

Five non-Russian republics declare their sovereignty

by Konstantin George

History was made in the Soviet Union June 19-24, not by the highly publicized June 19-23 Russian Communist Party conference, but by the sovereignty declarations by the Communist Party leaderships, organizations, and parliaments of five non-Russian republics including the three biggest: Ukraine, Belorussia, and Uzbekistan. These moves by the same party leaderships which had furiously resisted any moves toward sovereignty, were the result of a policy shift by Gorbachov and the Presidential Council leadership forced on the Kremlin by the growing popular demands for independence or autonomy from Moscow Center.

The sovereignty declarations mean that the Soviet Union will soon no longer exist in its *present form*. What will emerge will be a mix of "sovereign" federated republics, confederated republics, and independent republics, with at least one common denominator: The end of Communist Party rule through the institution of the Communist Party.

The dissolution of the empire along nationalist lines has produced a debate within the Soviet leadership, analogous to that produced by the revolutions in Eastern Europe: Crack down with military force against populations who have "lost their fear" of the Kremlin and risk armed popular insurrections in several republics—in effect, many "domestic Afghanistans"; or, sacrifice the *ancien régime* form of empire for another form of empire. Moscow has chosen the latter course.

The June developments which forced this decision toward a new form of empire included the election of Boris Yeltsin, the outspoken champion of Russian sovereignty and a new, post-Bolshevik empire, to the presidency of the Russian Federation; the June 12 declaration of sovereignty by the Russian Parliament; and the speech delivered to the U.S.S.R. Supreme Soviet on the same day by Gorbachov announcing the coming replacement of the U.S.S.R. with a new "Union

of Sovereign States" containing federated, confederated, and more independent components.

Ukraine forced the turn

The turn in policy by Gorbachov does not reflect benevolence or generosity towards the non-Russian Captive Nations. Pro-independence developments in the largest non-Russian republic, Ukraine, with 51 million persons, forced the Moscow shift. The outlook of Ukrainians falls into roughly three categories: those who demand immediate independence, who are supported by the overwhelming majority in the western Ukraine, and are now beginning to gather support in central and eastern Ukraine; those who demand the gradual, evolutionary achievement of independence—the population of central and eastern Ukraine being roughly evenly divided; and those willing to remain affiliated to Moscow, albeit only in a loose, confederated form. In the autumn of 1989, the majority of Ukrainians were in favor of settling for autonomy. Today, the majority favor true independence.

This change in popular mood is not confined to whispered discussions in dark places. The new Ukrainian Parliament, elected in March with one-third of its deputies from the National Movement, Rukh, resounds with calls for Ukraine's independence which are printed in the Ukrainian media. A dramatic call was issued on May 31 by Rukh deputy Pavlychko, who began by describing bolshevism as "neo-colonialism built on Czarist foundations of dictatorship, which has transformed the pre-revolutionary prison of nations into a post-revolutionary concentration camp of nations." Pavlychko called on his fellow Ukrainians to exercise "the will of history itself, to bring down the last empire on Earth." He rejected as a "cover" and "masquerade" the Kremlin's policy for the "renewal of the federation," and demanded the "gradual,

evolutionary, peaceful, but continuous drive towards a real independence of the country.”

Moscow's 'Damascus Road'

With developments moving so quickly, Moscow had to ensure that concessions to Ukrainian national sentiments were made by the Ukrainian Party Congress which opened on June 20. The alarm from Moscow Center was sounded on June 18 in a statement issued by Grigori Revenko, the token Ukrainian on the Gorbachov U.S.S.R. Presidential Council, who declared that “pro-independence impatience is growing enormously, especially in western Ukraine.”

On June 20, while the Western media were focused on the Russian party conference in Moscow, the Ukrainian Communist Party congress opened. It was the first Ukrainian party congress in history where every speaker, including Ukrainian party head Vladimir Ivashko, spoke in Ukrainian. The party congress was a spectacle of overnight conversions by the party leadership, from Ivashko on down, to the cause of Ukraine's sovereignty. The *Wendehals* (wryneck) phenomenon, so familiar to East Germans, Czechoslovaks, Hungarians, and Poles, had come to Ukraine.

