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Ethnonationalism in the Soviet Union: the Case of the Baltic States

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The bloody crackdown in Lithuania by the Soviet Airborne Troops ordered into that country and six other independence-minded Soviet Republics by President Mikhail Gorbachev on January 7, 1991, shocked the Western world. The deployment was necessary, according to a Defense Ministry announcement, to enforce conscription regulations in the troubled areas, where turnout for the fall 1990 military draft has been especially low. Yet Gorbachev's decision to send the paratroopers into Lithuania appears to be dictated more by political developments in the Baltic republics rather than the officially stated defense considerations. For Gorbachev, who is fighting a desperate battle to save the internal empire and the political structure upon which his own power rests, the conscription issue appears to provide a convenient excuse to bring the most defiant republics into line.

Among all troubled union republics, popular support for national sovereignty has been strongest in Lithuania and the other two Baltic republics of Latvia and Estonia, where the opposition to conscription has been only one part of their broad assertion to autonomy. In the era of glasnost and perestroika, draft dodging has become a political act supported by local parliaments, governments and pro-independence movements. The growth of nationalist sentiments among Russians and non-Russians and the escalation of demands in the Baltic republics has weakened Gorbachev's position within the Soviet leadership by fermenting instability and
complicating his consolidation process. The latest assertion of Moscow’s authority in Lithuania and Latvia in January 1991 military crackdown only underlines the dwindling support enjoyed by the national government and the leadership’s determination to save the union at any cost, including a serious set-back in East-West relations. Gorbachev is willing to pay the price because the survival of the union is closely related to his continued tenure in power and the success of his Perestroika policy.

The Rise of Ethnonationalism

The source of this latest rise of ethnonationalism in the Soviet Union can, ironically, be found in the Gorbachev’s “revolution from above”—the blueprint for economic restructuring of the Soviet Union known as perestroika, coupled with glasnost or openness in the Soviet society—that encouraged the airing in public of pressing questions in all union republics. The result of these policies was an unintended rise of nationalist and ethnic demands in the Baltic republics. In a country whose ideology long enforced silence about national discontent, Gorbachev’s policies of decentralization and greater freedom to speak had immediate implications for general nationality policy. In the Baltic republics of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia especially, glasnost resulted in less reticence to discuss underlying political, social and economic problems. The attempts at economic decentralization since 1985, accompanied by relaxed censorship at all levels, encouraged by the end of the 1980s the emergence of openly vocal national movements in all fifteen Union Republics whose demands vary from greater autonomy to frank demands of secession.2

This vocal and widespread resurgence of ethnic nationalism in the Soviet Union during the leadership of Mikhail Gorbachev has become, in the words of Arkady I. Volsky, who was sent to preside over the shaky peace in the embattled Azerbaijani territory of Nagorno-Karabak3, the national curse because the feeling of ethnic belonging has never been supplanted by a broader sense of Soviet citizenship. Leonid Brezhnev’s official pronouncements of the 1970s announcing the emergence of a new Soviet socialist nation populated by Soviet people forged from the “ethnic mosaic” of the old Russian Empire sounds hollow in the aftermath of the escalating nationalist demands by the ethnic minorities since the late 1980s.4 Even if such “ethnic mosaic” of national minorities were truly possible, President Gorbachev now faces an array of problems—ranging from mass migrations and conflict along the nation’s southern border, to Popular Front movements in critical areas like the Ukraine, to the demands for greater autonomy and push for independence in Latvia, Lithuania
and Estonia.

For Gorbachev, the increasingly assertive ethnic nationalism among the non-Russian minorities of the USSR has emerged as the major conflict area in Soviet domestic politics. The Party’s Draft Platform on Nationalities Policy of August 1989 acknowledged that the nationalities question in the Soviet Union has become exceptionally acute and suggested that a solution to the problems that have arisen in this connection is of enormous importance for the fate of restructuring and the future of the country. Besides placing Perestroika in jeopardy, the peripheral, border location of the vocal ethnic groups make national identity a military and security issue that has the potential to undermine the improved East-West relations orchestrated by Gorbachev. The ethnic unrest poses a threat not only to the cohesiveness of the Soviet Union—a threat in itself to the international stability—but also to the carefully nurtured image of Mr. Gorbachev in the West as a reformer of the Soviet system. The swift military action in Lithuania on January 13, 1991, where fifteen persons were killed by Soviet Army tanks, has already damaged Gorbachev’s image of a reformer as indicated by the suspension and slowdown of badly needed aid to Moscow by several Western governments. The adaptation of the policy by the Western governments occurred despite Mr. Gorbachev’s denial that the confrontations in the Baltic states marked any change in his policies or his abandonment of the reformist course he announced five years ago.

