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The 19th All-Union Party Conference:
Restructuring the Soviet Political System

Summary

The 19th All-Union party conference, scheduled to begin on 28 June, will be one of the most important events of Mikhail Gorbachev's tenure. If things go the General Secretary's way it could mark a watershed in the history of the Soviet political system. If neither he nor his opponents win a clear cut victory, Gorbachev, as in the past, will pocket his gains and try for more later. If Gorbachev fails to achieve any of his principal goals at the conference, it would prove a significant political setback for him and could diminish his authority in the party.

The high stakes of the conference--the first such meeting in 47 years--are evident in the several months of extraordinary political ferment that preceded it. Party conservatives, apparently encouraged by "second secretary" Ligachev, mounted an effort to derail Gorbachev's effort to build political momentum going into the conference. Gorbachev and his reform-minded allies responded with a vigorous counterattack, delivering a setback to conservatives and gaining the upper hand in the public debate over reform.

The debate has centered largely on the viability of political and economic institutions and processes that have remained largely intact since the Stalin period. Gorbachev is counting on the party conference to approve sweeping changes in the Soviet political system in order to breathe new life into his efforts to restructure the economy and build a stronger foundation for regime legitimacy. The changes under consideration, if successfully adopted and implemented, would radically alter the Soviet political landscape by "democratizing" the party and society, limiting the role of the party in day-to-day economic and social life, and opening the way for decentralizing decisionmaking.

44

Gorbachev has no intention of abandoning the one-party system in favor of Western-style pluralism, but he clearly wants to redefine and limit the role of the communist party in Soviet life. As a result, his political restructuring effort has generated alarm among ideological conservatives who fear an erosion of party control and entrenched party and government bureaucrats who have a vested interest in the status quo.

Since its inception, the idea of convening an all-union conference to discuss "democratization" has been controversial. Gorbachev initially proposed it in January 1987, but the Central Committee, almost certainly recognizing that he was hoping to use the conference to circumvent its influence, did not endorse it until six months later. Prolonged delays and extensive debate over all aspects of conference preparations indicate how crucial the outcome is in the overall struggle over the future pace and scope of reform.

In particular, controversy has centered on three sets of issues, and, after months of public debate and behind-the-scenes infighting, neither reformers nor conservatives have achieved a decisive victory:

- o The agenda. Gorbachev's biggest success came in May, when the Politburo and Central Committee approved "theses" outlining proposals for far-reaching political reform to be considered at the conference. If approved and implemented, the reforms would significantly expand intraparty democracy, limit the tenure of party officials at all levels, and constrain party organizations from usurping powers that legally belong to state organs. In addition, the proposed agenda includes discussion of a broad range of domestic and foreign policy issues, thus providing Gorbachev with an opportunity to propose new reforms for future consideration and keep the conservatives on the defensive. At the same time, the theses contain ambiguous language, are short on specifics, and do not include some other proposals favored by the reform wing of the party, indicating that Gorbachev probably had to make some compromises to get leadership backing. He probably hopes that the public debate over the theses will put additional pressure on party conservatives to adopt more radical proposals.

- o Authority. It appears that Gorbachev has had to make compromises in defining the powers of the conference. Originally, he seemed to want the conference to have broad powers approximating those of a party congress--including the power to authorize revisions of the party statutes and to make substantial changes in the 307-member Central Committee--but recent evidence indicates that he has fallen short of that mark. It is likely that the conference will only recommend changes in the party statutes that must be ratified later at a party congress. While the sweeping changes in the Central Committee that Gorbachev would have liked are now doubtful, it is still possible that the conference will replace some or all of the "dead souls" in the Central Committee--the more than 50 members who have lost jobs meriting Central Committee status since the last congress. Moreover, changes in the Politburo and Secretariat may be announced at a Central Committee plenum that reportedly will be held at the end of the conference. If few changes--or none--are made in any of these bodies, it would have to be seen as a major loss for Gorbachev.

- o The delegates. Gorbachev's biggest setback in preparing for the conference

was probably his inability to dominate the delegate selection process. The first sign of trouble came in a decree approved at the June 1987 Central Committee plenum, which stipulated that the delegates would be elected at plenums of regional party organizations, where conservative officials abound. Delays in the election process apparently were caused by Gorbachev's efforts to ensure that the party rank-and-file be given a greater voice in nominating candidates for delegate slots. Gorbachev also issued instructions that only ardent supporters of perestroika be chosen, and he apparently backed efforts by the central party apparatus to override the rejection of several well-known reform advocates by lower level organizations. These efforts had only limited success, however, and it is clear that the delegates to the conference will be a more conservative body than Gorbachev had hoped for.

On the eve of the party conference, Gorbachev and his allies seem to be in a strong, but not commanding, position. The reformers have dominated the rhetorical debate in recent months and reduced the conservatives' room to articulate an alternative agenda. Moreover, Gorbachev has benefitted politically from his successful summit with President Reagan, and his personal leadership of the party seems secure. At the same time, however, conservatives have not been completely cowed. Ligachev, while pledging his support for Gorbachev and perestroika, has also reasserted themes stressing the limits of reform. And the prevalence of conservative apparatchiki among regional delegations to the conference will serve as a powerful check on Gorbachev's radical impulses.

While losing the battle for delegate selection, Gorbachev's ability to control the agenda will probably allow him to achieve "approval" for some significant political reforms. By gaining Politburo and Central Committee backing for groundbreaking proposals, he has made it difficult for conservative delegates to reject them or further water them down at the conference. More likely, they will work to prevent reformers from pushing through even more radical measures. Traditionally, central authorities have maintained tight reins on party congresses and they, rather than the delegates, have dictated the results. If the party conference departs from that pattern, however, giving delegates a substantially freer hand in shaping the conference's decisions on the agenda, Gorbachev's failure to control the selection of delegates could prove costly.

In the short term, Gorbachev's success at the conference will be evident in the tone and substance of conference documents, including Gorbachev's keynote address, the speeches of other leaders, and the resolution summarizing conference decisions. If the conference articulates a bold reformist vision of the USSR's future and takes concrete steps to implement "democratization," Gorbachev will have achieved a victory. If it helps solidify his hold on power by adding reform supporters to the Central Committee, the magnitude of his achievement will be even larger.

On the other hand, if Gorbachev and other speakers adopt a highly cautious tone, and if the conference emasculates the theses and makes no significant personnel changes, it will send a signal throughout the party and Soviet society that Gorbachev is not strong enough to defeat the conservatives. While that would not necessarily jeopardize Gorbachev's hold on power, it would deliver a serious blow to the momentum of his reform program and could encourage even greater resistance from the party, state, and economic bureaucracy.

If the results of the conference are mixed, that momentum will be slowed but probably not stopped, and Gorbachev will begin preparing for the next battle. Anticipating the possibility of such an outcome, reform supporters have already begun calling for an extraordinary party congress to be convened to complete the works of the conference.

In the longer term, the success of political restructuring will depend on Gorbachev's willingness and ability to put reforms into practice. The USSR is already highly democratic on paper, and Gorbachev's "democratization" effort will mean little if party rules, Soviet laws, and the USSR Constitution continue to bear little resemblance to reality. Moreover, if Gorbachev sincerely wants to expand democratic political procedures--and the evidence suggests that he probably does--he will have to find a way to force the vast party and government bureaucracy to change authoritarian practices that have been in use for decades. The party conference can create the preconditions for political change, but the ultimate achievement of that goal will take many years.

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Scope Note

This paper provides an analysis of the forthcoming All-Union Party Conference and its political significance. It is intended both as a preview of the substantive issues to be discussed at the conference and as an assessment of the political importance of the event for General Secretary Gorbachev and his reform agenda. The conference will deal with a broad range of topics--including the economy and foreign policy--and leadership changes could take place at a plenum before or after the conference. The central purpose of the conference is to review and take action on proposals that Gorbachev hopes will form the foundation of "political restructuring," however, and the analysis in this paper will focus primarily on these political reform issues.

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Contents

Summary	i
Scope Note	vi
Preparing the Way	1
High Political Stakes	1
Gorbachev's Purposes	1
The Battle over Conference Preparations	2
Perestroika Plenums	3
Debate in the Press	3
Delegate Selection	5
Uncertain Powers	6
Conference Agenda: Key Issues of Political Restructuring	8
Promoting Party Democratization	9
Systematic Renewal of Cadres	9
Check on Party Abuses	11
Legitimizing Diversity in the Party	13
"Restructuring" the Party's Role in the Economy	16
Expectations for the Party Conference	17
Party Resistance	19
Signs of Support	20
Reform of the Soviets	20
Enhanced Powers	21
Electoral Reform	22
Legal Reform: Citizens' Rights as an Instrument of Political Reform	23
Federalism: Dealing with Nationalism	25
Changing the Central Committee: The Numbers Game	26
How Much Turnover?	27
Replacing the "Dead Souls"	28
Outlook	29
Appendix A	33
Appendix B	35

Preparing The Way

High Political Stakes

By all indications, Gorbachev and his allies are hoping that the 19th All-Union Party Conference will be a pivotal event in their effort to make perestroika "irreversible."