Ivashko personally presented the declaration of sovereignty resolution, which passed with near unanimity. It was not an independence declaration, but it asserted for Ukraine something approximating full domestic autonomy. It granted Ukraine “all rights and powers . . . except those which Ukraine voluntarily concedes to the Center.” It echoed the June 12 Russian sovereignty declaration, stating that the laws of Ukraine have precedence over those of Moscow within the republic. The speed of the political transformation can be seen in this declaration. A month ago, such a vote by a Ukrainian party congress could only have been forced at gunpoint.

The personnel changes made at the Ukrainian party congress also show the coming end of the present form of the Communist Party. Ivashko quit as party leader, turning it over to his deputy, Stanislav Gurenko. Patterning himself after Yeltsin, Ivashko got himself elected Ukrainian President, thus gaining the second most important seat after Yeltsin on the U.S.S.R. Federation Council, which consists of Gorbachov and the presidents of the republics. The U.S.S.R. Federation Council will spend this summer drafting the “new Union Treaty” for the new form of empire that will replace the Soviet Union. No time will be wasted, Ivashko stressed during the party congress: “There will be no delay in working out the new Union Treaty.”

Within days of the Ukrainian party congress resolution, similar resolutions were adopted by the parliament of Uzbekistan, the largest of the U.S.S.R.'s Muslim republics, the parliament of Kirghizia, the Belorussian party congress, and the parliament of Moldavia.

The next change in the non-Russian republics will occur at the latest in October when the Transcaucasian republic of Georgia holds elections which will produce an overwhelming

victory by parties demanding immediate independence. Once that occurs, the greatest pro-independence surge yet will be unleashed.

Polozkov backs Gorbachov

In contrast, the Russian party conference, though it grabbed the headlines was, relatively speaking, a sideshow. Ironically, a confirmation of this assessment was provided by *Pravda* June 25, two days after the party conference ended, through published results of a poll taken by the Central Committee's Social Research Institute. The poll showed that only 18% of Soviet citizens still view the Communist Party as the “leading force in society.”

The Western media made much of the in-fighting that occurred at the Russian party conference, focusing on the heavy criticisms of Gorbachov by Politburo member Yegor Ligachov and others. The man elected to head the new Russian Communist Party, Ivan Polozkov, was depicted as “anti-Gorbachov.” The coverage ignored the predicament of the Communist Party. The party has been dumped from power at the top, where the Politburo and Central Committee have been kicked aside for the Presidential Council and the Federation Council, and has lost all support, including that born by fear, from the population.

After the Russian party conference ended and Polozkov gave his first press conference, it became clear that the conference had been a non-event. The “anti-Gorbachov” Polozkov became a critical supporter of Gorbachov: “He [Gorbachov] doesn't take revenge because of criticism. Naturally, I'm for Gorbachov remaining President and chairman or general secretary of the party. The presidial regime [the rule of the country by the Presidential Council] has not yet unfolded its entire potential, and the power of the party cannot yet be written off.”

The only criticism Polozkov had of Gorbachov made Gorbachov look “too benevolent”: “He is too tolerant, thinks things over too much, and is too cautious.” Regarding Yeltsin, who had beaten Polozkov in the Russian Parliament vote for the Russian presidency, Polozkov declared his readiness to cooperate with Yeltsin and with the Democratic Platform reform group in the Russian party, who form the core of Yeltsin's support: “I have no personal problems with him. . . . I am prepared, in light of the inner-party opposition, to take the Democratic Platform into consideration.” Polozkov declared his support for the “transition to a regulated market economy,” and for treaty-based trade between sovereign republics, thus echoing Yeltsin's position on these questions.

So much for Polozkov, Yeltsin, and Gorbachov. The majority of Russians couldn't care less about the Russian or the Soviet Communist Party. The Russian majority only knows what it doesn't want. It has not made up its mind as to exactly whom, or what, it does want. When it begins to, events sweeping across Russia will intersect the upheaval in the other republics. Turbulent times are at hand.