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3 May 1991

Status of Talks Between Moscow and the Baltic Republics

Summary

In their renewed talks, the center and the Baltic republics have reached tentative agreements on certain procedural questions, but remain fundamentally at odds over whether independence should be the aim of talks and whether they should be conducted outside the onerous Soviet secession law. Despite their wariness regarding Gorbachev's intentions, Baltic leaders are likely to continue to pursue the discussions for now, but they will probably pull out if they become convinced that Gorbachev is not serious about talks or if the center's continuing pressure tactics precipitate serious unrest in the republics. For the near term, Gorbachev will probably continue to seek to negotiate on his terms and to rely on limited pressure tactics despite the 23 April agreement with Yel'tsin and other republic leaders. Over the next several months, however, if the Balts, as expected, continue to insist on achieving full independence on the basis of a process very different from the onerous secession law, Gorbachev might again seriously consider ousting the republic governments with force. However, real movement toward conclusion of a union treaty between the center, Russia, and other republics might lead him to soften his position, paving the way for progress toward a negotiated settlement stipulating the republics' gradual transition to independence.

New Negotiations

Following his failure in January to dislodge the Baltic governments with limited force, Gorbachev shifted tactics, appointing USSR deputy premier Laverov to head a delegation for talks with Estonia and USSR first deputy premiers Velichko and Doguzhiyev to head teams for talks with Latvia and Lithuania respectively. High ranking representatives from military, security, foreign affairs, and economic ministries were selected as delegation members. In response, each of the Baltic republics resurrected its own delegation which had been formed for talks late last year that went nowhere, with Estonia naming Ulgo Nugis, speaker of the republic legislature, to head its team; Latvia, Ilmars Bisers, the republic's first deputy premier; and Lithuania, republic President Landsbergis, although his deputy Ceslovas Stankevicius sat in for him at the first

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session. As of 3 May, Gorbachev's teams had met with the Estonians twice, and with the Latvians and Lithuanians once each. [redacted]

Limited Progress Made

Progress thus far has been limited to tentative agreements on procedural questions. The center's delegations are to meet at least twice a month with their Latvian and Lithuanian counterparts and at least once a month with the Estonian delegation, but individual members of the Estonian and center teams will meet regularly to discuss progress on specific agenda items. In all three of the talks, groups of experts from the sides are to consult frequently to prepare for sessions involving delegation members. [redacted]

[redacted] that the Soviet delegations also agreed with their Estonian and Lithuanian counterparts to discuss a number of substantive issues, such as:

- problems regarding the Soviet military presence in the republics, military service, and maintenance of the parties' security
- surveillance and maintenance of borders
- ownership and operation of all-union enterprises and facilities on republic territory
- financial, economic, and commercial relations
- rights of ethnic minorities in the republics
- legal rights of the parties

Although less is known about the specifics of the Soviet-Latvian agenda, [redacted]

[redacted] the Soviets were very concerned about economic issues and that both sides agreed that at the next meeting in late May they would focus on the stabilization of bilateral economic relations and banking questions. [redacted]

[redacted] that so far certain issues are not slated to be discussed in all three of the talks. Estonia and Latvia, for example, secured Soviet consent to discuss the question of independence, while the Soviet-Lithuanian agenda indicates only that the talks are intended to redefine relations between the republic and the center. Only Estonia and the center have apparently agreed to discuss the 1939-40 events surrounding the incorporation of the republic into the Soviet Union, which are key to Baltic claims that they have continued to be legally independent. The demarcation of borders will apparently

[redacted]

only be discussed in the center's talks with Lithuania.

Toughest Obstacles Remain

Although the onset of talks marks a small step toward a political resolution to the conflict between the center and the Baltic republics, the sides remain fundamentally at odds over the ultimate objectives of the talks and over their groundrules. The Baltic republics want to negotiate their independence outside the onerous Soviet secession law. Despite the willingness of the center's representatives to put independence on the formal agenda with the Estonians and Latvians, the weight of the evidence suggests that Gorbachev still intends to keep the Balts in the union, or, at a minimum, require them to pursue independence through the secession law.