The preparations for the conference took place in an environment of extraordinary political turmoil over the scope and pace of reform. While the upcoming conference did not create the struggle between reformers and conservatives in the party, it almost certainly exacerbated it and may have served as a catalyst for the confrontation in the leadership between Gorbachev and "Second Secretary" Ligachev that occurred this spring. Party conservatives, led by Ligachev, apparently tried to derail Gorbachev's effort to build political momentum going into the party conference by openly questioning whether his reforms are consistent with the principles of socialism. Gorbachev managed successfully to fend off the conservative challenge and took steps to heal party wounds prior to the conference. Nevertheless, Ligachev and the conservatives are far from vanquished, and they represent a formidable obstacle to the achievement of Gorbachev's reform objectives at the conference.

Gorbachev's Purposes

While the 27th CPSU Congress in 1986 did much to further his reform agenda and solidify his power, it came too early in Gorbachev's tenure to attempt any kind of systematic overhaul of Soviet political structures and processes. When Gorbachev later initiated his democratization campaign, he ran into resistance from the Central Committee, where party conservatives still comprise a large bloc of the membership. Another party congress could provide the programmatic support he desired and make changes in the Central Committee, but the next one is not scheduled to occur until 1991. By calling for an interim all-union party conference, Gorbachev hoped to reconstitute the reluctant Central Committee and develop the ideological framework for his controversial democratization effort. Gorbachev has stated that he wants the party conference to give perestroika a "second wind." He appears to have several specific goals in mind. Above all, he hopes to initiate and develop broad support for political reforms that will facilitate implementation of socio-economic reform. Gorbachev evidently recognizes the need to develop a more dynamic political system that will promote the freer flow of ideas and hold officials accountable to public demands. Through a process of "democratization" he hopes to encourage the innovative and free-thinking atmosphere needed to tackle the overwhelming economic and administrative problems brought on by decades of stagnation.

Gorbachev also hopes that the conference will help stem the erosion of confidence in the communist party and, at the same time, break down the ability of recalcitrant party officials to hinder the implementation of perestroika. While Soviet leaders including Gorbachev have reaffirmed the principle of the party's "leading role" in Soviet society, Gorbachev's supporters have grown increasingly critical of the performance of party, its leadership from Stalin's rule through the years of stagnation under Brezhnev, and the authoritarian practices and stultifying bureaucracy that still characterize it today. By adding a measure of democracy to the party, Gorbachev hopes both to reduce the gap between an increasingly bureaucratized elite and an alienated public and to increase pressure on party officials from below to comply with reformist directives from above.

The Battle Over Conference Preparations

Gorbachev's proposal to hold a conference, articulated in a speech at the January 1987 Central Committee plenum, immediately generated controversy. The party apparatchiki, recognizing that Gorbachev would try to use the conference as a springboard for breaking up the powerful regional party machines, managed to withhold Central Committee approval for the idea at the January plenum. While subsequent public statements by Soviet officials suggested that Gorbachev won agreement to hold the conference soon afterward, it was not until the June 1987 plenum that the Central Committee formally committed itself to the conference.

Since then, conservatives in the Central Committee and in the party apparatus have sought doggedly to limit what Gorbachev and the reformers can achieve at the conference. The heightened rhetorical battle in the press and evidence of a behind-the-scenes struggle within the party indicate that Gorbachev has had a difficult time getting control of critical conference preparations.

Conflict over those preparations may have been a factor in Gorbachev's struggle with Ligachev this spring. According to some reporting, Ligachev has lost some of his Secretariat responsibilities, including that of overseeing conference preparations. Gorbachev ally Georgiy Razumovskiy apparently has taken over full responsibility for overseeing that process, and it is likely that he reports directly to the General Secretary.

Nevertheless, Gorbachev has had limited success in controlling the conference preparations. Almost every aspect was delayed--from delegate selection to submission of a specific agenda--indicating their contentious nature. Gorbachev apparently won a significant political victory in May when the Politburo and Central Committee approved "theses"--or a draft conference agenda--for public debate. The agenda includes several proposals for radical political reform that Gorbachev favors. However, the results of the delegate selection process do not bode as well for the reformers. Furthermore, the ability of the conference to make significant personnel changes in the Central Committee and to pass binding resolutions for political reform seems doubtful. Thus, Gorbachev's ability to reach all of his main objectives at the conference is in serious doubt.

Perestroika Plenums. An initial gain for Gorbachev in the conference preparation process was the June 1987 plenum endorsement of his proposal to hold special nationwide plenums (report and election campaigns) to discuss the implementation of perestroika thus far. The plenums were also tasked with developing proposals for democratization that would be used as material for the conference as well as with replacing inert local officials. Gorbachev hoped that discussion of political reform among rank-and-file party members would produce proposals more radical than what was to be expected from the party apparatus. He also saw these plenums as an opportunity to replace officials resisting his reforms -- especially because these very officials would play a significant role in the selection of delegates to the conference. In speeches during the autumn of 1987, Gorbachev indicated that these meetings should be used first to persuade cadres to follow the new course and then, if necessary, to force them.

Gorbachev's conservative opposition significantly influence the results of the plenums. Not only did the plenums fail to remove many entrenched and uncooperative leaders but they did little to promote a nationwide debate on radical reforms. While thousands of proposals were produced, (according to the Moscow press, Moscow city plenums alone produced 15,000 proposals), few were published. Those that were turned out to be relatively innocuous. A 17 March Sovetskaya Kultura article probably expressed the universal disappointment of the reform camp when it charged that the proposals from the plenums published in the December-January papers called only for inconsequential innovations such as changing the length of time between obkom plenums, tinkering with the system for admission to the party, and reshuffling of party committees' apparatus.

Debate in the Press. Failing to gain the grass roots support he desired, Gorbachev turned to the central press. By the beginning of 1988 the central press opened special columns for discussion of democratization and the June conference and began publishing a plethora of articles and letters proposing controversial, and in some cases, politically sensitive ideas. In March, the Central Committee issued a decree instructing the party Secretariat to take these proposals into account in its preparation of conference materials along with proposals generated at the regional plenums. Gorbachev and the reformers appear to have won a significant victory with the adoption of many of the proposals that surfaced in the press discussion in the Central Committee approved theses to be discussed at the conference. In addition, Gorbachev has managed to have the draft published and circulated for rank-and-file discussion prior to the conference. Not only does this give Gorbachev the chance of giving the public a sense of greater participation in the policy making process, it also encourages the debate in the press to continue which will ultimately push the call for reform to go beyond what has been sanctioned by the Central Committee.

Proposals That Go Beyond the Theses

Many of the proposals raised in the press were adopted in some form or another in the theses, but several other more provocative ideas -- particularly those specifying a process for choosing the party leadership -- are not mentioned in the Central Committee-approved document. Many of these proposals go far beyond what the Politburo, Central Committee, and in some cases, party rank-and-file members will likely accept. Nevertheless, the discussion of these radical ideas, particularly ones raised after the theses were published, helps Gorbachev in his efforts to push the conference agenda, and perhaps its outcome, beyond what may have been a compromise set of theses. Proposals focusing on top political positions include:

- o A Soviet journalist writing in the weekly Moscow News called for the creation of separate legislative, executive, and judicial branches with universal suffrage to elect the country's supreme leader -- a president. According to the journalist, the duties of the party General Secretary can then return to what they were in Lenin's time -- "above all, organizational functions."
- o Writing in Literaturnaya Gazeta, reform advocate Fedor Burlatskiy disagreed with those who want to separate the offices of General Secretary and President, arguing that the General Secretary should be elected at a party congress and then run for the presidency "in a direct secret nationwide ballot." He also called for the creation of a formal vice presidency, whose incumbent would succeed the president in an emergency, avoiding the "stagnation in state decisionmaking" that attended Brezhnev's protracted illness.
- o Sovetskaya Kultura published a reader's letter calling for changes in the selection of the General Secretary -- primarily by taking away the power of Central Committee plenums to remove or appoint him. Claiming that since the CPSU Central Committee General Secretary is also the leader of the whole country, "his replacement or appointment is by no means an internal affair for the participants in Central Committee plenums." "The final decision should be for the people, and should therefore be submitted to a nationwide referendum... Thus we will be safeguarded against the chance circumstance of our country's fate being decided by a small circle of voters."

