

New nationalist challenge to Gorbachov on eve of summit

by Konstantin George

Mikhail Gorbachov finds himself confronted with the greatest domestic political crisis he has ever had to face, as he prepares for his May 31-June 3 summit talks with President Bush in Washington. The stage for this crisis—which will not be in the Baltic, in Transcaucasia, or Central Asia, but in Russia itself—has been set by the resurgence of “Russia First” nationalism in the Russian Federation.

Grabbing the international headlines was the power bid of maverick populist Boris Yeltsin, who on May 26 was narrowly defeated in his bid to become the new President of the Russian Federation. His speech to the Russian Congress of People’s Deputies set the tone for the “new” nationalism, and even his opponents in the election race picked up the themes which he established. Since no candidate emerged with an absolute majority, a new election is expected to take place during the last week in May.

The Russian Congress of People’s Deputies, the parliament, is also expected to pass overwhelmingly a declaration of Russia’s full political and economic sovereignty. This does not mean that Russia will follow the Lithuanian example and leave the U.S.S.R.; quite the contrary. It means that Russia will give itself the power to veto any Soviet federal laws or decrees. Although this Russian move presents Gorbachov with the greatest challenge ever to his rule, it could also afford him the chance to proclaim himself squarely on the side of Russian nationalism, as the only means of securing his power.

Yeltsin’s power bid

On May 22 in the Russian parliament, with Gorbachov sitting in the gallery observing, Yeltsin gave a 10-minute address, presenting, to tumultuous applause from the deputies, a 14-point program for Russian sovereignty, as a bill to be voted and passed by the Russian parliament. “All existing

laws, statutes, and decrees,” he said, “including those of the highest legislative bodies of the U.S.S.R., are valid on the territory of the R.S.F.S.R. [Russian Federation] only in so far as they do not contradict this declaration, the Constitution, and the legislation of the R.S.F.S.R.”

Yeltsin’s program included the following planks: Russia’s complete economic independence; the creation of Russian statehood, with Russia to become politically sovereign, and the creation of a separate Russian citizenship; “complete political pluralism with a multi-party system regulated by law.”

In a separate draft declaration, Yeltsin proposed that Russia take the initiative in convening a conference of all 15 Soviet republics to draft a “new Union Treaty . . . on an equal and voluntary basis,” to replace the 1922 Treaty of Union which created the U.S.S.R. Yeltsin added that the new treaty would redefine relations between Russia and the U.S.S.R., including with the Soviet President (namely, Gorbachov).

Yeltsin concluded with a “declaration of principle” for “unity and consensus . . . at this difficult and tense time in our history.” But Russia’s “independence,” as Yeltsin understands it, does not mean that Russia would surrender its hold over other republics, as he emphasized by rejecting any idea of “confrontation with the Center,” or of “Russian separatism.” His intent is not to accelerate the breakup of the empire, but a desperate short-term strategy of making enormous concessions to national unrest, to mollify and preempt the storms that have hit the non-Slavic republics, and the far bigger storms that will soon hit in the Slavic heartland.

The coming to the fore of a nationalist-populist Yeltsin opens the floodgates for a resurgence of Russian nationalism. This is intertwined with the panoply of Russian mass movements, or movements with mass support potential, ranging

from the movement Democratic Russia, which wants to revitalize Russia by aligning it with the democratic revolutions of Eastern Europe, to the outright fascistic, virulently anti-Semitic movements of the Pamyat stripe, and, in between, recently constituted right-wing political parties, such as the rebirth of the pre-revolutionary Constitutional Democratic, or "Cadet" party, and even a newly formed Association of the Nobility and a Monarchist Party.

The core of Yeltsin's policy can be summarized in the expression, "No strong Russia, no empire." Further, Yeltsin says, a "strong Russia" is impossible unless the present system is overhauled. On this basis, his presentation received an enthusiastic endorsement from the next speaker at that day's session, Gen. Col. Dmitri Volkogonov, head of the U.S.S.R. General Staff's Military History Institute. Volkogonov minced no words in proclaiming the end of the Bolshevik era:

"Our 70-year historic experiment has ended—in historic failure. . . . If we had a strong Russia, then we would have none of the problems we now face in the Baltic, in Transcaucasia, or Central Asia." Volkogonov declared that Yeltsin's proposals "could form the good basis for national harmony."

