

July 12, 1990

## PROMOTING THE PEACEFUL DECOLONIZATION OF THE SOVIET UNION

### INTRODUCTION

As East European communist regimes fell in the revolutions of 1989, Soviet control over the region was swept away. Most of these countries now have elected democratic governments and are moving toward market economies and close ties with the West. Building on these dramatic breakthroughs, the United States and its European allies are trying to consolidate the West's gains and to preserve stability in Europe. Yet an even greater upheaval is looming in the Soviet Union itself, brought about by the same processes that transformed Eastern Europe. Helping to ensure that these changes occur peacefully is an urgent priority for both the U.S. and the West as a whole.

The Soviet Union is beset by a staggering array of problems. Not only is the authority of the existing political system eroding rapidly, but the economy has begun a rapid downward slide. Of all the challenges facing the Soviet leadership, however, the most ominous are the growing calls for independence by the non-Russian nationalities. For these demands threaten not simply to transform the Soviet Union, but to end its existence.

**Real Name.** The Soviet nationalities problem frequently is misunderstood in the West because it is not called by its real name.<sup>1</sup> It is not mainly a problem of clashing ethnic groups, although the prospect for widespread conflict does exist, as between Christian Armenians and Muslim Azerbaijanis. Nor is it primarily a desire for greater autonomy in an overly-centralized state. It is a problem of decoloniza-

---

1 This is the second in a series of Heritage Foundation studies on the Soviet nationalities crisis. Preceding it was *Backgrounder* No. 762, "How America Can Help Baltic Independence" (March 29, 1990). A forthcoming paper will examine the problem of the Muslim republics.

# EUROPE

Including the European republics of the Soviet Union



tion, of the non-Russian nationalities seeking independence from the Russian-dominated Soviet Union.

The Soviet Union is not a nation, but an empire masquerading as a nation. And like all European empires in the modern era, the forces of decolonization have finally caught up with it. This process is most advanced in the Baltic republics of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, which already have elected democratic governments and embarked upon the path to independence. Yet, despite their prominence in the Western press, the Baltics are but the tip of an iceberg. The

same desire for freedom exists in all of the other non-Russian republics in the European portion of the Soviet Union: Armenia, Byelorussia, Georgia, Moldavia, and Ukraine.<sup>2</sup> And the demand for freedom is rapidly gaining strength in each.

**Momentous Consequences.** The consequences and implications of Soviet decolonization for the U.S. and the West are momentous. A successful and peaceful breakaway of the non-Russian European republics from the U.S.S.R. could result in a string of democratic states stretching from Estonia in the north to Armenia in the south, all eager to become market economies and participate in the affairs of Europe and the world. Similar demands for greater freedom are also at work in the Muslim republics in Central Asia and Azerbaijan.

Further, the threat of Soviet military power, which continues to pose the only real threat to European security, would be reduced significantly, if not eliminated altogether, by the independence of these republics. Together the non-Russian republics of the European U.S.S.R. account for one-third of the Soviet population and over one-third of its industry. Equally important, their independence would push the borders of Russia back from Europe several hundred miles to where they were before the early 18th Century conquests of Peter the Great.

There are great dangers in Soviet decolonization, however, especially if it becomes violent. Not only could there be widespread loss of life should the Soviet authorities decide to suppress the independence movements with force, but any fighting risks instability and unpredictable actions by the Soviet military, which at 4.5 million men is still the world's largest. Most alarming of all is the prospect of a loss of central control over the Soviet Union's vast nuclear arsenal.<sup>3</sup>

**Western Fears.** Events in the Soviet Union are moving more quickly than most Western policy makers appear to realize, and the West risks playing a marginal role in the events in the Soviet Union. Many Western policy makers would prefer to do nothing out of fear of provoking unrest or because they believe mistakenly that the West has little or no influence over events inside the Soviet Union.

But Soviet decolonization is moving forward whether or not the West is ready for it. The U.S. and the West as a whole have vital interests at stake and should use their significant influence to push this process toward a peaceful and negotiated path. The West's inaction merely abandons its interests to fate. Worse, it may contribute to the very instability it seeks to avoid by persuading Soviet hardliners that a military crackdown on the independence movements will be met with Western indifference.

To establish its policy toward Soviet decolonization on a stable and clearly understood foundation, U.S. policy must be based on a set of sound principles.

---

2 Although common American usage place "the" before Ukraine, Ukrainians assert that this derives from Moscow's claim that Ukraine is a region of Russia, not a nation unto itself.

3 This nuclear arsenal includes not only missiles capable of reaching the United States but also short-range battlefield weapons. The Soviet military may have begun withdrawing some of the latter from the non-Russian areas. See *The Wall Street Journal*, June 22, 1990.

**Principle #1:** The U.S. strongly supports a peaceful resolution of the problem of Soviet decolonization and will not assist or support the use of force by any group in the Soviet Union, although it understands sympathetically the need for self-defense.

**Principle #2:** The U.S. urges Moscow to negotiate with democratically-elected representatives of the republics to determine the future relations of these states with the Soviet Union and to respect the wishes of the populations as expressed through free and fair elections.

**Principle #3:** U.S. support for any nationalist organization in the Soviet Union is conditioned on its adherence to democratic values and respect for the rights of ethnic and religious minorities.

**Principle #4:** The U.S. supports the removal of political and economic barriers between the peoples of Europe, including the Russians, and will work with its European allies toward this end.