Delegate Selection. This victory may be somewhat hollow, however, given Gorbachev's failure to control the selection of the 5,000 delegates to the conference. The first sign of compromise came in the the June 1987 Central Committee decree outlining procedures for electing delegates. When he first proposed holding the conference, Gorbachev evidently hoped to convene a body more representative of the party rank-and-file rather than of conservative regional party leaders who are heavily represented in the Central Committee. He probably hoped delegates would be selected in primary party organizations, as they are for party congresses. According to the decree, however, delegates were to be elected in April and May of 1988 by secret ballot at regional party plenums. Smaller republics would select delegates at Central Committee plenums, and kray at kraykom plenums. Delegates from the Russian, Ukrainian, Belorussian, Uzbek, and Kazakh republics were to be elected at party obkom plenums. By giving regional party organizations control over the selection of delegates, the Central Committee was able to increase the likelihood that the ideological composition of the conference will not be dramatically different from that of the Central Committee itself. Indeed, this may have been the price Gorbachev had to pay to secure Central Committee approval to hold the conference.

Controversy over these procedures evidently led to delays in holding the plenums, which did not begin until mid-May. Recognizing the advantage held by the conservatives, reform supporters publicly protested the election procedures and called for changes that would dilute the influence of the more orthodox republic and regional level party chiefs. A letter published in Sovetskaya Kultura in late April stated the problem with particular clarity:

- o "Where are the guarantees, one wonders, that these highly conservative figures, ossified in their bureaucratically soulless attitude to their own fellow citizens and their worries and interests, will not be the very people who are elected delegates to the 19th party conference...?"

For his part, Gorbachev took several steps to put pressure on local party organizations to adopt elections procedures that would increase the chances of reform advocate representation. In mid-April he held a series of meetings with regional party leaders at which, according to the Soviet press, "a thorough exchange of opinions took place" on the progress of conference preparations. Gorbachev undoubtedly impressed upon them the importance of selecting the right kind of delegates.

In May, in a speech to media representatives, Gorbachev laid down a new dictum on the delegate selection process: Only "active supporters of perestroika" were to be elected, and past quotas--designed to ensure visible representation of various occupational groups--were to be abandoned. He called for the participation of low-level party organizations and non-party people in the election process and encouraged public discussion of all candidates before the plenums to ascertain their ardor on reform. He asserted that these changes had the support of the leadership.

Despite Gorbachev's injunctions, it appears that the regional party apparatchiki maintained substantial control over the process and succeeded in "electing" themselves as well as the usual quota of token worker and peasant representatives. The Soviet media have been swamped with complaints that certain elections were held without the participation of primary party committees or work collectives, that there was no choice of candidates, and that leading advocates of perestroika such as Tat'yana Zaslavskaya and Gavril Popov were not selected as delegates, despite popular support. Sovetskaya Kultura stated that not one of its reporters could find a regional plenum where the selection had been carried out by the procedure defined by Gorbachev. In Omsk, according to the Soviet press, 2000 people gathered to protest irregularities in the oblast delegate elections.

Uncertain Powers. The conference theses provide some hints about what the conference may accomplish, but the precise nature of its powers remains in question. Party statutes are not explicit on this point, press discussion of historical precedents has varied widely, and the leadership's failure to provide clarification suggests disagreement

According to current party statutes, the Central Committee can convene, when necessary, an all-union party conference to discuss pressing matters of party policy. The "procedure" for holding the conference is to be established by the Central Committee. Beyond that, they say nothing about the specific powers of a conference, and the June 1987 plenum decree failed to specify them.

The press debate -- mainly in the form of historical discussion of past party conferences -- centered, for the most part, on the question of whether conferences were equal to party congresses, the most authoritative type of party meeting. There was also a great deal of private speculation among Soviet officials. At the heart of this debate and speculation were the critical questions of whether the conference will have the authority to make changes to the Central Committee and change party statutes. At the June 1987 plenum, Gorbachev hinted that his preference was to give the conference broad enough power to adopt new strategic policies as well as to make personnel changes:

- o "Many conferences at crucial stages in history resolved problems that went far beyond being tactical problems. In a number of instances tasks of a strategic nature were advanced at them, and changes were made to statutory norms and to the composition of the party's central organs.

Subsequent press articles appeared to follow Gorbachev's lead and emphasized the broad powers of past conferences -- particularly their ability to make changes to the Central Committee, one of the most critical aspects of the General Secretary's agenda.

Table 1
Previous Party Conferences

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<u>Number</u>	<u>Dates</u>	<u>Highlights of Key Conferences</u>
1st	12-17 December 1905	Called for party unity, boycott of first Duma
2nd	3-7 November 1906	Expelled "liquidationists" from party; created party newspaper that later became Pravda; elected 7-man Central Committee, including Lenin
3rd	21-23 July 1907	
4th	5-12 November 1907	
5th	21-27 December 1908	
6th	5-17 January 1912	
7th	24-29 April 1917	Called for seizure of power by soviets after bolsheviks won majority Adopted first party rules
8th	2-4 December 1919	Called for prolongation of NEP
9th	22-25 September 1920	
10th	26-28 May 1921	
11th	19-22 December 1921	
12th	4-7 August 1922	
13th	16-18 January 1924	Condemned Trotsky and proscribed "decisive measures" against those who circulated "forbidden documents"
14th	27-29 April 1925	Called for further development of NEP in agriculture; adopted thesis on possibility of building socialism in one country
15th	26 October-3 November 1926	Expelled Trotsky-Zinoviev faction
16th	23-29 April 1929	Approved first five-year plan; called for rapid collectivization of agriculture; ordered first full-scale purge of party membership
17th	30 January-4 February 1932	Denounced Bukharin
18th	15-20 February 1941	Mobilized party to strengthen defense potential

Gorbachev apparently was not able to receive enough backing for giving the conference broad powers, however. Georgiy Kryuchkov, a deputy chief of the Central Committee Organizational Party Work Department, which is overseeing conference preparations, wrote an article published in a Soviet weekly newspaper in late May indicating that the conference's powers will be more limited than those of a congress. In particular, proposals to change the party statutes will have to be submitted to the next congress, which is currently scheduled to take place in 1991. Because of these limits on the conference, reformers have begun calling publicly for convening an extraordinary congress to complete the work the conference will not be able to do.

Kryuchkov's article indicated that a number of measures approved at the conference will not have to await a congress before they can be enacted. He said, for example, that changes in the political and electoral system will be handled by legislation and amendments to the constitution. Other reforms will be implemented "immediately" by Central Committee instructions, and he indicated that his department is already preparing such instructions in anticipation of the conference's decisions.

Kryuchkov did not indicate what powers, if any, the conference will have to make changes in the Central Committee, indicating possibly that the issue was still unresolved at that late date. The conference theses likewise fail to address the issue, although they do call for allowing a "partial replacement of central committee members in between congresses." It is uncertain, however, whether the conference will have the power to make such amendments itself or simply to recommend procedures for making them in the future.

The Conference Agenda: Key Issues of Political Restructuring

According to the "theses" approved and published in May, the conference will have a wideranging agenda that will include a midpoint assessment of the fulfillment of the current 5-year plan, an examination of the difficulties plaguing the implementation of economic reform, and a review of the rights and responsibilities of ethnic nationalities, presumably prompted by the burgeoning of nationality disturbances throughout the USSR since 1986. The theses make clear, however, that the chief focus of the conference will be on the reform of Soviet political institutions, ranging from institutionalizing systematic turnover of party and state leaders to delimiting the role of party and state organs in economic and public administration to creating new legal guarantees of individual freedoms.

The debate over Gorbachev's political restructuring program centers on two key questions: How should the communist party be reformed, and what role should it play vis-a-vis other political, economic, and social institutions? Gorbachev and his allies hope to enhance the viability and the vitality of the party by making it more responsive to the public, establishing a mechanism for regular turnover of party leaders at all levels, increasing the accountability of lower officials to the center, and by cleaning up party

corruption and eliminating some privileges of party officials. At the same time, they recognize that spurring social and economic progress requires weakening the party's stranglehold on the life of the country. How far to go in pursuit of these goals is the subject of intense debate within the party, and the proposals outlined in the theses contain enough ambiguities and loopholes to allow both conservatives and reformers plenty of room for maneuver at the party conference.¹

Promoting Party Democratization

Systematic Renewal of Cadres. The conference theses assert that "genuine competition, wide-scale discussion of candidates, and voting by secret ballot should become the norm" in electing party committee members and party secretaries at all levels. The document adds that, in party committee elections, "communists shall have the right to nominate a number of candidates exceeding that of the committee membership."

The Central Committee's endorsement of these party election procedures represents a significant victory for Gorbachev and his allies extending beyond what he tentatively proposed in January 1987. At that plenum, Gorbachev aligned himself with proposals to apply such procedures to republic party organizations and below, saying that they would "increase the responsibility of secretaries to the party committees that elected them." Gorbachev added without elaboration that the Politburo felt that "further democratization should also apply to 'central leadership organs of the party'."

The failure of the plenum resolution to endorse these principles and Gorbachev's vagueness about the top party leadership indicated that the issue was probably highly controversial. Over the course of the next year and a half, Gorbachev and the rest of the leadership remained relatively silent about the specifics of party electoral reform. In a speech in Czechoslovakia in March 1987, published in Rude Pravo, Politburo member Lev Zaykov complained that democratization had not yet penetrated the party apparatus, but that portion of his speech was not published in the Soviet press. Last November, Gorbachev told a reporter for Le Monde that secret ballot elections in the party already were the norm, presumably indicating his contentment with continuing the charade of having party officials say one thing while the actual procedure for selecting cadres is quite different.

