

The government crisis in Russia—a comment

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In the space of a week the chronic crisis of the Russian government once again came full circle. On Wednesday May 12, President Yeltsin sacked his Prime Minister Yevgeni Primakov and in his place named former Interior Minister Sergei Stepashin as head of government.

Three days later, on May 15, a vote of no-confidence by Russia's lower parliamentary house, the Duma, collapsed. If the vote, prepared over some time, had been successful, it would have led to a procedure for removing Yeltsin from power. The deputies of the Communist Party and their allies, who were the main driving force behind the plans for Yeltsin's removal, failed to achieve the necessary two-thirds majority.

A few days later, on May 19, Stepashin was confirmed as the new prime minister with the support of the overwhelming majority of the Duma. More than a hundred deputies from the camp of the Communist Party and its allies, who previously supported the impeachment procedure, now cast their vote for Yeltsin's man. For his part, Stepashin immediately declared he would continue the policies of his predecessor, Primakov. He declared that the terms recently agreed with the International Monetary Fund had to be passed in full by the Duma by the end of next month.

Stepashin announced that he would not accept any more CP members into his cabinet, but at the same time affirmed his “unity” with the Communists and echoed their demagoguery:

He would fight the shadow economy and corruption, he would establish a special commission to recover capital which has been illegally shifted abroad, he would regulate the market economy in the interests of the broad masses and, last but not least, he would draw the consequences of the Balkan war, placing more emphasis on Russian interests by tangibly increasing the allocation for armaments.

The usual explanation for such events in Russia—the supposed power struggle between the presidential camp and the Duma—which is portrayed as a conflict between the “forces for reform” and dyed-in-the-wool communists who oppose a drastic introduction of capitalism—is, in light of this game of musical chairs, totally unsustainable.

Indeed, just a few weeks ago the CP provided the man, presidium member Masliukov, who successfully concluded the talks with the IMF. And now Yeltsin and Stepashin are emphasising national independence and the interests of Great Russia, political themes which have always been the hobby horse of the opposition.

Behind the apparently arbitrary to and fro of positions, a vicious struggle is taking place inside the ruling layers, which are under enormous pressure and increasingly isolated with respect to both domestic and foreign policy.

The measures agreed with the International Monetary Fund will, as expected, unleash further price rises and worsen the impoverishment of broad layers of the population. The tendencies working towards a break-up of the Russian Federation will intensify. At the same time the war against Yugoslavia makes patently clear to the ruling circles that the imperialist powers are quite prepared to employ violence in order to win recognition for their economic and geo-strategical interests.

Pressure is growing on the new Russian bourgeoisie. The issue revolves around which of its representatives will be able to save their hides, i.e., from which corner a new “strong man” will emerge—a development which becomes more and more inevitable as the crisis intensifies.

Yeltsin has for the time being saved his skin, and the Duma is keeping quiet. In a number of respects the latest crisis resembles a cleansing storm, which has established a new temporary status quo, enabling the ruling circles to survive until the next elections in

December and, most importantly, get their hands on the much sought after IMF credits of billions of dollars. However not a single problem has been resolved. Tensions will inevitably increase and it is only a matter of time before the next big conflict. The threat to the working class grows with every round of in-fighting in the continuing political crisis.



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