

Ukrainian freedom movement gathers strength, backed by Polish Solidarnosc

by Oksana Polischyk and Luba George

“If we lose the Ukraine, we lose our head.”—Vladimir I. Lenin

Two singular events in September—the founding of the Ukrainian national movement supported by Poland’s Solidarnosc, and the move toward independent trade unions by Ukrainian strike committees—have underscored that Mikhail Gorbachov’s nightmare of a resurgent Ukrainian national movement has become reality. This has raised to a qualitatively new threshold the crisis wracking the Muscovite Empire. These events in the Ukraine, coming in tandem with the formation of a Solidarnosc government in neighboring Poland, have set off alarm bells in the Kremlin. For Moscow, the specter has arisen of Poland and the Ukraine, its two most populous colonies (38 and 51 million inhabitants, respectively), simultaneously going out of control.

The importance of the Ukraine was underscored this year by Gorbachov during a visit to the capital city of Kiev and the Donetsk coal basin. “You can only imagine what would happen if there were disorders in the Ukraine. . . . Fifty-one million people live here. The whole fabric of the Soviet Union would be amiss, and *perestroika* would fail,” he said.

Rukh movement defies Moscow

On Sept. 8, some 1,500 delegates (representing 22 districts, or *oblasti*) convened in Kiev for the founding congress of Rukh, Ukraine’s new mass national movement. In defiance of Moscow, the hall was filled with blue and yellow Ukrainian national flags. The delegates demanded the removal of the Ukrainian Communist Party leadership, beginning with the party secretary and Politburo member Vladimir Shcherbitsky; an end to russification; making Ukrainian the official state language and the language of the school system; the flowering of Ukrainian literature and culture; and finally, the immediate legalization of the Ukrainian Catholic Church, banned by Stalin in 1946.

Under Shcherbitsky, the Ukraine has gone through two decades of the most severe post-Stalin repression and russification imaginable. Thousands of Ukrainians have been arrested and subjected to brutal KGB actions; the Ukrainian language has been replaced by Russian in even many elementary schools; and special interior troops continuously

intervene to disrupt even pro-*perestroika* demonstrations.

At the Kiev congress, Vladimir Chernyak, a member of the Soviet Parliament, declared angrily: “In the Ukraine, officials see all democratization as destabilization.”

The Rukh Congress was no regional event, but an occurrence of international strategic importance. The conference was attended by a delegation from Poland’s Solidarnosc party—and now government—which declared to those assembled that Polish Solidarnosc was “watching with joy the rebirth of Ukraine.”

In the words of one of Solidarnosc’s most senior leaders, Adam Mischnik, who attended the congress and received thunderous applause: “Long live the free, just Ukraine! Solidarnosc is with you! Poland is with you! May there be a free, democratic, and sovereign Ukraine!”

Miners press their demands

The second event marking the decisive turning point in the upsurge of the Ukrainian national movement was the Sept. 11 assembly in Moscow of the leaders of the July coal miners’ mass strikes in the Ukraine and Siberia.

The strike committee leaders have already become the union leaders for the coal miners of the Ukraine and the Kuznetsk Basin of central Siberia. In Moscow, they presented the Soviet Union’s government and official trade unions with an ultimatum: Either the strike committees are recognized as the new trade union leaders of the U.S.S.R. coal miners, or they will formally proclaim the founding of new, independent Ukrainian and Russian trade unions, modeled on Poland’s Solidarnosc. In actual fact, the Ukrainian strike committees for the coal miners in the Donetsk Basin, the Lvov area, and other regions of the Republic are already functioning as such an independent, Solidarnosc-style trade union.

Indeed, the Solidarnosc delegation that attended the Rukh Congress came with the specific purpose of forging political alliances with the miners from Donbass—the Ukrainian coal-mining region in the Don River basin, which exploded in mass strikes earlier this year. In meetings with the Donbass miners, Mischnik advised that the unions must make political demands and join the Rukh movement. “No revolution can

be successful if the workers stand alone or if the intelligentsia stands alone," said Petro Poberezhny, a leader of the Donetsk mining brigade. In talks with Solidarnosc leaders, the miners also received advice on how to finance strikes, how to avoid strikebreaking by police, and how to get media coverage.

The July strikes were settled when Moscow agreed to meet the strikers' demands for higher wages, more benefits, better housing, and above all better supply of food and other consumer goods. The Soviet government had pledged that all components of the package deal would be implemented by Oct. 1. The strike committees suspect that Moscow will not fulfill all their demands by that date, and have warned that a new strike wave would erupt as early as October.

