

The state attorney general and the fate of the Russian president

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The April 21 vote in the Federal Council on the fate of chief public prosecutor Yuri Skuratov reveals a new relation of forces within Russia's highest political circles. The Senate majority's refusal to agree to a presidential decree removing Skuratov from office signals the beginning of new political moves against the Kremlin and weakens even further the power base of President Boris Yeltsin. Since the shelling of the White House in 1993 the latter has been one of the pillars of the Russian political system.

The "Skuratov incident" centres on the basic contradiction of the ruling regime: the claim to return the country to the "road of civilised development". Behind a proclaimed "rule of law" stands a different reality: the waging of a virtual civil war against one's own people, criminality and corruption protected by the highest governing circles and the absence of any strategy to assist the country out of its crisis.

Skuratov is one of many chief public prosecutors named in Yeltsin's reform period. The others were all either ensnared in corruption scandals or became victims of political intrigues. Skuratov was a compromise figure, who managed to manoeuvre longer than the others between the different interest groups. The failure to solve even one of the well-known contract murders in recent years and the uninterrupted growth of crime and corruption eventually forced him to take visible steps in this direction. He was supported by the state Duma and by Prime Minister Primakov in those legal proceedings which became the key issue in recent developments: an investigation into the legitimacy of the business activities of Boris Berezovsky, the biggest among the "oligarchs".

The presidential decree over Skuratov's dismissal coincided with the start of investigations into a Berezovsky-controlled company in late January, early February. An article in the *Moskovskii Komsomolets* reporting on the firm "Atoll" founded by Berezovsky,

served as the motive for initiating the investigation. Atoll was situated behind Kremlin walls and allegedly listened into phone conversations of Kremlin residents--among them the "family members" of the president.

In response to those judicial proceedings a video was made public shortly afterwards showing someone "resembling Skuratov" in bed with two prostitutes. The presidential edict that followed was the official response to this video, which supposedly jeopardised the moral reputation of the nation's highest lawmakers.

From then on the Skuratov scandal has dominated Russian politics. Rather than serving to bury the scandal, events which followed--such as credit negotiations with the IMF, the commencement of NATO's bombing of Yugoslavia, as well as ever more detailed discussions over plans to impeach the Russian president--only served to further heighten the whole affair.

Central to the crisis is the impossibility of dealing with corruption at the highest levels without threatening the foundations of the new Russian state. In Berezovsky's case it appears that the most powerful of the oligarchs to emerge so far managed to entangle Yeltsin and his "family" in a network of corruption. At every attempt to clean up Berezovsky's intrigues, pressure bears down upon Yeltsin, forcing him to block every move directed against Berezovsky's personal interests. Whether he wants to or not, Yeltsin has become Berezovsky's political hostage while the latter doubles as an alter ego of the president.

According to the current constitution the dismissal of the chief public prosecutor falls under the jurisdiction of the Federal Council, the highest chamber of parliament. There the vote was put for the first time in mid-March. Then, the majority of the senate voted against Skuratov's dismissal, and the voting outcome hit like a bomb. "The country stands on the brink of a severe political crisis," wrote *Izvestia*, "and the fundamental, if not the only,

political achievement of Primakov's government, political stability, is turning into its opposite. The president, the premier and the majority of Russian politicians, including the closest circles around Yeltsin and Primakov, are suffering an unparalleled blow. One can go so far as to say that the central authority received a ringing box on the ears from the united regional princes."

In reality, the senators were mainly concerned not to get caught up in the dirty intrigues of the Kremlin. Their vote made clear that they did not want to find themselves in an adverse situation with their regional constituents by taking on the responsibility for the actions of a president completely in the embrace of the oligarchs. During the events of February/March the idea circulated in the liberal media that the next round of IMF credit would only be forthcoming if key figures of the Primakov government, Maslyukov and Kulik, were sacked. The sacking of Skuratov could thus be followed by the removal of the entire Primakov government and an unequivocal revenge by sections of the liberal reformers. The regional governors wanted nothing to do with such a suicidal step. On the contrary, the majority feared a new round of reforms carried through for the benefit of international capitalist firms.

The commencement of NATO's bombing of Serbia led to a greatly increased mood of nationalism, which also found expression in both chambers of parliament. In order to secure Skuratov's sacking under such circumstances, Yeltsin felt forced to grant concessions to the regional districts. Shortly before the second vote on Skuratov's dismissal, Yeltsin organised a meeting with governors from 19 regions who were close to him. At the meeting he stated that he counted on their support: "I am relying and hoping on you."

The president presented a proposal to engage in discussions over granting greater authoritative powers to the separate federal parts. He declared he was ready to reconsider the agreements which had previously restricted regional powers in favour of a centralised Moscow. Yeltsin proposed to the governors that they "hand over their proposals, including what you still wish to be granted from the Federation centre". "I will follow this line and stick to it," he vowed.

For the same purpose, the president issued further statements. For instance, he announced the granting of governmental guaranties for foreign contracts and offered to devolve on the regional chiefs' independent foreign initiatives. According to the latest presidential positions, the regions and not the federal centre have priority. This is

to become the strategic line in 1999.

Despite all his attempts, Yeltsin has not been able to achieve his ends. On the second vote on April 21 the majority of senators rejected Skuratov's sacking. This has created a precedent, having never occurred in the history of the "new Russia". Since the presidential edict to dismiss the chief public prosecutor remains in force, Skuratov is unable to carry out his duties. Furthermore, a criminal charge has been initiated against him personally. Effectively a stalemate exists and Skuratov's fate cannot be decided until after the proceedings against him have been finalised.

One thing is clear: if Skuratov goes, the case against Berezovsky will be thrown out of court and those demanding Yeltsin's impeachment will lose an important lever for the continuation of this process, which is exclusively bound up with their concern for Russia's "national security".

In April, while Berezovsky was in France, a warrant was issued for his arrest. The absence of a reciprocal agreement between the two countries meant that the Russian warrant could not be delivered. Berezovsky, however, deciding against the step taken by both S. Stankyeovich and A. Sobchak to remain in Poland and France, returned to Russia. Shortly after his re-entry, just prior to the second Federal Council vote, he admitted himself to hospital "for treatment" and awaited the decision.

The outcome was not in his favour. The senators failed to provide an unequivocal vote along the president's line. In reality, the decision reached by the governors can be interpreted as unfavourable to Yeltsin. The Russian ruling class is aware that, against a background of economic and social crisis, their only chance of maintaining maximum stability for their own circles remains the consolidation of the ruling elites. In this situation Yeltsin is becoming more and more a *destabilising* factor. They are no longer prepared to bolster his authority at every turn. On the eve of parliamentary and presidential elections they are attempting to bring to the fore compromise figures who will not bear the responsibility for the terrible harvest of Yeltsin's reforms.



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