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EXECUTIVE BRIEF

THE BALTIC REPUBLICS: MOSCOW WON'T FORCE THEM TO STAY

- o **The current Soviet leadership is not prepared to use force to prevent the Baltic republics from seceding from the USSR--the only means, in our view, that would keep them from leaving.**
- o **Gorbachev will still try to devise ways to, at a minimum, delay a Baltic move toward independence and ideally to come up with some scheme of vastly expanded republic autonomy that would convince the Balts to remain tied to the USSR.**
- o **Even so, the Balts--following local and republic elections in the next two months--will press for independence even more vigorously. As long as they avoid violence, we believe that Moscow will reach an agreement in the next two years with Lithuania first and subsequently Estonia and Latvia granting the right to independence after a transition period of at least several years.**
- o **The major obstacle to this scenario is that the Balts may not want to wait that long or accept any conditions imposed by Moscow, thus forcing a confrontation.**
- o **Although the Baltic republics are a special case, independence for them will fuel secessionist movements in Moldavia, the Caucasus republics, and eventually the Ukraine.**

This Executive Brief reflects the view of the Intelligence Community expressed at a meeting on 25 January 1990. It was drafted by the National Intelligence Officer for the USSR and coordinated within the Community.

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THE BALTIC REPUBLICS: MOSCOW WON'T FORCE THEM TO STAY

The Baltic republics' drive for independence crossed a critical watershed during the past month. The drama centered on Lithuania but has direct implications for Latvia and Estonia as well. The Lithuanian Communist Party (LCP) challenged the CPSU and Moscow temporized. In the process, the independence movement in Lithuania received a tremendous boost and gave the Soviet leadership a vivid and sobering demonstration of the Lithuanians' determination to go their own way.

An Independent Party

The LCP's decision at its 20th party congress in December to withdraw from the CPSU and--perhaps even more important--support the goal of Lithuanian independence from the USSR was the spark. Lithuanian party leaders came under intense criticism at a quickly convened CPSU Central Committee plenum in late December.

- But the plenum's decision to play for time by sending a Politburo fact-finding delegation to the republic indicated that there was no Central Committee consensus on how to handle the situation.
- In fact, the unanimously favorable readout LCP leaders gave of their meeting with Gorbachev, Yakovlev, and Medvedev in Moscow in early January prior to Gorbachev's visit to Lithuania suggested that at least those three had recognized that a large majority of the LCP is intent on remaining independent from the CPSU.

Gorbachev apparently decided that trying to force the LCP back into the fold would only destroy the local party's political prospects and would leave the Lithuanian political field entirely to the popular front Sajudis. At the same time, Moscow has hedged its bets by encouraging the establishment of a rump Communist party of Lithuania loyal to the CPSU.

A Peaceful Process

The comments of Soviet leaders during Gorbachev's visit suggest that the Politburo has reached consensus on forswearing the use of force to keep the Lithuanians in the union.

- *Gorbachev* noted that a constitutional mechanism for secession was being drawn up.
- Politburo member *Ligachev*, in an interview with a Swedish newspaper, said that force is not a solution in the Baltic and that the USSR could live without one or another small republic.

Although each leader argued strongly against independence, the above statements indicate a willingness to work out procedures for secession.

- Conceding the possibility of independence and failing to force the Lithuanian Communist party back into the fold will be difficult to reverse.
- Only a decisive swing in the Politburo against Gorbachev, which appears unlikely at the moment, would lead Moscow to resist this course with force. If it came to this, the leadership would probably attempt to create an inter-ethnic clash, giving it a law and order pretext for intervention.

Playing for Time . . .

Moscow is left with a strategy of trying to delay and sidetrack the forces driving for independence. Gorbachev will attempt to slow Lithuania's move toward secession through prolonged negotiations. The draft legislation on mechanics for secession along with negotiations on economic and military relations will be his primary delaying tactics.

- His comments in Lithuania on the right of other Soviet republics to have a say in Lithuania's decision and on

economic compensation that would be due them foreshadowed some of the impediments to secession he is likely to propose in this new legislation.

- He will use his powers in the Supreme Soviet and the Congress of People's Deputies to drag the process out as long as possible.

The debate on the secession mechanism is likely to be supplemented with implied threats of economic disaster for the Balts if they try to leave unilaterally. The three republics are most vulnerable in the energy sphere. But the actual use of economic sanctions, rather than having a sobering effect, would probably further radicalize the situation and prompt Baltic leaders to intensify efforts to achieve independence.

Gorbachev, however, in the end is likely to depend more on carrots than sticks. He will have no choice but to offer the Baltic republics far more self-rule than Moscow has thus far. This probably will include genuine economic autonomy (complete with separate Baltic currencies), the right to enact their own laws, no military service outside the republic, and perhaps some form of separate representation abroad within Soviet embassies.