Thus, the theses proposal represents a significant breakthrough for proponents of greater party democracy, and in part may reflect Gorbachev's ability to use the public debate to put pressure on the Central Committee. Nevertheless, the ambiguity of the theses' language suggests that the controversy is not fully resolved, and leaves unclear how rigorously the competitive principle will be applied. In particular, the failure to call for making multi-candidate elections mandatory and universal could provide a loophole that would allow party organizations to continue old, non-democratic practices.

The extent to which these electoral reforms would actually limit the ability of higher party organs to pick subordinate party leaders -- the guiding principle of the current nomenklatura system of cadre selection -- is still unclear. If party organizations abide by both the spirit and letter of these reforms, the nomenklatura system may be

destroyed. In the few experiments with multi-candidate party elections already held in the USSR, however, regional party leaders tightly managed the electoral process, putting up nominees handpicked by the next higher party organization. Moreover, in January 1987 when he first introduced the idea of party electoral reform, Gorbachev was careful to set limits. He stressed that "control from below" will supplement, not replace, control from above and emphasized that the decisions of higher party bodies will continue to be binding on personnel matters.

Thus, enactment of the current proposals would probably increase the participation of local party organizations in cadre selection but will not give them total discretion. Moreover, these proposals would increase the input of members of party committees, not of rank-and-file party members. There is no indication as yet that democratization will include any significant involvement of the masses in party leadership selection.

Any increase in the powers of the local party organizations to influence cadre selection does, in turn, increase the possibility of manipulation by local officials. Indeed, the results of the selection process for conference delegates is a telling example of not only the strength of entrenched practices, but the ability of local leaders to control the selection process when given the chance.

A second aspect of cadre renewal addressed by the theses is the call for a discussion of reestablishing a tenure limit for party leaders to two consecutive terms of office (ten years).¹ A third term can be allowed if three quarters of a party committee, using secret balloting. In an interview with the Washington Post just prior to the publication of the theses, Gorbachev noted approvingly that this limitation would apply to the office of General Secretary.

As with electoral reform, the potential for manipulation -- or circumvention -- of tenure limitation is high. During the press debate prior to the release of the theses, many reformers expressed concern that these limits not be watered down. The inclusion of an escape clause allowing for a third term suggests that they were not entirely successful, and the debate over the theses has zeroed in on this problem. In a 31 May article in Sovetskaya Rossiya, for example, a conference delegate said that "outwardly this clause is subject to considerable restrictive conditions," but that his "experience of life" suggests that after ten years in office, a local leader would have an easy time getting around these restrictions. Therefore, by allowing this loophole, he contended, the conference would be legalizing life terms in office.

The theses do not indicate whether the tenure limitation will apply retroactively to current party officials. Such a provision would almost certainly be opposed by senior leaders, including members of the top leadership, such as longtime Ukrainian party chief

¹ In 1961 provisions for tenure were adopted under Khrushchev which stated that every regular election was to renew at least one-fourth of the CPSU Central Committee and its Presidium (Politburo) and that Presidium members were not, as a rule, to be elected for more than three terms of office. This also applied to lower-level party committees. Five years later, the 23rd Congress deleted these provisions.

and Politburo member Vladimir Shcherbitskiy, who stand to lose power immediately. Younger leaders who realize this could mean short careers for them may also be opposed to such limits. Despite Ligachev's public endorsement of the theses, he is likely to be sympathetic to keeping the language of the tenure limitation provision vague. He is on record as opposing limitations on job tenures, at least at the factory level.

Even some reformers welcome the escape clause in the tenure limitation proposal. There have been calls in the press for exempting Gorbachev from tenure limitation claiming that he is the type of reform-minded leader the country needs now and should remain in office for an extended time. Thus, if both conservatives and reformers see the need for exceptions to limiting the terms of top party posts, the chances for strict adherence to the two-term limit will be low.

An additional proposal for cadre renewal which was reportedly under consideration and discussed in the press was the adoption of a mandatory retirement age for party and state leaders. The failure of this proposal in any form to be included in the draft theses probably represents a victory for more conservative elements in the party. Conceivably, this was the price they exacted for their agreement to tenure limitation.

No member of the leadership has gone on record in favor of setting age limits, although Gorbachev reportedly supported efforts to include a mandatory retirement age in the party statutes adopted at the 27th Congress in February 1987. Conservatives apparently blocked the proposal then as well, reportedly with the support of Ligachev.

While mandatory retirement has apparently been shelved for now, it will most likely remain a hot issue. According to survey results published in June by Soviet media, 80% of communist party members in Moscow favor mandatory retirement for national and republic officials at age 65, for regional officials at age 62-63, and for local officials at age 60. Reformers may find support for their cause in the actions of organizations outside of the CPSU: The Bulgarian Communist Party established a retirement age for its party and state leaders (albeit at 75 years) and several Soviet public organizations are considering (the USSR Writer's Union) or have ~~already~~ adopted (the USSR Academy of Sciences) provisions for mandatory retirement.

Checks on Party Abuse. The theses call for the creation of a new body independent of the Central Committee to serve as a watchdog over all party organizations. It would replace both the Central Auditing Commission, responsible for monitoring the financial and economic activity of party bodies, and the Party Control Commission, which monitors party discipline and compliance with party rules. This new organ would be elected directly by the party congress on a par with the Central Committee.

Lenin's Central Control Commission

In 1920, Lenin created a hierarchical system of control commissions ostensibly in response to demands for action against the overbearing and "bureaucratized" party officialdom. Local control commissions were elected by local party conferences and the Central Control Commission by the all-union congress. Thus the Commission would be on a par with the Central Committee, not under its direction, and accountable only to the congress.

Originally, the control commissions were tasked with the maintenance of party discipline. Their purpose was to ensure a high standard of party ethics, but not to take sides in any party controversies. Disputes between a control committee and a party committee would go before a joint sitting of the two bodies. Unresolved matters would be settled at the next higher party committee. Disagreements between the Central Control Commission and the Central Committee were to go before a party congress.

Once Stalin became party leader, he managed to control the composition of the Central Control Commission and use it as a weapon in consolidating his power. Eventually it became another highly centralized hierarchy paralleling party secretaries. It was transformed from being a check on the bureaucracy to an integral part of the bureaucracy and a powerful instrument in the hands of party leaders to break down local resistance to central leadership. In 1924, party regulations describing the functions of the Central Control Commission included waging a "determined struggle with all kinds of groupings and tendencies toward faction within the party, purging the party of ideological alien, harmful and demoralizing elements, broad systematic study of unhealthy phenomena in the party in the field of ideology."

By 1934 the Central Control Commission had outlived its usefulness to Stalin and was transformed into the present day Party Control Commission which is attached to the Central Committee and appointed by it.

This provision apparently emerged from suggestions during the pre-debate that the old Central Control Commission, established by Lenin but co-opted by Stalin and finally abolished in 1934, be recreated as a mechanism to monitor and control the party. Proponents of this idea argued that there is a need for the establishment of a system of checks and balances, particularly a check on the power of the high party organs. The head of the USSR Academy of Sciences Political Economic Department, for example, in bemoaning the many ills of the Soviet system that developed since Lenin's time, asked, "Why does the Central Committee acquire such unchecked power?" and added that a "control organ must be reestablished in the party which would be dependent of the Central Committee, as Lenin once proposed."

While Gorbachev has not indicated where he stands on this proposal, there are several reasons why he likely supports it. Since coming to power, he has launched a drive to clean up corruption in the party that flourished during the Brezhnev years. Creating a powerful central watchdog agency will undoubtedly help this effort. Moreover, since the party's disciplining organ -- the Party Control Commission -- falls under the jurisdiction of the Central Committee, it is susceptible to Central Committee pressure. By combining party control with party financial monitoring in a single independent body, the reformers are creating a mechanism that can be used as both a check on corruption and abuses by senior party officials (including the Central Committee) and as an additional means of ensuring compliance with political and economic reforms.

Although the new control commission will be elected at a party congress, rather than appointed by the Central Committee, it is doubtful that it would be independent of the Secretariat and Politburo. Indeed, it might be more susceptible to manipulation by the General Secretary who would find it a powerful instrument in battles with the party apparatus.

Legitimizing Diversity in the Party. Gorbachev's drive to develop a more dynamic political system demands a mechanism in the political process, heretofore absent, that not only legitimizes the expression of conflicting ideas, but ensures more democratic procedures for conflict management, particularly within the party. The draft theses state the importance of such a mechanism, especially in a one-party system: "We need a constantly operating mechanism for comparing views, for criticism and self-criticism in the party and society."

