base on which to build a stronger regional economy. "This is the model for Kamchatka in the future," said Kamchatka Governor Biryukov at the opening. "We're opening international markets for fish processed on Kamchatka, and revivifying our local economy." ⁴

Yours for more liberty and less bloodshed,



Peter H. Christensen

footnotes

¹"The Provinces Attack the Kremlin", Moskovskiye Novosti, October 3, 1993, No. 40 (686).

²"The Federal Assembly: Still Not A Reality, But Not A Mirage", *Op cit.*, 1

³"Saving Kamchatka From Moscow's Passion", Vesti, October 5, 1993.

⁴Kamchatka Television Report, October 2, 1993.