... Unlikely to Get It

The major obstacle to this approach is that the Lithuanians--as well as the Latvians and Estonians--will balk at achieving only autonomy as well as at some of Moscow's economic and security demands and open-ended timetable, forcing a showdown.

- The Balts will particularly resist attempts to maintain Baltic obligations to serve in the Soviet armed forces and pay taxes to the center or "reparations" for the economic assets they will take with them out of the union.
- The certain victory of Baltic popular fronts in local elections in February and March and the increasing likelihood of popular referenda on

independence in each republic in the next six months will quicken the pace of events, making it more difficult for Moscow to draw out the process.

The Contrast With the Caucasus

The situation in the Baltic republics differs from that in the Caucasus in a number of important respects. Except for a brief period of independence during the Russian Civil War (1918-1921), the three Caucasus republics have been part of the Russian empire for a minimum of two centuries, whereas the Baltic republics had two decades (1918-1940) as independent states. The United States and other Western powers have never recognized the USSR's incorporation of the Baltic states, but they have not questioned Moscow's sovereignty over the Caucasus. Finally, the Balts have avoided the interethnic violence that has plagued the Caucasus over the past two years and that has given Moscow's military intervention there some legitimacy internationally.

The Baltic peoples--the Lithuanians in particular--smell independence and they sense wavering in Moscow. If the Soviet leadership attempts only to stall, we believe the newly-elected Baltic governments will become radicalized, significantly increasing the likelihood of a unilateral declaration of independence. This could produce a crisis atmosphere and lead possibly to civil disobedience and the use of force.

Gorbachev and his colleagues want to avoid such a prospect. They recognize that employing force in the Baltic would certainly destroy *perestroika* and the good relationship Gorbachev has built with the West, and could lead to Gorbachev's political demise.

- Thus, we believe it much more likely that, as long as the Lithuanians avoid violence, Gorbachev--after failing to get them to settle for broader autonomy and seeing the direction of events--will agree in 1990, or 1991 at the latest, to grant them the right to full independence after a transition period of at least several years.

The process of reaching an agreement on independence after a transition period is certain to be difficult even if the Lithuanians believe Moscow has conceded the main point. The critical issues will be transition arrangements and the relationship of the new state with the USSR. Moscow will want to: retain some of its military bases; be assured of overflight rights; maintain road, rail, and air access to what would become the exclave of Kaliningrad Oblast; and receive assurances that the rights of the Russian minority will be protected.

Lithuania, for its part, would need continued economic ties to the USSR at least until its economy was on its feet and capable of competing in the world economy. This mutual dependence increases the likelihood of an "amicable divorce" that both sides claim protects their vital interests--independence for Lithuania and security for Moscow.

We judge the chances of Estonia and Latvia obtaining the same deal in 1990 or 1991 to be lower than Lithuania's because of the higher proportion of non-natives in their populations. But once Lithuania went its own way, it would only be a matter of time before Estonia and Latvia, which came into the USSR in the same manner as their Lithuanian neighbor, did so as well.

An Alternative

Although we believe it to be much less likely, there is some possibility that the Balts would settle for the vastly expanded autonomy Gorbachev is certain to offer. Without giving up the goal of eventual independence, cooler heads in the Baltic could conclude that such a compromise would give the Baltic republics the necessary time and experience to develop genuine self-sufficiency. Selling this to the Balts would be an uphill battle, unless the Lithuanians came to believe that the Soviet leadership was prepared to use force to prevent secession.

Implications for the Union and for Gorbachev

In granting the Baltic republics independence, Moscow would portray it as a special case rectifying an illegal international act of Stalin's. Nonetheless, secessionist movement in other non-Russian republics would be energized.

- Moldavia is likely to be the most directly affected. It is a fellow victim of the 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, and its activists are already following the lead of the Baltic popular fronts. Developments across the border in Romania, however, are likely to be an even more important variable affecting the future of this republic.
- The Caucasus republics, where disgust with Moscow's handling of the various and bloody indigenous ethnic disputes is growing, are also likely to see Baltic secession as opening the way for them. The situation in the region and within each republic is so much more complex, however, that the eventual outcome is more uncertain than in the Baltic.
- The independence movement in the Ukraine is much less well-developed, but it, too, could not fail to be affected by the Balts' leaving the USSR. At a minimum, it would spur demands for greater autonomy. Independence, however, would be much harder to sell both inside the republic, which has a probable majority of Russians and Russified Ukrainians, and to Moscow, given the size of the Ukraine and its importance to the Soviet economy.

Independence for the Baltic republics is not by itself likely to bring Gorbachev down. But it will give his opponents in the party one more failure to use as a rallying point against him.