The theses urge the restoration of a "Leninist understanding" of the traditional principle of "democratic centralism" that governs party decision-making, in which "freedom of debates" is theoretically ensured before a decision is taken, with discipline requiring that dissenters do not criticize the "main line" decided upon. The discussion in the theses emphasizes the "democratic" aspect rather than the "centralism" aspect of this basic communist tenet.

Similarly, the theses discuss the longstanding ban on "factionalism" in a revisionist fashion. Lenin instituted the ban, according to which specific policy initiatives could be criticized by no overall rival political program could be set forth. Stalin expanded the definition of "factionalism" to include any dissent whatsoever and ruthlessly used the ban to rout his critics. The theses do not indicate any intention of repealing the ban on "factionalism," but they do indicate a possible liberalized attitude, calling again for a "Leninist-type approach." According to the theses, "In condemning factionalism, Lenin was definitively against persecution of his party comrades for thinking otherwise." They call for "constant and constructive political dialogue," civilized discussions, wide information, and knowledge of public opinion to become "part and parcel of the party's life."

In addition to generally endorsing the idea of broadening the boundaries of political dialogue within the party, the theses also advocate expanding the amount of information

available to the Soviet public on policy issues--thus creating an important precondition for broadening the arena of political activity beyond the confines of the party. The theses do not, however, go so far as to endorse the publication of secret party documents--including stenographic reports on Central Committee plenums--as some reformers have urged.

The theses deal only vaguely with the issue of alternatives to the communist party. They call for establishment of a "legal basis" for the activities of public organizations (such as the Komsomol), voluntary societies, and "independent associations," presumably including unofficial political groups. The theses do not make clear what the limits of political activism should be, but they do convey an attitude of tolerance, stating that "any activity" should be allowed as long as it is consistent with the constitution and "does not jeopardize the progress of our socialist society." Without further elaboration, however, those qualifiers could be used by authorities to crack down on political activists in the name of state interests.

It is highly unlikely that Gorbachev would support or the conference would endorse the creation of an opposition party, as proposed by some dissident groups and informal political clubs. But it could take steps toward creating some organizations with semi-official standing but operating outside the framework of the Communist Party, designed to give non-party members an outlet for expressing their views on political issues. Gorbachev has stated publicly that it is the population's justifiable dissatisfaction with the shortcomings of party and other public organizations that has led to the rise of unofficial political groups in the USSR, thus implying that these groups have some legitimacy. And in the public discussion of proposals to be considered at the conference, some influential spokesmen have advocated the establishment of a political entity, such as a "national front" organization, that would have much wider representation than the CPSU.

Gorbachev may encourage discussion of these proposals at the conference, but it is not clear how much autonomy he or other members of the leadership would be willing to give such an organization. Whatever measures the conference formally endorses to expand political glasnost and diversity of views, it is doubtful that Gorbachev himself is prepared to allow his opponents the same freedom of expression as his supporters have. The recent branding of a controversial Sovetskaya Rossiya article as going beyond the limits of permissible criticism and Gorbachev's reported invocation of the "main line" suggests there are definite bounds to what he will tolerate.

A "National Front" Organization?

While there is no apparent official support for the concept of a multi-party system, there appears to be growing support among reformers for the creation of a socio-political organization outside of the CPSU that would serve to unite activists from politically acceptable "informal groups," as well as politically active individuals who are not party members. For the most part, the proposals for such an organization make it clear that it will not challenge the leading role of the CPSU and will work under party supervision:

- o Moscow lawyer and Institute of State and Law official Boris Kurashvili first proposed the creation of a "national front" organization similar to those found in Eastern Europe in a March 1987 Moscow News article. According to Kurashvili, such an organization would function as an "alliance uniting people according to social and other interests" who are not party members.
- o Speaking at a press conference during the Moscow summit, reform academician Tat'yana Zaslavskaya reiterated calls for a new socio-political group outside of the CPSU to help in the fight for perestroyka. She stated that among the rights of this new group should be the freedom to criticize the work of party and government organizations, to nominate candidates for elections to government positions, and suggest issues for public referendums.
- o One letter published in Sovetskaya Kultura called for CPSU congresses to elect a "legalized special opposition center" that would "advance opposition arguments from the most diverse viewpoints." This would prevent party and state officials from being "lulled into the honeyed sleep that ensues when there is unanimity and approval to the point of absurdity."

The creation this spring of a "people's front" organization in Estonia to represent the interests of the people against the bureaucracy could serve as a precedent for establishing a national-level organization. While the Estonian "people's front" expresses overall support for perestroyka, however, it also appears sympathetic to Estonian nationalist sentiment and the Gorbachev regime will probably want to monitor its activities carefully.

"Restructuring" the Party's Role in the Economy Another major focus of the conference will be "restructuring" the party's role in the economy. According to its theses, the conference will consider the "precise delimitation" of the functions of party and state bodies. In his speech to the Central Committee plenum in February 1988, Gorbachev asserted that "delimiting the functions of party and state bodies" was "a key issue of reform in the political system."

In essence, Gorbachev wants the party to retreat from direct oversight of the economy. He evidently believes that the party--like the ministerial apparatus--has acted as a dead weight on economic development, impeding rather than spurring progress, and that redefining the party's role and relaxing its control is essential for economic reform to succeed. In a speech to Leningrad party officials in October 1987, Gorbachev asserted:

- We have long been saying, justly, that it is time for party officials to stop taking the place of economic managers and intervening in everyday production activity. . . [however] in real life. . . we went along the path of command methods and administrative methods--in other words, along the path of party pressure. . . now that we are mastering and implementing a reform and mastering new methods of economic management, it is necessary at the same time to restructure the methods of party work in the sphere of the economy, too.

Gorbachev apparently recognizes that party intervention in the economy is incompatible with the reform's goals of increased efficiency, quality, and innovation. By intervening, party officials, like their ministry counterparts, restrict the decisionmaking powers of managers and prevent their rewards (penalties) from being commensurate with their success (failure), and thus, discourage the personal commitment needed to achieve the reform's goals.

The Party's Heavyhanded Intervention in the Economy

Local party bosses typically engage in a number of activities that weaken managerial commitment to achieving gains in quality, efficiency, and innovation.²

In coordinating the activity of different organizations in their territories to improve their area's overall performance, they often pressure enterprise directors to provide services or resources at no cost to other organizations. The director of Moscow Instrument-making plant complained that he was forced by local party officials to provide "practically free labor of our people to collective farms and various kinds of 'assistance' and 'donations' to the city and rayon."

They also involve themselves in decisionmaking within individual enterprises. In Izvestiya, for example, an economist at a Moscow enterprise lamented that "our feet remain tied" by local party officials who take steps such as dictating "who [among the enterprise employees] should be doing what and where" and freezing the enterprise's bank account for overexpenditures on business trips.

In addition, interviews conducted with participants in the Soviet Interview Project (SIP) indicate that local party officials weaken managerial incentives for operating efficiently through their regular lobbying of higher party and state bodies for material or financial resources needed to prop up lagging enterprises in their areas.

Expectations for the Party Conference. Gorbachev and other members of the leadership have yet to recommend any specific limits on the party's role in the economy. Gorbachev, for example, has confined himself to "emphasizing that the party should concern itself more with its "principal functions as the political vanguard," including formulating and adjusting overall policy, selecting and placing personnel, and organizing and educating the masses to implement policy.

- ² Soviet references define "local" (mestnye) party organs to include those party bodies at the republic, regional (oblast), city and district (rayon) level. The term "local" is somewhat misleading because the highest officials of republican central committees or of Moscow or Leningrad city committees are important national party figures. (U)
- ³ Vitaliy Vorotnikov, chairman of the RSFSR Council of Ministers, has been most willing to single out aspects of traditional party behavior for change. In January 1988, he told an obkom plenum that party officials must not "protect and shield enterprises"

It appears, however, that Gorbachev and his allies intend to use the conference to push "restructuring" the role of the party in the economy to the forefront of their reform agenda. At a minimum, Gorbachev hopes that the conference, by identifying the issue as a priority problem, will encourage reformers to begin to address it directly in the press, thus increasing pressure on party officials who continue to use heavyhanded methods. Beyond that, they likely hope that the conference will endorse a new, more clearly defined role for the party that ultimately leaves it much less involved in economic activity. Articles in the Soviet press suggest that Gorbachev will probably want to air proposals at the conference for changing the party rules so that they reflect this new role. Traditionally, the rules have prohibited the "supplanting" of economic organs and local governments (soviets) by party organizations, but the term's ambiguity has left party officials with wide freedom of action.

Gorbachev and his allies may also want the conference to set at least a general timeframe for the party's transition to its new role. Evidence suggests that rather than pushing for rapid changes, they will seek approval for linking the pace of transition to progress in implementing economic reform. Gorbachev and others appear concerned that if the weaning of party officials from heavyhanded administration outpaces the introduction of key economic reforms--such as a market-based pricing and a regulated market for producer goods--it could disrupt the economy. In his speech to Leningrad party officials in October 1987, Gorbachev hinted at this concern when he excused the past use of pressure tactics by the party as necessary "to compensate for flaws in the economic system." Slyunkov appeared to do the same in his January 1988 article in Kommunist, arguing that, in the past, party committees' "administrative pressure as well as improper replacement of economic organs... were largely explained by the need to compensate for imperfections of the economic mechanism."

