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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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