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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.¹ 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.² 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.³

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