**Ethnonationalism in the Baltic Republics**

The most serious challenge to the cohesiveness of the Soviet Union comes from the national movements in the Baltic republics of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia. In all three republics, popular front movements with commanding public support have pressed for greater economic and political independence, including the option of secession if their craving for sovereignty cannot be satisfied within the present Soviet federation. Under Gorbachev’s policy of glasnost, controversy surrounding ethnic politics has assumed numerous forms and has been given an astounding degree of legitimacy. Protests, strikes, work stoppages, demonstrations and the like have become an almost “normal” part of the political process in the Baltic states. Once this process was legitimized through public discussion, Gorbachev and his colleagues could not claim a monopoly on agenda-setting, especially in areas dealing with inter-ethnic issues.

The early catalyst for Baltic activism and rising nationalism was the concern for the environment. With Gorbachev’s encouragement to seek solutions to the environmental problems
present in the Soviet society, especially after the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear reactor accident in the Ukraine, the Baltic activists quickly seized the opportunity to speak out about the intolerable environmental conditions present in their republics. The blame for the environmental degradation was laid at the steps of the centralized Stalinist drive of rapid industrialization that failed to adequately assess the damaging environmental consequences of mammoth factory projects, mines or energy-generating plants in the Baltic.

Besides the environmental concerns, the rapid industrialization also resulted in a large influx of non-Baltic ethnic groups as workers into Latvia and Estonia and to a lesser degree, Lithuania. The fear of becoming an ethnic minority in their own republic fuels the Baltic activism and nationalism that now spearheads the drive for national independence and secession from the Soviet Union. Of the three Baltic republics, the ethnic composition is the most critical in Latvia where only 54 percent of the total population of 2.7 million is Latvian. In Estonia the situation is similar as 65 percent of the 1.6 million population is Estonian. On the other hand, Lithuanians enjoy 80 percent majority in their state of 3.7 million. In all three republics the national movements that quickly formed by 1988 under Gorbachev’s reform-minded leadership, mobilized peoples toward a recovery of the past, the end of demographic and linguistic Russification, a struggle against environmental pollution, greater local autonomy, republic-level self-financing, and real democracy. 8

In all three instances, environmental activists in the Baltic republics first acted in an effort to gain control over their own environment, resources and economy. In Latvia, it was the Environmental Protection Club, known by its Latvian initial VAK, that criticized in 1986 the construction of a massive hydroelectric station in the town of Daugavpils. The hotly debated project by Latvian activists in the biweekly journal Literatura un Maksla caused the USSR State Planning Committee to mandate an expert assessment of the project which, in January 1987 found it economically unsound and halted the construction in November 1987.

In Lithuania, ecological concerns also became the center of sharp focus by the Movement to Support Perestroika (Sajudis) after the Ignalina Nuclear Power Plant in northeastern Lithuania caught fire on September 5, 1988. By October, Sajudis protests led to a halt in a construction of a third planned reactor block. Estonia as well initiated an environmental movement in 1986 over the phosphorate mining conditions outside of Tallinn that evolved into a democratic movement demanding, among other things, economic autonomy and the supremacy of Estonian law over all-
union rule in cultural and political spheres. The ecologically motivated Baltic movements scored early important victories that led to political demands.

Fortified by their success in the environmental movement, the Baltic activists now enlarged their demands for regional autonomy to include political issues. In their fight to reclaim national sovereignty, the symbols of independent Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia became a powerful inspiration for the Baltic national movements as they actively pressed their demands for greater autonomy. The Baltic drive for independence is also fueled by the fact of their interwar independence that still remains a living memory to many of their citizens. An important goal of the first phase of the national movements was to gain official status for the flags and anthems of the interwar independent Baltic states. By the end of 1988, the communist authorities in the Baltic states granted official status to the flags of independent interwar Baltic republics. By the fall of 1990, hundreds of these flags were carried by demonstrators during mass rallies and protests.

The success of this initial campaign, valued more for it symbolic rather than actual substantive value, moved the Baltic people to press on with their demand for the publication of the secret protocols to the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact propelled now by broadly-based movements known as popular fronts. The facts surrounding the claimed forced incorporation of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia into the Soviet Union during the war and especially the public airing of the secret protocol concluded between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany became an early key demand of Baltic activists.