In addition, Gorbachev and his allies intend for the conference to take concrete steps to aid the party's transition to its new role. The theses indicate that the reorganization of local party committee apparatuses--and perhaps the CPSU central committee apparatus--will be addressed at the conference. Many proposals in the Soviet press have supported the expansion of experiments in Moscow, Riga, and other regions in which certain local party committees have eliminated the branch departments through which they monitor economic activity and given those party committee staffers, who previously focused exclusively on a specific economic sector, broad responsibilities for personnel, propaganda, education, social, and economic policy at a number of enterprises. These proposals likely reflect the belief that broadening the responsibilities of party staffers will leave them less able to intervene in economic activity. It is not clear whether the current experiments involve not only restructuring of party committee apparatuses, but also cuts in the number of party committee staffers. Many proposals appearing in the Soviet press, however, urge that such reorganizations be accompanied by sizable personnel cuts, much like the cuts now underway in economic ministries, to further hinder detailed involvement in the economy by remaining officials.

who "beg for all sorts of allowances and additional funds." In the same speech, he indicated his eagerness to see the end of "the time when stronger methods could be used [by party organs] to dispose of enterprise resources..."

Calls for Cutting the Party Apparatus

In the public debate leading up to the party conference many Soviet officials and ordinary citizens have criticized the "swollen" party apparatus and called for its reduction. In a particularly candid letter to Sotsialisticheskaya Industriya, a Ukrainian academic wrote:

Lately it is often said that party committees should not supplant local soviets and economic organs, but instead should focus on the political leadership of these organs. By chance I opened the phone book to the section on party organs. In one obkom alone there are 13 administrative departments. Each of these departments has from three to 20 telephone numbers, suggesting they have at least as many workers. Along with an industrial department, there are also departments for machinebuilding and food and light industry. Besides that, there is a gorkom which has seven departments, plus seven raykoms with four departments each. And all this for a city with a population a little over 800,000 people. . . . As a result of such proliferation, the party committee departments duplicate the structure of the national economy. I think that such a large apparatus is not needed for political leadership. It is well known that we must significantly reduce the 18 million strong army of administrators. So why not begin the reductions in the party apparatus? . . . I think that this question should be addressed at the 19th party conference.

Steps taken by the conference to promote economic reform and democratization could also facilitate Gorbachev's efforts to change the party's role in the economy. For example, the approval of measures aimed at improving the implementation of economic reform would likely make it easier for him to press party officials to begin the transition to a new role. In addition, measures that give greater influence over the selection of local party bosses to economic managers who are party committee members would likely increase pressure on elected bosses to stay out of enterprise affairs.

Party Resistance. A scaling back of the party's role in the economy would be extremely painful for many party officials high and low. Their ideology, by emphasizing the close connection between political power and control of the means of production and distribution, predisposes them to fear that removing the party from active intervention in economic management would cut into the very heart of the party's power and undermine the foundations of party rule. Many local party officials, in particular, who devote themselves almost exclusively to intervention in economic activity are likely worried that accepting a lesser role in the economy would erode the status of their jobs and accompanying personal status and privileges.

The resistance of local party officials also stems, in large part, from their personal responsibility for the economic performance of their areas, coupled with their belief that

without their intervention economic and social disruptions would occur in their territories. In a December 1987 interview with Sovetskaya Rossiya, for example, Valentin Kuptsov, first secretary of Vologda oblast in the Russian republic, admitted that the party's overinvolvement in the economy was an "unsolved problem" but noted the large number of requests for assistance in economic matters flowing into the obkom, and asked, "And really, how can you throw them away if you know that the fate of whole collectives is at stake?" In addition, according to Soviet economist Gavril Popov, editor of Voprosy Ekonomiki, local party officials sometimes view abandonment of their traditional role in the economy "as a death blow to their former skills and experience." According to a recent poll of 487 gorkom and raykom first secretaries conducted by a Soviet historian, 84 percent of the respondents had received their higher educational training in an economics specialty.

Signs of Support. Recent Soviet press articles suggest that at least some local party officials will support Gorbachev's efforts at the conference to reshape party committees' role in the economy. Several officials, including certain obkom first secretaries, have backed the kind of structural changes in local party committees that have been the focus of experiments in different regions of the country. In a Pravda interview in October 1987, for example, Fedor Morgun, then first secretary of Poltava obkom in the Ukraine, argued that it was necessary to "get rid of the superfluous parts" of obkom apparatuses and that the majority of communists with whom he had spoken in private agreed with him. Morgun, since selected to head the new State Committee for the Protection of Nature, urged the abolition of the obkom's branch departments to allow obkom workers to focus on political work with the masses and political leadership of the economy and social development.

Those party officials who support a lesser role for the party in the economy probably do so in part because it is official policy. They may be concerned that in failing to promote such a policy rhetorically they could risk repercussions. By the same token, they may well view supporting change as a means for getting favorable recognition from above. These officials, especially those with strong ideological training, may be influenced by the Leninist precepts emphasizing political leadership as the party's role. In addition, party officials from areas that depend primarily on enterprises subordinate to local soviets--rather than to Moscow or republic officials--may be confident they can accept a lesser role in the economy without jeopardizing regional development.

Reform of the Soviets

A primary focus of Gorbachev's plan to revitalize Soviet society and make the political system more responsive to restructuring is the rejuvenation of the soviets as instruments of public administration and citizen participation. As Gorbachev stated in February 1988,

- o "One of chief tasks in renewal of the political system is that of creating clear-cut democratic guarantees which will considerably reduce or completely banish subjectivism in the solution of questions at all stages of

authority. Above all the changes must affect the Soviets, as bodies of people's power, their work and formation."

While reformers have called for major changes in the Supreme Soviet, Gorbachev appears primarily concerned with enhancing the role of soviets at the local level. Local soviets are supposed to be representative legislatures responsible for overseeing the administration of government affairs in their territories, but in practice they are little more than part-time, rubberstamp legislative organs. Local party bodies have routinely infringed upon their rights in all aspects of public and economic administration, and the soviets are often powerless to resist the intervention of central government ministries who oversee economic enterprises located within the local soviet's jurisdiction. The draft theses admit to the serious shortcomings of the work and powers of the soviets:

- o "As a result of known deformations, the rights and powers of the representative bodies have been curtailed and they remain under unwarranted tutelage from party committees. In many cases ministries and departments decide matters of economic and social development over their heads."

Democratizing the soviets will have a much more limited impact than democratizing the party. By increasing the powers of the soviets and simultaneously expanding democratic procedures in electing soviets and their executive committees, local populations will gain greater control over matters of local concern, such as environmental issues, public transportation, and food services. The party, however, will remain the principle decision-making body at all levels of the system, and average citizens will still have no direct voice in choosing party leaders.

Enhanced Powers. The theses state that it is necessary to "reinststate to the soviets their real governing powers by turning over to them all specific questions of state, economic, social, and cultural life for consideration and decision." Gorbachev and his allies likely believe that increasing the power of the soviets will aid their efforts to reduce the party's involvement in economic activity. Soviets have traditionally had formal powers to ensure local development, but, in practice, they have had to rely on local party officials to pressure enterprises for assistance. In a March 1988 interview in *Izvestiya*, for example, the chairman of the executive committee (Ispolkom) of the soviet of the city of Pushkin outside Moscow, acknowledged that when enterprises are negligent in providing housing, or recreational or health care facilities, the ispolkom could "demand" they take remedial measures, but couldn't accomplish much without the intervention of party officials.

Gorbachev probably hopes that conference decisions will provide the basis for legislation and for changes in the USSR constitution that expand the powers of soviets. Perhaps most important, legislation must guarantee soviets a share of income from local enterprises sufficient to finance local development. Certain provisions of the law on state enterprises, approved in June 1987, address this question, but Soviet officials have indicated that the law's provisions must be sharpened. In addition to legislative changes, Soviet press articles suggest that Gorbachev will seek conference support for expanding ongoing reorganizations of Ispolkoms - measures intended to enhance their ability to coordinate local economic activity.

Electoral Reform. According to the draft theses, "the necessity to dramatically enhance the role of soviets requires an election system reform to guarantee free nomination of candidates, and wide and multi-sided discussion of the nominees at public meetings and in the mass media." While the USSR Constitution allows for public participation in the nomination and selection of candidates, in practice, the party has always dominated the process -- preselecting candidates to run in noncompetitive elections. By introducing further guarantees for greater citizen participation in this process, reformers are taking the first step in making the soviets more representative bodies.