**Principle #5:** The U.S. seeks no unilateral gain in the matter of Soviet decolonization nor does it seek to exploit the matter to threaten the security of the Soviet Union.

**Principle #6:** The U.S. will reward Moscow appropriately for allowing the process of decolonization to proceed peacefully.

Translating these principles into policy, the Bush Administration should:

◆ ◆ **Warn Moscow against the use of force against the national movements.** Soviet hard-liners may be tempted to use force to suppress the nationalist challenge. The U.S. must make clear that this course will inevitably result in a worsening of U.S.-Soviet relations.

◆ ◆ **Include those European republics of the Soviet Union which have elected democratic governments in U.S. assistance packages intended for Eastern Europe.** Emerging from decades of Soviet rule, the European republics of the Soviet Union face staggering economic, social, and ecological problems. U.S. assistance, especially in the form of technical expertise, will help these republics tackle each of these problems and accelerate the essential task of creating market economies.

◆ ◆ **Ask Congress to exchange parliamentary groups with each of the democratically elected governments.** Congress can offer important symbolic support, as well as needed technical assistance and expertise regarding parliamentary democracy, by exchanging parliamentary groups with democratically elected governments.

◆ ◆ **Establish relations with each of the European republics of the Soviet Union.** Article 80 of the Soviet constitution gives every Soviet republic the right to establish relations with foreign countries and international organizations. The U.S. should establish direct relations with each republic that requests it, even if that republic is not moving toward independence. This need not, however, imply official U.S. recognition of independence.

◆ ◆ **Press for the inclusion of Soviet decolonization on the agenda at the forthcoming meeting of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE).** CSCE, which includes every European country plus the U.S. and Canada, is meeting this November to discuss the far-reaching political, security, and economic changes in Europe. The agenda should include the many problems posed by Soviet decolonization, and the European republics of the Soviet Union should be invited to attend.

◆ ◆ **Encourage America's European allies to use their influence to press Moscow for peaceful change and to integrate the new republics into Europe.** The populations of each of these republics regard themselves as European and are eager to establish close ties with Europe. The European states can provide important political and economic support by removing trade barriers and by including these republics in such organizations as the Council of Europe.

## THE IMPERIAL CRISIS

Although it is formally a voluntary federation of fifteen sovereign republics, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics is in fact the last of Europe's colonial empires. It is the descendent of the Russian empire, an amalgam of conquered peoples amassed over several centuries of military expansion.

The multi-ethnic and repressive character of the Russian empire was characterized best by none other than Vladimir Lenin himself, the founder of the Soviet state, who termed it a "prisonhouse of nationalities." It remains the most apt description of the Soviet Union today. For despite decades of often savage repression by Moscow and strenuous efforts to obliterate the identities of the separate nationalities, the Soviet empire now is convulsed by the forces of national self-determination. This process of decolonization is not unique to the Soviet Union; it has been the fate of all the European colonial empires, including those of Belgium, Britain, France, the Netherlands, and Portugal. The Soviet case differs only because it has been delayed so long.

**Short-Lived Freedom.** Far from a new development, this is the second time the Russian empire has been threatened with decolonization. With the collapse of central authority following the Bolshevik coup in November 1917 and the ensuing civil war, each of the major nationalities quickly broke away from the empire. Estonia, Finland, Georgia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and Ukraine, as well as Muslim Central Asia and other areas, declared their independence in the first half of 1918. Although Finland and Poland successfully defended their freedom, the others eventually were reconquered by the Red Army: Ukraine in 1919, Georgia in 1921, and Central Asia by 1922. In fact, the major "accomplishment" of the Bolsheviks was their reconstitution of the Russian Empire, albeit under the new name of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.

The Bolsheviks' empire, however, is now falling apart. Although much of the West's attention has been focused on the Baltic states' moves toward independence, especially in Lithuania, these republics represent only the leading edge of a much broader phenomenon embracing all the non-Russian nationalities in the European portion of the Soviet Union.

**THE EUROPEAN REPUBLICS OF THE SOVIET UNION - BASIC DATA**

	R.S.F.S.R.	Ukraine	Byelorussia	Moldavia	Georgia	Armenia	Lithuania	Latvia	Estonia
<b>Capital</b>	Moscow	Kiev	Minsk	Kishinev	Tbilisi	Yerevan	Vilnius	Riga	Tallinn
<b>Area</b> <i>(in thousands of sq. miles)</i>	6,593	233	80	13	27	11	26	25	17
<b>Population*</b> <i>(in millions)</i>	145.3	51.2	10.1	4.2	5.3	3.4	3.6	2.6	1.6
<b>Ethnic Composition**</b>									
<b>Native Population</b>	83%	74%	79%	64%	69%	88%	80%	54%	65%
<b>Russians</b>	⊗	21%	12%	13%	7%	2%	9%	33%	28%
<b>Ukrainians</b>	4%	⊗	2%	14%	---	---	---	3%	3%
<b>Byelorussians</b>	---	1%	⊗	---	---	---	2%	5%	2%
<b>Poles</b>	---	---	4%	---	---	---	7%	3%	---
<b>Azerbaijanis</b>	---	---	---	---	5%	5%	---	---	---
<b>Armenians</b>	---	---	---	---	9%	⊗	---	---	---
<b>Jews</b>	1%	1%	1%	2%	---	---	---	---	---
<b>Others</b>	12%	3%	2%	7%	10%	5%	2%	2%	2%

\* All population figures are as of 1987.