Until the conclusion of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact on August 23, 1939 sealed their fate, the three Baltic republics enjoyed relative prosperity and independence. The pact’s secret "additional protocol" assigned Estonia and Latvia to the Soviet sphere of influence, while Lithuania was left initially to Germany. After the collapse of Poland most of Lithuania was placed into the Soviet sphere of influence as well. After the international order in Europe collapsed, all three republics, operating under heavy Soviet influence guaranteed by the presence of the Red Army, presented their application for membership in the USSR on July 21, 1940 in Moscow.

Despite the stern warnings from Moscow, the Lithuanian legislature voted on September 24, 1989 to declare the 1940 Soviet annexation of the republic invalid, thus supplying what could ultimately become the legal basis for secession. The vote in 1940 to join the Soviet Union, the legislature said, was not only involuntary but improper because such questions must be submit-
ted to a popular referendum. After many denials the Soviet Foreign Ministry finally acknowledged on February 27, 1990 that it had found copies of a secret Soviet-Nazi agreement that allotted parts of Eastern Europe to the Soviet Union. Vestnik, a new magazine published by the Foreign Ministry, showed photographs of a typewritten Russian-language copy of the "Secret Additional Protocol."

The success of the Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian popular fronts which have only been in formal existence since October 1988 has inspired the formation of similar groups inside the Soviet Union, with activists from various republics coming to the Baltic popular fronts to learn tactics and structure. In 1988 and 1989, the Baltic states offered a safe haven, political advice, and logistical support to movements from other republics still harassed and persecuted by their authorities. The inability of the central government to prevent "spillover" from the Baltic republics resulted in declaration of sovereignty or independence by almost all fifteen Union Republics.

It was this spreading of yearning for independence from the Baltic to other union republic that has awakened foreboding and agitation in the Kremlin. The Baltic movements, which dispute the legitimacy of Soviet power in their republics and demand the right to decide whether they will remain within the Soviet federation, created tensions within the Kremlin leadership and prompted Mr. Ligachev to issue a warning in September 1989 that if the ethnic discord continues, "the disintegration of the Union of the Soviet Republics is inevitable." Mr. Gorbachev also warned Lithuanian activists that he does not plan to be remembered as the Soviet leader who lost the Baltic and attacked the ethnic unrest as an attempt to endanger his proposed program of perestroika. While addressing a special meeting of the Communist Party's Central Committee on September 20, 1989, Gorbachev called the talk of secession, in particular the well-organized autonomy movements in Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia, as "an irresponsible game" that not only interfered with his reform plans, but also could lead to a civil war.

Lithuania became the first of the three Baltic states to challenge formally the legitimacy of Soviet rule, but Estonia and Latvia were not far behind. On December 10, 1989 Lithuania became the first Soviet republic to abolish the Communist Party's guaranteed monopoly on power when its parliament voted to legalize rival political parties. In February 1990, in the Soviet Union's first free multiparty election in seven decades, the Soviet Communist Party was overwhelmingly rebuffed by voters. The loyalists of President Mikhail S. Gorbachev's Communist Party
won only 7 of the 90 seats filled by voters—all managed among the republic’s non-Lithuanian minority. The election results, from a turnout estimated at more than 70 percent of eligible voters, was the most forceful demonstration so far of the prevailing view of the Lithuanian people that the Soviet Union has never held legitimate authority over the republic since it was annexed in 1940. The plan of the pro-independence Sajudis strategists was then to use their new parliamentary majority to name a new president, Vytautas Landsbergis, and formally declare political independence by calling an immediate end to the Communist Party’s vast patronage monopoly over Lithuania’s institutional life. After that, Lithuanian leaders hoped to negotiate with President Gorbachev and the Central Government on the details of a complete break. The official declaration of independence was announced on March 11, 1990.

The boldness of the Baltic national movement caught Moscow by surprise. Reacting to the fast-pace developments in Vilnius, the Soviet authorities sent a column of tanks and paratroopers rumbling past an all-night session of the Lithuanian Parliament early on March 24, 1990 in what witnesses described as the strongest attempt yet to intimidate the republic into abandoning its declaration of independence announced on March 11. Dismissing the republic’s declaration of independence as illicit, Gorbachev justified the troop movements as “part of the national Government’s duty to preserve law in what remains a Soviet republic.” Self-determination, he urged, “is an issue to be settled by mutual agreement under pending constitutional provisions.”

As they are being shaped by Gorbachev officials, however, these provisions threaten to add years of political hurdles to Lithuania’s course.