A second aspect of soviet electoral reform to be discussed at the conference is tenure limitation. The theses stipulate that in order "to ensure better continuity and efficiency of deputies, the standard term of five years should be set." They further state that a rule should be established "according to which no one may hold an elective government post for more than two terms, i.e. for ten years." Election for a third term, as with the proposed election procedure for the party, can take place by secret ballot with 3/4 of the deputies of the soviet involved deciding in favor. Tenure limitation for governments posts, as with the party, will provide a mechanism for systematic leadership turnover. If the leadership is at all successful in strengthening the powers of the soviets in the day-to-day management of local economic and public administration, the need for such mechanisms becomes that much more important.

The theses do not directly address the issue of multi-candidate elections to the soviets. However, speaking in Latvia in February 1987, Gorbachev specifically proposed such experimentation in then upcoming elections of local deputies: "Let them nominate 3, 4, 5, or 10 people," so as to permit the authorities to "accumulate enough experience to draft a new law on the electoral system." Local soviet elections in June 1987 were carried out under experimental reforms -- some districts were combined into multi-representative districts, and the ballots listed more candidates than the number of seats to be filled. The conference may deal with this aspect of electoral reform as well, although the specifics on electoral procedures may be dealt with in the future law Gorbachev mentioned above.

The conference may also discuss ways to change the composition of the soviets to make them more representative of the people and not of established officialdom. Under the title "Who should be a deputy?", Izvestiya published a number of letters highlighting this problem, including one that said:

- o "When party or state forums are convened, you cannot at once make out from their composition what they are: a central committee plenum or a supreme soviet session. I am convinced that the unprecedented merging and intertwining of party and state organs of power is undemocratic and hinders the cause."

The theses partially address this issue by proposing that ministers and other government officials should not be elected deputies to soviets since soviets are supposed to conduct oversight of government and having ministers in the soviets undermines this function. The theses fail to discuss the role of local party leaders as

denuties, however -- an issue at the heart of delineating party and state functions

Legal Reform: Citizens' Rights as an Instrument of Political Reform

Gorbachev has called for major legal change to make the administration of justice more equitable and the use of police power less arbitrary as a way of enhancing the regime's legitimacy in the eyes of the population, and especially of gaining support among the more outspoken and productive members of society. Until now, some categories of people and regime institutions -- the party elite and the KGB -- have been above the law to a considerable degree, while critics of the regime -- political dissenters, non-conformists, religious believers and others deemed "troublemakers" -- have largely been outside its protection.

Gorbachev apparently believes that in order for his "democratization" campaign to make a significant impact on the bureaucratized political system, he must give the citizenry sufficient legal powers that can stand up to bureaucrats who have traditionally used the legal system to persecute their critics.

In his plenum speech last February, he linked democratization with strengthening "socialist legality" and called for universal primary legal education.

The conference may call for the strengthening of "socialist legality" by creating mechanisms placing the police and the KGB under tighter control. Gorbachev has already sanctioned unprecedented exposure in the media of abuses by the police, the courts, and KGB and has continued a purge of the law enforcement organs to remove corrupt and inept officials. Nearly 200,000 employees of the Interior Ministry have been dismissed in the past five years.

The conference theses calls for the creation of a "law-based" society in which citizens as well as state and party organizations act within the law. The theses urge the adoption of new measures designed to increase the protection of individual citizens' rights including:

- o new legal guarantees to ensure respect for individual freedoms such as "freedom of speech, the press, conscience, assembly, street processions and demonstrations,"
- o "guarantees of citizens' personal rights such as privacy and the confidentiality of correspondence and telephone conversations,
- o protection for law enforcement organs against outside pressure or interference, and
- o improvement in public legal education to support increased activeness.

By pushing for the effective implementation of citizen's rights, Gorbachev and the reformers are attempting to give the citizenry a greater sense of control over their own lives and, in turn, increase their activism in the political process. The creation of the "law-based socialist state" described in the theses will help Gorbachev and his supporters overcome the stagnated and corrupt economic and political system they have inherited. Reform of the legal system encourages the citizenry to become more involved in identifying official abuses and to become more law-abiding themselves. It also serves to enhance the legitimacy of the system in the eyes of both those at home and abroad.

The conference may endorse the idea of drafting a new constitution to encompass democratic changes or to give teeth to reform proposals. While Soviets have recently backed away from earlier claims that drafts of new laws on press, glasnost, religion, and criminal law will be ready for presentation to the conference, it could discuss these issues in general terms and provide guidance to those preparing the drafts. In any case, it will probably provide a strong endorsement of Gorbachev's call for a "law-based socialist state" which could be used as a lever in the final debates over the wording of the existing drafts.

Federalism: Dealing with Nationalism

The conference is likely to confront the explosive and troublesome nationality problem during discussion of what the theses refer to as "overdue measures" to develop Soviet "federalism." The non-Russian minorities have used new opportunities afforded them under glasnost to press for realization in practice of the federal structure set forth on paper in the constitution.

Since Gorbachev's succession, many minorities have become more vocal in seeking an expansion of legal, economic, and cultural rights. The Baltic region, particularly Estonia, is in the forefront of pressing for changes, that would in effect establish a form of "home rule" for republics within the Soviet state. At a meeting of the Estonian cultural unions in early April, for example, demands for "true federalism" in the USSR were made and the calls for giving Union Republics broad control over their own socio-economic developments were forwarded to the conference and given extensive play in Estonian media. In June, an Estonian newspaper published proposals from Estonian delegates asking the conference to adopt Lenin's original concept of federalism: according to this idea, the central government would provide only for defense and foreign policy, while the constituent republics would have their own citizenship, official language, and control of decisions affecting their separate economies.

The vision of center-periphery relations embodied in the theses is clearly less radical. The theses call for "constant attention" to the task of developing each ethnic group. This is balanced by positive references to "internationalist ideology" and strengthening friendship between nationalities in the interest of the "cohesion of Soviet society". A reference to increased decentralization and independence of "republics and other ethnic administrative units" is offset by a reminder that this "must go hand-in-hand with their responsibility for all-union state interests."

The theses do go beyond standard formulations, however, in stating that ethnic groups lacking territorial units of their own are entitled to more possibilities to express and satisfy their demands. Several Soviet academics have been pressing for acceptance of such an "extra-territorial" approach which would provide cultural institutions for the 30 million national minorities who live outside their home republic. While thus upholding the present federal structure, the theses call for the activation of political institutions, probably including groups reportedly established recently under the Central Committee and the Supreme Soviet, to identify and coordinate national interests.

The careful language in the theses on nationality issues suggests this remains an area of significant controversy within the elite. It seems unlikely that proposals for fundamental changes in the status of the republics vis-a-vis the center will be adopted by the conference. However, several Soviet officials have suggested that a general discussion of nationality issues will be on the agenda. The results of this discussion may also provide guidance for the special Central Committee meeting on the nationality

- * The constitution formally grants the republics of the USSR broad powers -- including the right of secession from the union -- but in fact, ~~the theoretical~~ powers have not been exercised in the highly centralized Soviet state.

problem planned for later this year which may take place soon after the conference

Central Committee Membership: The Numbers Game

When Gorbachev first proposed holding an All-Union Party Conference, it appeared that he was motivated in large measure by dissatisfaction with political complexion of the Central Committee. After all, if that body fully supported his reform agenda, there would be no particular need to go outside the framework of Central Committee plenums to get backing for his "democratization" proposals. The failure of the January 1987 plenum resolution to endorse several of the ideas contained in Gorbachev's report—including the idea of holding a party conference--attests to the more conservative nature of that body. While Gorbachev has had some major successes at Central Committee plenums--such as the approval of a comprehensive economic reform package in June 1987—he has often had to compromise his goals in the face of resistance from a large block of conservative members. Rather than wait until the next party congress to get what he wanted, Gorbachev decided to revive the party conference as a venue for strategic policy decisions and changes in Central Committee membership.

Part of Gorbachev's motivation for holding a conference almost certainly was the prospect of using such a gathering to alter the membership of the Central Committee in his favor. Since the last party conference was held in 1941, the quinquennial party congress has been the sole authority empowered to elect full (voting) and candidate (alternate) members of the Central Committee. Between congresses, a plenum can promote candidate members to fill vacancies created by the death or, occasionally, forced removal of full members. Reporting indicated that Gorbachev originally hoped that the conference would have the power to remove conservative members of the Central Committee and replace them from outside the ranks of candidate members.

Gorbachev's concern suggests he believes that he does not at present have a majority in the Central Committee--a conclusion our limited evidence corroborates. At best, depending on the issue, our judgment is that he probably enjoys the firm support of no more than about 40% of the 306 full members. (The actual size is 307, but one member died since the last Central Committee plenum.)

This places the General Secretary in some danger should his opponents bring the question of his leadership to a showdown: Nikita Khrushchev won such a showdown in the Central Committee in 1957 and retained his position, but lost a similar contest seven years later. Concerns that a similar fate could befall Gorbachev were evidenced by the

publication of a letter in Sovetskaya Kultura on 30 April from a reader who warned that "to present a plenum at which M. S. Gorbachev could be removed...is entirely realistic." This letter suggested that the Central Committee should be stripped of its ability to remove a General Secretary in order to "safeguard against the chance circumstance of our country's fate being decided by a small circle of voters."⁵

How Much Turnover?