\*\* An "⊗" symbol indicates that this group comprises the majority in the republic. A blank indicates less than 1% composition.

In each of these republics, Mikhail Gorbachev's relaxation of political controls over Soviet society has combined with popular dissatisfaction with Soviet rule to produce a rapid growth of nationalist sentiment and pro-independence organizations. In several republics, such as the Baltic states and Moldavia, the democratic forces control the government and have begun to take steps to move away from Moscow; in others, such as Ukraine, the communist party remains in control but faces an increasing challenge from the nationalist forces.

**Ukraine**

The rapid rise of independence forces in Ukraine over the past year has been one of the most significant developments in the Soviet Union. With over 50 million people, its population is second only to the Russian republic's 145 million. Its agricultural and industrial output comprise one-third and one-fifth of the Soviet total, respectively. The loss of this republic would be a severe blow to Soviet power. Not only would an independent Ukraine create an enormous buffer between Russia and the rest of Europe, it could possibly become a rival power.

**Forced Russification.** Because of its economic and strategic importance, Ukraine always has been subject to tight control by Moscow. Ever since Ukraine's incorporation into the Russian Empire by Catherine the Great in the late 18th Century, Ukrainian nationalism has been regarded with great hostility by Russian and Soviet leaders, who have attempted to suppress Ukraine's separate identity through such methods as forcing commerce and education to be conducted in Russian instead of the Ukrainian language.

Ukrainian independence was reestablished on January 22, 1918, when independence forces proclaimed the establishment of a separate state. This freedom

## THE SOVIET SOLUTION: A NEW TREATY OF UNION

Faced with a growing nationalist revolt, the Soviet regime has proposed replacing the highly centralized Soviet system with a new Treaty of Union in which the various republics would enjoy much greater autonomy. This autonomy reportedly would include control over most of their own domestic affairs, such as education and much of the economy, with Moscow retaining control over foreign and defense policies. Gorbachev presented this new plan on June 12 to the Federation Council, a new body of undetermined responsibilities composed of himself and the presidents of the fifteen union republics.<sup>14</sup>

Gorbachev's plan, and others like it, are unlikely to solve the problem of Soviet decolonization. The Soviet Union in theory already is a voluntary federation in which the republics possess a broad array of rights, yet Moscow has never allowed these to be exercised. There is no reason to believe a new constitution with new rights would be any more respected by Soviet authorities.

Further, almost none of the officials and organizations likely to be involved in drafting and ratifying a new Treaty of Union — including Gorbachev and the Soviet parliament as well as their republican counterparts — have been democratically elected. Thus, they lack legitimacy.

**Only Acceptable Arrangement.** But most important, there is no reason to believe that limited autonomy would be preferable to outright independence in any of the republics. In fact, nationalist leaders in the Baltic states, Ukraine, Georgia, and elsewhere have told The Heritage Foundation that no arrangement short of independence would be acceptable. Ivan Drach, Chairman of *Rukh*, publicly declared on March 6 that the organization “will stand for the independence of Ukraine, for its political and social sovereignty. And at this stage the only way to achieve this is to leave the Soviet Union.”<sup>15</sup>

Even those who say they are willing to continue some tie with the Soviet Union describe this relationship in terms indistinguishable from independence. Ion Khadirke, for example, Chairman of the Moldavian Popular Front and Vice President of the Supreme Soviet, stated that he supports Gorbachev's proposal but views it as leading to a “union of independent states,” not a federation or confederation.<sup>16</sup>

Thus, the Soviet regime either will have to impose a new treaty, by force or with the cooperation of unelected communist officials in the republics, or it will have to grant the peoples the freedom to decide for themselves, in which case all likely will choose independence, as they did in 1918. The former option only would make the present situation worse; the latter would mean the end of the Soviet Union.

---

14 RFE/RL *Daily Report*, No. 112, June 13, 1990.

15 RFE/RL *Daily Report*, No. 47, March 7, 1990.

16 *Financial Times*, June 25, 1990

The end of the Soviet Union would not mean the end of relations between its former republics, however. Nationalist leaders in Estonia, Georgia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Ukraine have assured Heritage Foundation officials that they place great importance on good relations with their neighbors and with Moscow, but as independent states. Of greater importance to them, however, is establishment of close ties with Europe, of which they consider their republics an integral part. A Soviet connection is merely an unnecessary and costly burden.

Cooperative planning for the post-Soviet era already has begun in these republics. When representatives of the Popular Fronts of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Byelorussia, Estonia, Georgia, Latvia, Lithuania, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan met in Kiev on May 5-6, they formed a Union of Democratic Forces with a goal to "guarantee the peaceful secession of republics from the USSR by negotiation with the Soviet government" and to create "structures to facilitate mutual cooperation between the republics after the fall of the empire."<sup>17</sup>

## WHAT THE WEST CAN DO

Given the enormous stakes involved, the U.S. and the West as a whole have vital interests in ensuring that Soviet decolonization proceeds peacefully. The pace of events in the Soviet Union over the next year easily could match those of the East European revolutions in 1989.

The Western fear of inadvertently causing instability, either by raising the nationalists' expectations and encouraging them to take greater risks or by provoking Moscow into a crackdown on the nationalist forces, is a legitimate one. Chaos in the Soviet Union is not in the West's interests, and promises of support that will not be forthcoming are sure to be counterproductive.