Estonia has been charting its own, more cautious approach to independence, a slower pace that legislators deny is related to Mr. Gorbachev’s pressure on Lithuania. Gorbachev asked Estonians to retract its initial move toward an independence resolution, approved on March 31, 1990, in which the Soviet Union was accused of illegally occupying the republic for the last 50 years. Concerned about the “domino” theory, President Gorbachev warned against Estonia’s following Lithuania in declaring independence. In a telephone call to President Arnold F. Ruutel from the Kremlin on April 3, 1990, the Soviet leader expressed concern that the Baltic republics’ rebellion be contained. In contrast to the Lithuanian declaration, the Estonian sovereignty resolution approved in Tallinn was not a full declaration of independence, but rather a notice to Moscow that the republic has started on a gradual course of reclaiming independent statehood lost in the forced
Soviet annexation of 1940.

After initial tough talk on Lithuania, the White House softened its tone, making it clear that the United States was not prepared to take the Baltic republic’s side in its test of wills with Moscow. Western European leaders, concerned about wider repercussions of the Baltic crisis, also neither encouraged nor rejected Lithuania’s claim to independence. They avoided any direct criticism of the Soviet Army’s reported violent roundup of Lithuanian deserters in Vilnius. Washington instead called for negotiations between Lithuania and Moscow and said “any other resolution runs the risk of being counterproductive” for Soviet-American relations. During the visit of Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard A. Shevardnadze on April 4, 1990 in Washington, Secretary of State James A. Baker cautioned that a crackdown in Lithuania could wipe out much of the progress made in Soviet-American relations in the last year.15

While the administration downplayed the Lithuanian issue in Soviet-American relations, Congress passed a delicately phrased resolution, which has no legal force, for the President “to plan for and take steps, at the earliest possible time, that would normalize diplomatic relations with the new Government of Lithuania.” American policy is complicated by the fact that even though the United States has never recognized Lithuania’s incorporation into the Soviet Union in 1940, it did sign the Helsinki accords in the 1970s that accepted Europe’s de facto borders in exchange for human-rights concessions by the Soviet bloc. Unless dramatic events in the Soviet Union cause equally dramatic reversal of U.S. foreign policy, the American administration’s policy continues to echo Mr. Gorbachev’s sentiment that “it would be sad and dangerous if an incorrect interpretation would endanger what has been achieved in international relations in recent years.”16

Even though the Baltic republics continued to press their demands for independence during the second half of 1990, the international scene, and the American administration, was dominated by the Iraq-Kuwait crisis. When the conscription issue in Lithuania heated up in October after the legislature proposed that Moscow allow Lithuanian military recruits to do their mandatory service in their homeland, the Kremlin responded that the Lithuanian republic is a part of the Soviet Union, which has a constitution and a law on Universal Military Service. A political solution to the draft question was attainable after Chief of Staff Mikhail Moiseyev offered that 25 percent of all non-Russian draftees will be allowed to serve in their home districts.17 Nikolai Ryzhkov, during his negotiations with Lithuanian President Landsbergis stressed
Moscow’s willingness to meet Lithuania halfway as long as basic principles are not violated. Such basic principles were in question when Defense Minister Dmitri T. Yazov vehemently condemned any attempts to set up military regiments by the republic and suggested that the aim of such units was armed resistance to Moscow.  

Moscow’s resort to force, an instrument renounced by Gorbachev during Eastern Europe’s democratization process in 1989, sowed doubts in the West concerning Moscow’s sincerity and determination to continue its reform programs. The crisis in the Baltic republics is due to the fact that the national movements set the agenda to which Moscow only reacted or not acted at all. Consequently, Gorbachev’s program has constantly been lagging behind the escalating demands of the republics. Starting with a call for “the complete political and economic decentralization” in June 1988, the Baltic activists stepped up their demands for sovereignty and finally full independence by early 1990. Only after the Lithuanian and Estonian parliaments devised plans for achieving full independence did the Soviet leadership propose specific measures for reforming the national-state structure. Kazimiera Prunskiene, prime minister of Lithuania, told Gorbachev: “Imagine how skeptical we are of a new Union whose plan we have not seen.”

The continued demand for Baltic independence can result in dramatic disintegration of the Soviet Union. In an interview in the Soviet weekly Sobesednik, USSR People’s Deputy Yurii Afanasyev, a rector of the Moscow Historical-Archival Institute who supports Baltic drive for sovereignty, predicted that the Soviet Union will be transformed into a union of sovereign states. According to him, the disintegration of the Soviet Union can now be stopped only “by force,” an act which would “delay for decades the establishment of normal neighborly relations” between Russia and the other republics. Similarly, he argues, Gorbachev’s ploy of attempting to hold the USSR together through the instrument of the newly established “strong presidency” is also doomed: “The idea of a democratic dictatorship is not destined to be realized.”