Tightrope act

Gorbachov had to respond to these direct challenges, and respond he did the next day, in a speech to the Russian Congress of People's Deputies. He attacked Yeltsin in strong language. Yet the attack had to be couched in such a way that, at least verbally, Gorbachov would appear to be as great a champion of Russian sovereignty as Yeltsin, and an even stronger exponent of keeping the U.S.S.R. intact. Finally, Gorbachov had to mix his attack with at least partial praise for Yeltsin's proposals, as the Soviet leader cannot afford to burn his bridges to the man likely to be the next President of Russia.

Contrary to the one-sided accounts in Western media, which only focused on the anti-Yeltsin statements, Gorbachov was careful not to reject Yeltsin's 14 points out of hand. As reported by Radio Moscow May 24, he told the deputies that he found Yeltsin's proposals "interesting," citing the goal of establishing Russia's sovereignty, though "needing improvement." "Russia must control its own resources," he said. He announced, as Radio Moscow stressed, "that he expects from the Russian Federation proposals for a new Union Treaty," thus conceding that the initiative for what is planned as the future configuration of the Soviet Union should come from Russia. Gorbachov conceded "the need" for Russia to set up its own Communist Party.

Gorbachov condemned that part of Yeltsin's plan which would decentralize Russia into several autonomous regions, saying this would weaken Russia and lead to "principalities, antagonism, and internecine strife." Gorbachov concluded by warning that Yeltsin's plan could lead to "the collapse of the union."

Referendum on economic reform

The other main event of that day in Moscow was the press conference given after the Presidential Council meeting that finalized the economic reform package, by U.S.S.R. First Deputy Prime Minister Yuri Maslyukov. He announced that a national referendum would be held on the economic reform package after it was finalized by the U.S.S.R. Supreme Soviet. This was an unprecedented admission of how close mass eruptions are in the Slavic core. The Soviet leadership preferred the risk of being humiliated in a referendum, to going ahead with price rises and igniting mass protests and strikes.

Maslyukov put it squarely: "The population will have to make the choice. If the people vote in favor, we think that in two years they will notice improvement," though for these two years, the plan would force a lowering of living standards. Maslyukov emphasized that the plan was no copy of "shock therapy," such as has been applied in Poland, saying that "shock therapy" would lead to a "steep fall in production" and "unmanageable unemployment . . . to the brink of an economic crash."

Compared to the uncontrolled "floating" of prices that has occurred in Poland, the Soviet planned price rises, at least as revealed so far, are quite modest. One of the plan's most crucial components has already been decreed and will not be dependent on the referendum—a 95% increase in procurement price for grain paid by the state to collective, state, and private farmers. The existence of a very low procurement price for grain, below the cost of production, was responsible for the collapse in state procurement in 1988 and 1989, with the resulting enormous food shortages in the state shops.

Asked what would happen if the electorate voted against the economic reform package, Maslyukov said, "It is my opinion that the government should resign."

The "government," of course, does not mean Gorbachov and the Presidential Council; it means the U.S.S.R. Council of Ministers, chaired by Prime Minister Nikolai Ryzhkov, or, the next round of personalities and institutions that Gorbachov will throw to the wolves.

The entire economic reform package could have been enacted by presidential decrees, the means which Gorbachov had threatened back in March to employ. Gorbachov at present, however, has shied away from using his presidential powers on such explosive issues, in fact on most domestic matters, preferring that inevitable popular backlashes strike at other figures and institutions. Thus, even the post-May 1 *lèse majesté* laws—put forward by Gorbachov after the huge May Day Moscow demonstration which had attacked him, laws which provide for huge fines and prison or labor camp sentences ranging from three to six years for anyone "guilty" of "insulting" the U.S.S.R. President verbally or in writing—were not issued by presidential decree, but were passed by the Supreme Soviet.