But the growing instability in the Soviet Union is not caused by these republics' struggle for independence but rather from the Soviet denial of freedom. Stability for these areas, as well as the rest of Europe, will be possible only after these republics have been allowed freely to choose their future.

**Reduced Threat.** Concern for stability may obscure the fact that the preservation of the Soviet Union in its current state clearly is not in the West's interests. The enormous amount of attention that has been focused on the potential threat to European stability from a united Germany has obscured the fact that the Soviet Union has been the only serious threat to Europe over the past four decades, and likely will be the only plausible threat for the foreseeable future. A successful decolonization of the Soviet Union not only would remove the major sources of instability inside the Soviet Union but also deny Moscow control over the resources in the non-Russian republics needed to pose a credible threat to Europe.

While U.S. and Western influence is limited, it can play an important role nonetheless. Moscow's need for economic assistance and the nationalists' desire for

---

<sup>17</sup> *Report on the USSR, May 25, 1990.*



had a tragic history, including the slaughter of the Armenian population by the Ottoman Empire during World War I. The Armenian republic declared its independence from Russia on May 28, 1918, but was reconquered in December 1920. Armenian national identity always has been very strong, even under the Soviet regime. Nevertheless, many Armenians have accepted Soviet rule because it was perceived as providing some protection against potential threats from Turkey, Iran, and Azerbaijan.

This acceptance, however, has been greatly undermined in recent years, especially by Soviet actions in Nagorno-Karabakh, a small Armenian-populated enclave within the neighboring Muslim republic of Azerbaijan. Armenia has demanded that this territory be transferred to Armenia, but Azerbaijan refuses to relinquish control. The result has been an outbreak of ethnic violence in both republics, including continuing heavy fighting along the Armenian-Azerbaijani border.

Moscow is perceived in Armenia as favoring Azerbaijan in this dispute. Reasons: Soviet authorities confirmed Azerbaijani control over the disputed territory in November 1989. Further, Soviet officials have refused to lift the Azerbaijani-imposed blockade of the rail lines into Armenia, which has produced an economic crisis in the republic.

**Defying Moscow.** This failure to support Armenian claims has led to the rapid growth of overtly anti-Soviet sentiment, including Red Army clashes with armed groups of Armenians. Several nationalist organizations now call for independence from the Soviet Union; the most important is the Armenian Pan-National Movement (ANM). Other organizations calling for an end to Soviet rule include the Paruyr Hayrikyan Society, led by its namesake who was expelled from the Soviet Union two years ago but who was elected from exile to the Supreme Soviet in the May 20 elections.

Defiance of Soviet authority continues to grow, along with violence. A crowd of Armenians tried to storm and burn KGB headquarters in the capital of Yerevan on April 14, 1990. The situation further deteriorated on May 27-28, when 22 Armenians were killed in clashes between Armenian nationalists and Soviet forces in the city. Widespread disillusionment with the Soviet authorities in Moscow led to a significant boycotting of the May 20 elections for the Supreme Soviet, in which less than 50 percent of the electorate voted.<sup>12</sup>

Nevertheless, nationalist forces led by the ANM have taken control of the Supreme Soviet in Armenia. ANM leader Levon Ter-Petrosyan announced on June 6 that his organization would form a coalition government with the communist party. He also proposed establishing direct links with the Russian republic, led by Boris Yeltsin, bypassing Gorbachev and the Soviet government.<sup>13</sup>

---

12 *Report on the USSR*, June 8, 1990.

13 *RFE/RL Daily Report*, No.108, June 7, 1990.

tack with sharpened shovels and poison gas, and nineteen were killed. This incident has been a catalyst for the rapid growth and consolidation of the nationalists' influence and has severely eroded any remaining support for the local communist party.

The nationalist parties have strong support from the population, but they are hampered by dissension. The two most important umbrella organizations, the National Forum and the Round Table, agree on the establishment of a democratic and independent Georgia, but they differ sharply over such issues as the path to independence and the future status of the ethnic minorities within Georgia, such as the Abkhazians, Azerbaijanis, and Ossetians.

The National Forum, led by Georgi Chanturia, advocates boycotting the October 28 elections for the Georgian Supreme Soviet. In its place, the National Forum wants to elect an independent National Congress on September 30 to prepare Georgia for independence. Round Table leader Zviad Gamsakhurdia, a long-time dissident and leader of the Georgian Helsinki Watch Group, opposes the creation of such an alternative parliament because he believes that it will be powerless. Other major nationalist groups include the Social Democrats and the Popular Front. These are prepared to work within existing institutions such as the Georgian Supreme Soviet to move toward independence.

**Support for Lithuania.** The Supreme Soviet bowed to popular protests and on March 20 postponed elections for a new parliament from March 25 to October 28 to provide more time for the democratic opposition to organize. These elections likely will give control of the Supreme Soviet to pro-independence forces, yet the present communist-controlled legislature already has attempted to regain some of its authority by adopting a more nationalist position. On March 9, it declared Georgia's 1921 annexation by Moscow "an international crime." It passed a resolution asserting Georgia's sovereignty on June 23 and established a commission to examine the steps needed for its implementation. It has also expressed support for Lithuania's bid for independence, voting on June 20 to defy Moscow's economic blockade of that break-away republic.<sup>11</sup>

Although the road remains uncertain, the nationalist forces are committed to achieving independence within a year. National Forum leaders told Heritage Foundation officials in May that Soviet civil power in Georgia largely has ceased to exist and that their main objective is to negotiate a withdrawal of Soviet forces, following the election of a National Congress. They wish to proceed peacefully, but they stated that they accept that Soviet forces may have to be driven out.