Alexander Solzhenitsyn also offers vision of a Russian future in his programmatic brochure, “How Shall We Reconstitute Russia?” published in two major Soviet newspapers. Solzhenitsyn says clearly that the Soviet Union has no future as a single state. Centrifugal developments and separatist tendencies, he argues, have advanced to a point where the union can be held together only at the cost of enormous bloodshed. Russia, Solzhenitsyn contends, should herself take the initiative to disband an empire that is sapping her strength and in fact killing her. Most Russian nationalists, however, insist on the preservation of the
territorial integrity of the USSR. Organizations such as Nash Sovremennik, Molodiya Gvardiya, or Moskva have suddenly turned into supporters of “true federalism.”

American policy toward the Soviet Union is faced now with a fundamentally important fact: The Soviet Union of the past is ceasing to exist. What will replace the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republic will have profound influence on the development of the people within the Union as well as on the development of regional and international relations. The nationalist demands of the Baltic states—political independence from the Soviet Union—strikes at the heart of American policy that aims to promote democratic transformation of the Soviet Union at the same time as giving unconditional support to Gorbachev and his policy of perestroika.

While Gorbachev has been highly successful in convincing an international audience of the existence of a global community confronted with common problems and sharing all-human values and interests, domestically, he has been unable to further a sense of commonwealth and of a common future within a Soviet federation. The Kremlin’s inability to stop or at least slow down the Baltic call for separatism pushed Gorbachev to his last-ditch effort to keep the Soviet Union intact by calling for a national referendum on the nation’s future scheduled for March 17, 1991. Regardless of its outcome, the future of the Soviet Union depends more on a quick and equitable resolution of its systemic crisis.

As the political developments in the era of glasnost and perestroika already indicate, a renewal of the federation system is unlikely to satisfy all ethnic problems and demand and may actually increase the nationalistic tendencies in the Baltic states and other union republics. Moscow’s continued inability to resolve the national demands of the Baltic republics and other ethnic groups in the Soviet Union within the framework of the present federal structure and proposed economic restructuring can lead not only to chaos and the disintegration of the Soviet Union into its constituent republics, but also to deterioration in East-West relations and resumption of international hostilities.

FOOTNOTES

1 According to the Defense Ministry, draft evasion figures released for the fall 1990 conscription indicate turn-out rate of 12.5% in Lithuania, 24.5% in Estonia, 25.3% in Latvia, 10% in Georgia,
28.1% in Armenia, and 58.9% in Moldavia. Figures for the Ukraine, the other troubled region, were not released. 

2Currently, the Soviet Union includes the huge Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR). The other fourteen non-Russian union republics, the historical homelands of large ethnic minorities, form an outer belt around the RSFSR in the west and, in part, in the south. They are, in alphabetical order: the Armenian SSR, Azerbaijan SSR, Byelorussian SSR, Estonian SSR, Georgian SSR, Latvian SSR, Lithuanian SSR, Kazakh SSR, Kirghiz SSR, Moldavian SSR, Tajik SSR, Turkmen SSR, Ukrainian SSR, and Uzbek SSR.

3In February 1988, tens of thousand of Armenians marched through the streets of Yerevan in support of their compatriots in NagornoKarabakh in neighboring Azerbaijan, who wished to join their region to the Armenian Republic. The suppressed ethnic empathy between the two groups tragically flared up when after Azerbaijani youth went on a rampage in Sumgait in the last days of February and killed Armenians indiscriminately.

4The Current Digest of the Soviet Press (Columbus, Ohio—hereafter, CDSP), Vol. 23, No. 14, p. 3.
9The Baltic states of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia claimed their independence in 1918 after the simultaneous collapse of the Russian and German empires during World War I. In 1920, the three Baltic republics concluded peace treaties with the Soviet state (Estonia on February 2; Lithuania on July 12; and Latvian August 1) that formally renounced any Russian claims to sovereignty over their territories.
11The Soviet-German nonaggression pact was signed by Stalin’s foreign minister, Vyacheslav M. Molotov, and Hitler’s top diplomat, Joachim von Ribbentrop, on August 23, 1939.
12A draft of Soviet law on secession defines the disengagement procedures, which include a referendum requiring a two-thirds majority of the population in the republic to vote in favor of the independence, a five-year waiting period and possible huge compensatory payments to the Union by the seceding republic.
22 Stephan Kux, op. cit., p. 6.