-- After the Estonians' second session with the center's delegation, [redacted] the Soviets had insisted that the resolution of the Baltic problem could only be achieved through the new union treaty now being debated, not through outright independence.

-- Soviet negotiators told their Lithuanian counterparts that they intended to do all they could to persuade the republic to remain in the union and rejected Lithuanian proposals that the talks be state-to-state--a condition that would support Baltic claims of legal independence and exemption from the secession law.

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Another formidable obstacle is the center's continuing use of economic and military pressure on the Baltic governments apparently in the hope of demoralizing them without attracting significant Western response. The center's tactics have been especially tough toward the Lithuanians. In April, Soviet troops occupied at gunpoint facilities in several cities that had been taken over from a Soviet military support group and seized a republic bank and the local branch of a centrally controlled bank that had allegedly come under harassment from republic authorities. Believing that the Estonians are more willing to compromise, the center has been least coercive toward that republic.

Prospects

Despite their wariness regarding Gorbachev's intentions, Baltic leaders are likely to pursue talks in order to avoid being portrayed as intransigent and to test Gorbachev's professed desire for a political solution. [redacted]

[redacted] the republic delegations will probably work on smaller issues in hopes of moving Soviet counterparts toward accepting the inevitability of independence. [redacted] for example, that the Lithuanian team will first press the Soviets to renounce use of force, end the occupation of Lithuanian facilities, and give at least limited recognition to Lithuanian passports and visas. If Moscow shows flexibility on the question of independence, republic leaders may respond with significant concessions:

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Nevertheless, if the republics' leaders become convinced that Gorbachev is not serious about talks or if the center's pressure tactics precipitate serious unrest in the republics, they will probably pull out. Despite worsening economic conditions, public support for holding firm against the center--as demonstrated by the results of the republics' recent independence plebiscites--is strong in all three republics. The agreement signed in late April by Gorbachev and leaders of nine republics on concluding a union treaty soon indicated that the Baltic and other holdout republics would be forced to pay world prices for imports from the signing republics. The Balts want to negotiate trade agreements prior to independence that at least to some extent preserve subsidized prices for their supplies, but they are prepared to pay higher prices as part of the cost of independence. [redacted]

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In the near term, Gorbachev will probably continue to seek to negotiate on his terms while relying on limited pressure tactics such as using Soviet force in the area to harass republic government operations and Baltic citizens, and to foment interethnic tensions. The center's representatives will probably make other tough demands of the Balts. For example, Moscow will almost certainly raise the status of Vilnius and surrounding areas that were part of Poland between the wars in serious substantive talks, at least for negotiating leverage. It will probably insist on huge hard currency payments for its economic and military investment in the republics.

Over the next several months, however, if the Balts, as expected, continue to insist on achieving full independence on the basis of a process very different from the onerous secession law, Gorbachev might again seriously consider ousting the republic governments with force. However, real movement toward conclusion of a union treaty between the center, Russia, and other republics might lessen Gorbachev's concern about the potential disruptive effects of Baltic secession and almost certainly would greatly limit his ability to apply military pressure on the Baltics. In this situation, Gorbachev might regard the price of keeping the Balts in the union as too high, paving the way for progress toward a negotiated settlement.

The United States faces the probability of repeated flashpoints with Moscow over the Baltic issue. As long as Gorbachev and Baltic leaders remain so seriously at odds, the potential for major violence and further increased tension in the region remains high, and Baltic leaders will press hard for US political protection and help in softening Moscow's position. While Moscow has developed an increasingly thick skin toward US support for the Baltic cause, substantial criticism of its commitment to reaching a just settlement in the region would be seen by Moscow as a serious irritant in the relationship.

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