### **Armenia**

Like neighboring Georgia, Armenia is one of the oldest countries in Europe. Its national origins date back at least 2,500 years. Its independence has always been precarious because it has been surrounded by powerful and often hostile neighbors, from the ancient Romans to modern-day Azerbaijan. Consequently, it has

---

11 RFE/RL *Daily Report*, No. 117, June 21, 1990.

now controls the government in the capital of Kishinev following its victory in the March 25 elections for the Moldavian Supreme Soviet. Popular Front leader Ion Khadyrke stated on June 30 that the Front's highest goal must be the creation of an independent state, the Romanian Republic of Moldova.<sup>8</sup>

**Proclaiming Sovereignty.** The new Supreme Soviet already has taken great strides toward independence. On June 23, it proclaimed Moldavia's sovereignty, giving Moldavian law precedence over that of the Soviet Union. It also claimed control over Moldavia's natural resources, including land, and announced its intention to seek membership in the United Nations. And on June 28, the Supreme Soviet marked the 50th anniversary of the Soviet takeover by declaring that the Soviet annexation was the product of a "conspiracy between the USSR and Hitlerite Germany."<sup>9</sup>

Moldavia's parliament, however, has stopped short of proclaiming full independence. But given the close ethnic and cultural ties between the two states, the Moldavian government likely will establish ever-closer ties to Romania, possibly eventually reuniting with it. For example, the Supreme Soviet adopted Romania's national flag as its own on April 27, and on June 5 changed the republic's name from Moldavia to the traditional Romanian designation, Moldova. Tens of thousands of Moldavian demonstrators linked hands with their Romanian counterparts in a June 24 demonstration of solidarity across the bridge over the Prut River separating the two states. Several of the demonstrators denounced the 1940 Soviet annexation, and signs with the slogan "one nation" were displayed.<sup>10</sup>

## Georgia

Georgia, in the southern Soviet Union and bordered by the Black Sea and the Caucasus mountains, has an ancient history. Fiercely independent but surrounded by such powerful neighbors as the Turks and Persians, Georgia became part of the Russian empire in 1801 when Russian forces were called in by the government to help defend against a threat from Persia, and then stayed.

Led by a Social Democratic (Menshevik) government, Georgia declared its independence from the Russian Empire on May 26, 1918. It remained free for three years until conquered by the Bolsheviks in February 1921. Although Josef Stalin was a Georgian, the country suffered greatly from his rule. Forced collectivization of agriculture was as brutal here as elsewhere in the Soviet Union, and much of the intelligentsia and religious leadership were shot or sent to labor camps.

**Brutal Attack.** Nevertheless, Georgian nationalism remained strong even under Soviet rule and has grown rapidly during Gorbachev's political liberalization. The emergence of national resistance to Moscow was greatly accelerated following a brutal attack by Soviet forces on a group of unarmed, peaceful demonstrators on April 9, 1989, in the capital, Tbilisi. Women and children were singled out for at-

---

8 RFE/RL *Daily Report*, No. 124, July 2, 1990.

9 RFE/RL *Daily Report*, No. 123, June 29, 1990.

10 *Washington Times*, June 25, 1990.

Despite this, there has been a strong revival of Byelorussian nationalism in recent years. The Byelorussian Popular Front, known as *Adradzhen'ne* (Renewal), was founded on June 24-25, 1989. Headed by Chairman Zyanon Paznyak, an anthropologist, this organization has promoted a revival of the national culture, including demands for making Byelorussian the sole official language in the republic and its greater use in the schools and media.

**Grim Past.** Nationalism has been spurred by a growing awareness of the consequences of Soviet rule. Most prominent has been the outrage over the April 1986 accident at the Chernobyl nuclear power station, which, although situated in Ukraine, had its most serious impact in Byelorussia. In addition, the Popular Front has been active in publicizing the discovery of a mass grave at Kuropaty, near the capital of Minsk, in which an estimated 100,000 people executed by Stalin's secret police are buried.

Notwithstanding the rise of the Popular Front, Byelorussia remains in the grip of a hard-line communist party. The founding congress of the Popular Front had to be held in neighboring Lithuania because Byelorussian officials prevented it from convening in the capital, Minsk. In the elections to the Byelorussian Supreme Soviet on May 4, 1990, the communist party apparatus used its control over the police, media, and economic enterprises to campaign against the democratic forces, refusing even to register the Popular Front as a legal organization.

Although the communist party and government continue to back Moscow's hard-line position against the nationalists, the Popular Front supports independence for Byelorussia and has been joined by new groups, such as the Association for an Independent Byelorussia. On April 22, Popular Front leader Paznyak called for Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldavia, and Ukraine to form an association of independent states with Byelorussia to defend themselves against both communism and Russian power.

### **Moldavia**

Another republic undergoing nationalist ferment is Moldavia. The Soviet Union seized Moldavia from Romania on June 28, 1940, as part of the booty from the August 23, 1939, Hitler-Stalin Pact, which also gave Moscow the Baltic states and western Ukraine. Two-thirds of its population are ethnic Romanians and speak a dialect of Romanian; the rest are primarily Ukrainian and Russian. Despite the region's close ties to Romania, the Soviet regime has promoted the myth of a separate Moldavian nationality and tried to sever most of Moldavia's ties with Romania. These efforts have included imposing a Cyrillic (or Russian) alphabet on the language in place of the traditional Latin alphabet also used in Romania.