According to Poberezhny, "We came here [as delegates to the Rukh Congress] to play a pivotal role as workers. . . . This popular front cannot be stopped now by anything."

A new strike wave will not be confined, as it was in July, to the coal miners. Ukrainian sources expect workers from key sectors of heavy industry and rail transport to join, thus potentially creating the biggest mass strikes in the Ukraine since 1904-05.

Alarm in Moscow

It did not take long for the Kremlin leadership to respond in emergency fashion to these developments, coming on top of the consolidation of mass popular pro-independence movements in the three Baltic republics of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania:

Sept 8. The Soviet Politburo convened and announced that the long-postponed Central Committee plenum to deal with the urgent question of national unrest would be held in September. On Sept. 13, Moscow announced that the date had been set for Sept 19.

Sept 8. Politburo member Yegor Ligachov, speaking in Frunze, the capital of the Central Asian republic of Kirgizia, sounded the most dramatic alarm in public to date. A Radio Moscow broadcast that day commented: "Yegor Ligachov declared that the Soviet Union faces the danger of disintegration due to inter-ethnic conflicts."

Sept 9. President Mikhail Gorbachov appeared on Soviet television to stress the "necessity" of solving the Soviet Union's "national question." He didn't mention the Ukraine as such, but he didn't have to. Those who listened knew exactly what he meant when he stressed the danger of a new strike wave. Gorbachov warned that strikes entailed "consequences for Soviet society" which "could be very dangerous."

'Autonomy' vs. 'independence'

The proceedings at the Rukh Congress documented dramatically how far and how fast the dissolution process in the Russian Empire has proceeded. This can best be seen by comparing the political evolution of the Baltic Popular Front movements, with the Ukrainian one.

The Baltic Popular Fronts were created in 1988 and were allowed to exist as safety valves to deflect popular motion away from the goal of national independence, and into the limited goal of an "autonomous" status within the Soviet Union. It took a good year for this state of affairs to end. Since August, at the latest, the Popular Fronts themselves have been forced to join the overwhelming pro-independence sentiments of the Baltic populations.

What is striking in the Ukrainian case is not only that such a process will also occur, as the Rukh imperceptibly, but decisively over the course of 12-18 months shifts from supporting "autonomy" to independence. Unlike in the Baltic, where at the creation of the Popular Fronts, their entire leadership was opposed to independence, in the case of Rukh, a pro-independence minority group, led by Levko Lukyanenko, already sits in the leadership body. Lukyanenko, who has spent 15 years in prison and labor camps, delivered a landmark pro-independence speech to the Kiev congress.

The point that a large minority of Rukh is already pro-independence, was underscored in a Sept. 14 Radio Moscow interview with Rukh's pro-autonomy chairman, Ivan Drach. Asked whether Rukh had "Ukrainian nationalists" in its membership, Drach replied, "There are nationalist extremists in our movement who want the Ukraine to leave the Soviet Union, but they are not a majority."

The pro-independence grouping led by Lukyanenko is indeed nationalist, but in no way extremist, as clearly demonstrated by Lukyanenko's speech. He stressed Ukraine's independence as "the goal," adding that the forces to ensure this goal being reached "must first be organized and built up." During Lukyanenko's recent tour in the West, he stressed that the cherished goal of independence could only be reached through carefully planned and coordinated joint strategy and actions in Poland, the Baltic republics, Belorussia, and the Transcaucasus. He said: "We cannot go too far, too fast, on any one front, in any one republic. . . . We must avoid thoughtless, rash actions, provocations, and being misled into inter-ethnic conflicts, because that would lead to crushing defeats."

According to Ukrainian sources, it is irrelevant that the majority of those present did not support Lukyanenko. In the three Baltic states, just a year ago, *no one* at the Popular Front conference supported independence.

Moscow understands—and fears—this dynamic only too well. It was what the Politburo's chief of internal security, Viktor Chebrikov, was referring to in a Sept. 7 speech, excerpted on Soviet television, when he said, "We have to nip nationalist extremist activities in the bud."

The Ukrainian KGB went into a crisis session right before the Rukh Congress opened. *Izvestia* of Sept. 8 reported that the KGB and police had met in Kiev, and called for a crack-down on the "anti-Soviet activities" of the informal organizations which it said were guilty of "exaggerating inter-ethnic hostility."