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p. 1, 3

A new Fortinbras on Russia's political stage?

The President has accepted all the conditions of the Prime Minister regarding the government members. Viktor Chernomyrdin proved his right to be regarded as figure number two in the Russian political hierarchy.

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At first Chernomyrdin upheld "his" structure of the government. Then, he did not sacrifice any of "his" men. On the contrary, with the appointment of Vladimir Kvasov as Federal Minister, he increased the number of "absolutely his own" people. Thus, he achieved a great uniformity of the government: among the 29 members of the "smaller cabinet of ministers" there will hardly be even 5 potential "opposi-

tionists" to the general policy of the Premier.

The government is a coalition, as previously. The desire of Anatoly Chubais, Alexander Shokhin, Sergei Shakhrai and Andrei Kozyrev to remain surrounded by people who are ideologically alien to them can certainly be explained by various tactical reasons. But, everything seems to indicate that each of the ministers of the "Burbulis enrolment" is convinced of his ability to find a common language with "pragmatist industrialists", and the Chernomyrdin-Soskovets-Zaveryukha triangle won't become for them a "Bermuda triangle". After two years of work "under Yeltsin" and a year of work "under Chernomyrdin" Shokhin and Chubais can hardly be suspected of political naivety. Most likely, they all felt that the situation has changed in the White House, so far as the changed mood of the ruling elite, as a whole.

The epoch of "revolutionary romanticism" has ended not only for the eco-

nomic reforms of Gaidar. It proved to be finished for the President as well. It is hard to say whether he came to this idea on his own, or a part of his closest entourage urged him on to it.

Having given his blessing to the "renovated" (or, rather, depleted) government, the President hoped that finally there would arise at least one structure of the supreme power, free from internal discords, and capable of acting "resolutely and effectively" in the economy as well as in politics. Chernomyrdin of 1993 was a Premier and economic executive. Now he turns into a Premier-politician. He will mainly outline the tactical moves of Russia regarding the ex-Soviet republics. He has been set a clear-cut task: to turn the ex-Soviet republics gradually, step by step, into "remote provinces". It appears that he likes this task. It may be noted that neither Alexander Shokhin nor Andrei Kozyrev go on arguing with him.

(Please turn to page 3)

(Continued from page 1)

Strange to say the least are the assertions that the Premier lacks sufficient support among the leading political forces. It is exactly the other way round — and this is what the President values most of all. The only obvious opponent is "Russia's Choice". But at present it is too split to speak about its "tough opposition" to the government's policy.

As for the next 3-4 months, Chernomyrdin's government has enlisted the reliable backing of the leaders of most regions. There is support in the Federation Council. In the State Duma the group "New Regional Policy" will in due course transform into a mighty pro-government lobby, in its number competing with the factions of the Liberal-Democratic Party and "Russia's Choice". Shakhrai's Party of Russian Unity and Accord (PRUA) is also putting its stake on the Premier. The decision of Shokhin and Shakhrai to stay in the government is not a compromise decision but a long thought-out step.

Finally, Chernomyrdin enjoys the liking of many officials in the President's staff. Tired of reorganizations and unpredictability, they saw in the Prime Minister a "stabilizer".

Chernomyrdin is almost the only politician in the higher echelons of power, who enjoys the increasing trust of the "law-enforcement structures", especially the security

services and the Interior Ministry, to a lesser degree — the Defence Ministry and the General Staff.

Such a balance of forces largely stipulated the fact that the scale finally outweighed in favour of Chernomyrdin and his team, team is the exact word. Without a hurry he consistently placed his men in the key posts. His alliance with Viktor Gerashchenko, Alexander Zaveryukha, Oleg Soskovets, Oleg Lobov is strong because it is based on common interests. It is a different question whether his team will be able to offer an effective combination of economic and political conceptions on the basis of its group interests.

At any rate, the field of its activity is cleared. Three months ago there were serious doubts about the character of the supreme executive power. Also offered was an "almost American model" where the only ruler of the real policy would be the President's staff, and the government reserved for itself purely economic functions. Today we have an "almost French" model under which the government is playing a key role. In the present Russian scheme it balances not so much the parliament, as the President. The Premier stepped onto the stage full of conflicts and "skirmishes", as if today Fortinbras must also put an end to discords.

For the time being the President as well as the Premier staked on cooperation within the executive branch of power. However, the demarche of Gaidar is a signal for the "war". Struggle for a new division of power may break out neither today nor tomorrow. But, sooner or later, the President will be urged to "protect the reforms". Maybe, he is already being suggested the simple idea: isn't the Premier concentrating too much power in his hand?

Judging by everything, the Premier has attentively studied the not-very-successful experience of Yuri Petrov and Yuri Skokov, and does not mean to repeat it.