Nevertheless, nationalism has reemerged strongly in Moldavia. Among the several nationalist groups, the most important is the Moldavian Popular Front, founded in May 1989. An umbrella group of several nationalist organizations, it

(President) of the Supreme Soviet and former Ukrainian Communist Party boss, stated that Ukrainians in the Soviet army should not be stationed outside of Ukraine, declaring that they "have nothing to die for in Azerbaijan."<sup>4</sup>

**Government Crackdown.** Even as they adopt much of the nationalists' platform, the communist authorities continue to battle against them. On April 17, the Ukrainian Communist Party and government denounced growing nationalism in Ukraine, especially calls for independence. *Rukh* leaders also revealed on April 29 that the communist party and government had begun a campaign to crack down on *Rukh* by firing its members from their jobs and also restricting the power of local governments that *Rukh* controls.

Despite these measures, the independence forces continue to gather strength. The balance of forces within the Supreme Soviet continues to shift in favor of the nationalists with signs that the communist bloc is suffering severe divisions. Twelve members of the Democratic Platform of the Ukrainian Communist Party announced on June 18 that they had decided to cooperate with the nationalist opposition.<sup>5</sup>

Members of the *Rukh* leadership, including the Chairman of the Executive Council, Mihailo Horyn, told Heritage Foundation officials in May that Ukraine's independence probably would come about through cooperation with the other nationalist movements in the Soviet Union, especially those in the Russian republic. He said that he expected independence to be achieved within two years, during which time *Rukh* and the democratic forces would take power through new elections. Horyn said that eventually the authority of the Soviet government would extend no further than the Kremlin compound, comparing it to Vatican City.

### **Byelorussia**

Like Ukrainians, Byelorussians are a Slavic people, with a language close to Russian. Byelorussia has always been overshadowed by more powerful neighbors and has been ruled by a succession of Lithuanians, Poles, and Russians. Byelorussia declared independence from Russia on March 25, 1918, but was unable to defend its freedom from the Red Army.

As in Ukraine, the Soviet regime has attempted to suppress any sign of a separate Byelorussian national identity and has vigorously pursued a policy of Russification. For example, while 80 percent of the republic's population identifies Byelorussian as its native language, only 14 percent of the school children attend schools where the language of instruction is Byelorussian, the remainder being taught in Russian.<sup>6</sup>

---

4 The Soviet military has occupied large areas of the Soviet republic of Azerbaijan, including its capital, Baku, in an effort to quell ethnic unrest and to suppress the independence movement there.

5 Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, *Report on the USSR*, June 8, 1990.

6 *Report on the USSR*, March 17, 1989.

was short-lived. By the end of 1919, the Red Army had conquered the country and imposed rule from Moscow.

Strong resistance to the Soviet regime remained. Ukrainian guerrilla groups, most prominently the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (known by its Ukrainian acronym UPA), which arose in 1941 to fight the invading Nazis, mounted extensive armed resistance to the return of Soviet rule after World War II, by some estimates inflicting over 100,000 casualties on the Soviet army. Although largely crushed by 1948, scattered fighting continued into the 1950s.

There are a number of nationalist organizations pressing for Ukrainian independence. The most important is the Popular Movement for Restructuring in Ukraine, better known as *Rukh* (Ukrainian for "Movement"). Founded on September 8-9, 1989, as an umbrella organization for a variety of ecological and cultural groups such as the Ukrainian Writers' Union, *Rukh* is transforming itself rapidly into a political force dedicated to independence. Among the political organizations under its umbrella is the Ukrainian Republican Party, formerly the Ukrainian Helsinki Union, led by Levko Lukyanenko, a long-time dissident and human rights activist.

**Impressive Victory.** The Democratic Bloc, an alliance between *Rukh* and other democratic organizations such as the Ukrainian Helsinki Union, captured 27 percent of the seats in the March 4, 1990, elections for the Ukrainian Supreme Soviet, or parliament. This victory was especially impressive because the Bloc was able to field candidates in only 40 percent of the electoral districts and had to battle against harassment and intimidation from the communist party. Although *Rukh's* greatest strength lies in the strongly nationalist western Ukraine, where it easily won control of the city council of Lvov on March 4, it also captured control of the city council in the capital, Kiev, where nationalist groups have been less active. Its success in these elections emboldened *Rukh* on March 6 to adopt as its formal goal the creation of an independent and democratic Ukraine.

*Rukh* is in favor of pursuing independence through existing organizations such as the Supreme Soviet, but other groups believe this approach to be ineffective. One such group is the Ukrainian National Party (UNP), led by Hrihoriy Prikhodko, a former colonel in the Soviet army. Prikhodko told officials from The Heritage Foundation who visited Ukraine in May that independence for Ukraine will require gaining control over its own armed forces. Other groups, including those still associated with the UPA, advocate the creation of independent armed forces to expel the Soviets by force.

The rapid growth of nationalist sentiment and organizations have forced the hard-line Ukrainian Communist Party to take a more nationalist stance in an effort to salvage its sagging popularity. On April 3, 1990, for example, the Ukrainian Communist Party's Central Committee called for sovereignty for Ukraine, although within the Soviet Union. Legislation to that effect has been introduced in the communist-dominated Supreme Soviet. The communist-controlled Ukrainian government defied Moscow on May 24 by criticizing the Soviet government's unpopular economic reform plan and declaring that it would not be allowed to take effect in Ukraine. And on June 25, Volodymyr Ivashko, the current Chairman

foreign recognition give the West valuable tools for influencing both sides. Although the West cannot stop, and should not accelerate, the process of Soviet decolonization, it can influence the direction in which it evolves. Given the alternatives of a violent or a peaceful process of decolonization, the West's interests argue strongly for using whatever influence it possesses to help push it in a peaceful direction.

## **U.S. POLICY FOR PROMOTING A PEACEFUL DECOLONIZATION OF THE U.S.S.R.**

The U.S. should promote the peaceful decolonization of the Soviet Union by encouraging both Moscow and the republics seeking independence to begin negotiations aimed at a mutually acceptable solution. The aim of U.S. policy should be to help bring about a new democratic order in which the rights and security of all nationalities, including the Russians, are respected. To be effective, U.S. policies should rest on a foundation of six principles.

**Principle #1:** The U.S. strongly supports a peaceful resolution of the problem of Soviet decolonization and will not assist or support the use of force by any group in the Soviet Union, although it understands sympathetically the need for self-defense.

**Principle #2:** The U.S. urges Moscow to negotiate with democratically-elected representatives of the republics to determine their future relations with the Soviet Union and to respect the wishes of the populations as expressed through free and fair elections.

**Principle #3:** U.S. support for any national organization in the Soviet Union is conditioned on its adherence to democratic values and respect for the rights of ethnic and religious minorities.

**Principle #4:** The U.S. supports the removal of political and economic barriers between the peoples of Europe, including the Russians, and will work with its European allies toward this end.

**Principle #5:** The U.S. seeks no unilateral gain in the matter of Soviet decolonization nor does it seek to exploit the matter to threaten the security of the Soviet Union.

**Principle #6:** The U.S. will reward Moscow appropriately for allowing the process of decolonization to proceed peacefully.

To translate these principles into policy, the U.S. should:

◆ ◆ **Warn Moscow against the use of force against the national movements.** The most likely instigator of violence is Moscow. Gorbachev has already demonstrated that he is prepared to use force in Lithuania. The U.S. must make clear to Moscow that the use of force against the national movements inevitably will lead to a worsening of U.S.-Soviet relations and will block the Soviet government's efforts to improve its economy by increasing its ties with the West.

At the same time, the U.S. should refuse to deal with any of the nationalist groups which engage in violence. Several organizations in these republics have begun planning for armed resistance to the Soviet Union. The U.S. position must be that, although it recognizes that there may be a need for legitimate self-defense, it will in no way support actions leading to armed conflict.

The U.S. must be especially careful not to automatically accept Moscow's explanations that its use of force may be necessary to restore order when fighting breaks out between ethnic groups. Nationalist leaders in Georgia told officials of The Heritage Foundation in May that many of the clashes between Armenians and Azerbaijanis have been manipulated by the Soviet government to provide pretexts for cracking down on the independence movements in those republics, and that Moscow was also attempting to create conflict in Georgia among the ethnic minorities. Only in those cases in which the U.S. can verify independently that local authorities cannot control the outbreak of violence, that loss of life has occurred or is immediately threatened, and where Soviet intervention is not aimed against nationalist movements pursuing peaceful change, should it accept Soviet explanations of the need to intervene.

◆ ◆ **Include the European republics of the Soviet Union which have elected democratic governments in the U.S. assistance package for Eastern Europe.** The SEED (Support for East European Democracy) Act of 1989, which was passed in November 1989 to help Poland and Hungary, may be expanded this year in a bill dubbed SEED II to include the rest of Eastern Europe. The Soviet Union's European republics, including the Baltic republics, are the true "eastern" Europe and should be eligible for assistance once they have installed democratically elected governments.

SEED II would make them eligible for loans to private entrepreneurs, give their governments access to foreign credit, and provide them the technical assistance to clean their environment, improve their farm economy, and launch small businesses.

These countries will best be helped, however, not through foreign aid, but by quickly establishing market economies. One of the major obstacles to this is the lack of experience and expertise with business and free markets. The U.S. can play an important role in helping to establish centers for business education and managerial expertise. The U.S. and especially the Europeans can also help by removing trade barriers to these countries as they become independent.

◆ ◆ **Ask Congress to exchange parliamentary groups with democratically elected legislatures.** Parliamentary democracy is a new phenomenon in most of these republics and their systems likely will remain fragile for some time. Once they have elected legislatures democratically, Congress should exchange parliamentary groups with them to provide needed expertise on the establishment and operations of legislative bodies and their role in establishing the rule of law. U.S. delegations could help train lawmakers and their staffs about parliamentary procedures, committee organization, legislative oversight of executive agencies, and competition and cooperation among the parties. With such exchanges, Congress would also provide important symbolic support to struggling democracies.



◆ ◆ **Establish relations with each of the European republics of the Soviet Union.** Given the growing importance of the European republics of the Soviet Union, the U.S. should establish direct relations with their governments, whether or not they are committed to independence. Such ties are permitted under Article 80 of the current Soviet constitution, which states that "A Union Republic has the right to enter into relations with other states, conclude treaties with them, exchange diplomatic and consular representatives, and take part in the work of international organizations." In the past, Moscow forbade such contacts, but its new policy of greater respect for the rights of the republics should be put to the test. There is a precedent: Byelorussia and Ukraine have been members of the United Nations since 1945.

Opening relations with these republics need not imply official U.S. recognition of independence. However, should a democratically elected government come to power in any of these republics and declare independence, the President should grant it diplomatic recognition, provided doing so advances U.S. interests and does not contribute to violence within the Soviet Union. The U.S. has never recognized the incorporation of the Baltic states into the Soviet Union, but none of the other republics voluntarily joined the Soviet Union; all were forcibly annexed by the Soviet Union. Thus, the U.S. should look sympathetically upon the reassertion of their independence.

◆ ◆ **Put Soviet decolonization on the agenda at the forthcoming CSCE conference.** Begun in the early 1970s, the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) is a forum for discussing human rights, security, and economic cooperation. It includes all the countries of Europe, plus the U.S. and Canada. At Moscow's insistence, the next session will be held this autumn and will address the consequences of the dramatic changes in Europe over the past year and their impact on European security.

To exclude Soviet decolonization from the agenda of this session would be to omit the most pressing question facing Europe. At CSCE, the political, economic, and security consequences of Soviet decolonization should be discussed. The legitimate concerns of the Soviet Union and the republics, as well as those of Western and Eastern Europe and the U.S., can be examined and cooperative solutions crafted which will allow the self-determination of the nationalities to proceed peacefully. Here the West can play an important role by reassuring Moscow regarding its security and by offering the Soviet Union and the republics economic cooperation if decolonization proceeds peacefully.

Representatives of the governments of the European republics of the Soviet Union should be invited to attend the CSCE meeting. These should include not only the Baltic states, whose annexation by the Soviet Union has never been recognized by the U.S. and most Western countries, but the other European republics as well. The Soviet government has no legal basis to object because Article 80 of the Soviet Constitution gives all Soviet republics the right to conduct their foreign affairs, including the right to "take part in the work of international organizations."

◆ ◆ **Encourage America's European allies to use their influence to press Moscow for peaceful change and to integrate the new republics into Europe.** Although

the West European governments may be reluctant to become involved in Soviet decolonization, preferring to let the U.S. take the lead, the U.S. should press its West European allies to join in a common approach to the problem. The U.S. should also invite the new democracies of Eastern Europe to cooperate. Government officials in Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland have demonstrated their support for the Baltic states' moves toward independence and may welcome the opportunity to promote peaceful change in the Soviet Union in conjunction with the West.

The U.S. should also encourage its European allies to adopt policies aimed at integrating the European republics of the Soviet Union into Europe, should these become independent. The populations in each of these republics consider their countries to be integral parts of Europe and are eager to reestablish close political, economic, and cultural ties with it.

These measures could include the lowering of trade barriers and extension of the activities of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), a new organization established by the West to provide economic assistance to Eastern Europe. Also the U.S. should encourage the Europeans to admit these republics into European and regional organizations like the Council of Europe, established in 1948 as an organization of European parliamentary democracies.

## CONCLUSION

The Soviet Union is the last of the European colonial empires. It has managed so far to avoid the fate of the British, French, Portuguese, and other empires because of its repressive character and its enormous military power. But this may be coming to an end. The long-suppressed nationalist forces of the European republics of the U.S.S.R. are gaining strength rapidly and are moving quickly toward independence. It is unlikely that this process can be stopped. A massive use of force by the Soviet military may slow it down temporarily, but only at great cost in life and risk to international stability. The only real question is whether the republics' march toward independence will proceed peacefully or violently.

**New Democracies.** For the West, Soviet decolonization holds both great opportunities and great risks. A successful decolonization would mean the emergence of a broad band of new democracies extending from Estonia in the north to Armenia in the south, possibly including even a democratic Russia, all eager to join the international economy and take their place in Europe and the world. It would also mean a significant reduction in, and possible elimination of, the Soviet threat to Europe.

An unsuccessful decolonization, especially one involving a massive use of the Soviet military, likely would create extended conflict and instability and threaten U.S. and Western interests in Europe and elsewhere. It would also raise the prospect of a loss of control over the Soviet Union's nuclear arsenal.

**High Stakes.** The U.S. has vital interests in ensuring that Soviet decolonization occurs peacefully, as does the West as a whole. To help push this process in a

peaceful direction, the Bush Administration should warn Moscow against using force against the nationalist movements, include those republics which elect democratic governments in U.S. assistance programs for Eastern Europe, ask Congress to exchange parliamentary groups with the democratically elected legislatures, establish relations with those Soviet republics which request them, press for inclusion of these republics and the topic of Soviet decolonization at the CSCE conference, and encourage America's allies to use their influence to press Moscow for peaceful change.

The East European revolutions of 1989 dramatically transformed the situation in Europe in favor of the West. The sudden rollback of Soviet power has produced a belief that the threat from the Soviet Union is largely over. Yet, the real danger is only now beginning, for the events in Eastern Europe were but a prelude to the far more significant and dangerous revolutions underway in the Soviet Union. The stakes are too high for the West to stand on the sidelines and hope for the best, as happened in Eastern Europe, for there is no guarantee that events will unfold as favorably. The victory of democracy and of free enterprise will only be secure once the peoples of the Soviet Union are free as well.

Douglas Seay  
Policy Analyst