About 40% of the current membership (125 of the 306 members) was elected at the 27th Party Congress in March 1986, a year after Gorbachev's accession to the post of General Secretary.⁶ Of these, 23 were elevated from candidate membership and 102 were newcomers to the Central Committee. Although elected under Gorbachev, it must be assumed that they are all Gorbachev supporters.⁷

How much additional support Gorbachev can hope to gain in the Central Committee will not be known until the regime clarifies the powers of the conference. According to Party statutes adopted in 1939--which are no longer in force but may serve as possible precedents--up to 20% of the full membership could be removed, but their replacements would have to come from the ranks of current candidate Central Committee members. This would produce limited gains for Gorbachev: only 14 of the 57 officials who currently occupy Central Committee-warranting positions are already candidate members, and of those only nine are known to be associated with reformists in the leadership. This process would also mean that several high-level party and government officials now in Central Committee-warranting positions would be forced to wait three years until the next party congress for full membership, leaving their institutions or bureaucracies without a vote on the Central Committee for that period of

⁵ According to the Moscow rumor mill, "Second Secretary" Ligachev may have tried last April to convene a special Central Committee plenum while Gorbachev was out of town with the purpose of ousting the General Secretary. The rumors indicated, however, that Ligachev was unable to muster enough support among other Politburo or military leaders to convene such a plenum.

⁶ About 85% of the Central Committee is comprised of people filling official posts throughout the country, with the majority of these holding national and regional party and government jobs. The remaining 15% consists of a mix of academics, factory managers, workers, and farmers. Despite the large overall turnover in the Central Committee membership at the 27th Congress, the proportions represented by various institutional and occupational groups in the Central Committee were almost identical to those of the previous one.

⁷ There are several pre-1986 Central Committee members who are key supporters of reform, however, such as Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze and Gorbachev adviser Ivan Frollov. Similarly, several members of this newly elected group of 125 are probably politically closer to the conservatives (such as first deputy chief of the CPSU CC cadre department Yevgeniy Razumov and Toms'k First Secretary Viktor Zorkaltsev). These crossovers appear to balance out.

time.

It is uncertain, however, that the 1939 statutes will be adhered to strictly--or at all. There has been a variety of reporting on the 20% rule.

Recent indications, however, suggest that Gorbachev will not be able to make dramatic changes in the Central Committee and there is some question whether any turnover at all will occur.

Even before the plenum, Novosti director and candidate Central Committee member Valentin Falin told Western journalists that there would be no major changes. Burlatskiy reportedly told foreign interviewers in late May that Gorbachev had concluded it would be risky to let the conference alter the composition of the Central Committee, because the prevalence of conservative conference delegates could lead to an increase, rather than reduction of conservative membership of the Central Committee. It is possible that Gorbachev and his allies have already ascertained that they will not be able to obtain the 20% turnover they originally hoped for, and thus are exerting damage control before the fact.

Replacing the "Dead Souls"

Recent reporting suggests that the conference may still take some action regarding the so-called "dead souls" -- those members of the Central Committee who since the last congress have lost official positions that merit Central Committee status. Seven who have died or have been expelled have already been replaced with candidate members. (The other official has died since the last plenum.) About 50 other vacancies have been created through dismissal (11), retirement (33), and demotions (2) of individuals in Central Committee-warranting positions. Historian Yevgeniy Ambartsumov reportedly said in April that these former officials had been requested to submit their resignations from the Central Committee to facilitate their replacement at the conference, and that 40 had already done so.

Removing the "dead souls" would appear to benefit Gorbachev politically. The majority of them probably are not Gorbachev supporters. Most have career ties to or are supporters of conservative members of the leadership or their stand on reform issues is unknown. Of the group of officials waiting in the wings to take their places on the Central Committee, the largest proportion appears to be associated with Gorbachev and his allies.

Different election scenarios would have different results for Gorbachev:

- o Partial or full replacement of the "dead souls" would probably help him politically, since the replacements are more likely to support his programs. If the party conference removes the "dead souls" without immediately replacing all of them -- creating a smaller Central Committee--Gorbachev should gain slightly because most of the "dead souls" are associated with either the conservative bloc of the current Politburo or disgraced Politburo members or have no known ties to Politburo members--thus giving the reform supporters a larger proportion in a body reduced in size by 13%.
- o If close to a 20% turnover in membership still takes place without restriction to selection from the ranks of current candidate Central Committee members, the opportunity exists for significant gains for Gorbachev, perhaps including the achievement of solid majority support on the Central Committee.
- o A greater than 20% change would constitute a major political victory for Gorbachev, but this now appears highly unlikely.
- o No changes would have to be considered a defeat for him.

Outlook

The draft theses for the conference provide a framework for institutionalizing changes of the political system that Gorbachev and the reformers hope will facilitate implementation of the broader reform agenda. The Politburo and Central Committee endorsement of these theses suggest that most of them will be acted upon at the conference. By securing the publication of the theses in advance, Gorbachev undoubtedly hoped to generate pressure on conference delegates to approve even more radical proposals. Indeed, Soviet media announced in early June that the Politburo ordered the party apparatus to collate proposals generated by the "grass roots" debate "so that they may be taken into account during discussion matters for the conference agenda and be reflected in the conference decisions."

Gorbachev has orchestrated several major victories in the period leading up to the conference. He has taken steps to remove a number of regional party leaders in the weeks prior to the conference. Reformers have dominated the media and kept conservatives on the defensive. Gorbachev's success at the summit, which may have been scheduled deliberately only weeks before the party conference, gave him added political momentum and strengthened his image as a world statesman whose presence at the helm brings prestige to the USSR.

The conservatives have not retreated, however, and their success in blocking the selection of many reformers as delegates suggests they will exert considerable influence at the conference. Ligachev has voiced public support for Gorbachev's personal leadership of the party and has at least verbally supported Gorbachev's call for party

unity, but he has also continued to caution publicly against allowing reform to exceed the boundaries of socialism. The continuing power of conservatives in the Central Committee is evident in the ambiguous language of some proposals and in the apparently diminishing expectations that the conference will authorize significant changes in the Central Committee's composition. Indeed, in order to secure the Central Committee's approval of the agenda, Gorbachev may have had to water down the wording of specific provisions and to back down on the powers of the conference. Central Committee conservatives, in turn, may have been willing to go along with some radical proposals because they were being submitted for discussion only, and they probably expected to be well represented among the delegates who would vote on them.

Given the relaxation of restrictions on political debate and the absence of recent precedents, it is difficult to predict how much control over the conference proceedings will be exercised by central authorities. Some reporting indicates that they will be in firm command, with little decision-making power allotted to the delegates themselves. But with more than 5000 participants--many of whom are not dependent on the top leadership for their jobs--it may be more difficult to control than a Central Committee plenum, a much smaller gathering of political elites. In the past, the leadership has succeeded in stage-managing other large gatherings, such as party congresses, but new rules of "democratization" may now apply. For example, sessions of the 1500-member Supreme Soviet have traditionally been largely ceremonial occasions devoted to perfunctory discussion and formal approval of legislation dictated from above, but the May 1988 session turned into a raucous referendum on economic legislation. If similar standards of participation are applied to the party conference, central officials will have a hard time dictating the conference's decisions. Indeed, both reformers and conservatives may anticipate that the conference will be difficult for either side to successfully manipulate.

A number of indicators will help us measure Gorbachev's success at the conference, including:

o Conference endorsement and wording of specific proposals. High on Gorbachev's agenda are the proposals to "democratize" the party and redefine its role, particularly in regard to economic management. The degree of specificity in those proposals will be an important measure of how successful he has been in overcoming conservative opposition. If proposals contained in the theses are approved without further qualifying language, Gorbachev will have made a noteworthy gain. If more radical proposals are approved, especially if followed by strong implementation measures, Gorbachev's achievement will be substantial indeed. If the theses proposals are watered down, however, it will be a clear loss for Gorbachev.

o Personnel turnover. While Gorbachev has seriously lost the battle to make sweeping changes in the Central Committee, it is nonetheless important for him to increase

If the conference produces no personnel changes, it will have to be seen as a loss for Gorbachev.

o The tone and substance of Gorbachev's speech at the 70th anniversary -- A cautious tone -- like that he adopted in the 70th anniversary speech following the ouster of his ally Yeltsin -- or failure to expand the reform agenda beyond the framework of the theses would indicate that he had pushed for too much too soon and was forced to compromise. By allowing reform proponents unprecedented freedom publicly to criticize the political system, Gorbachev has inevitably generated expectations that he will use the conference as a springboard for radical change. While Gorbachev is unlikely to embrace some of the most controversial proposals, he cannot afford to disillusion his supporters by appearing to make too many compromises with the conservatives. As he has done in the past, he will also want to use his speech to articulate new reform ideas for future consideration, thus keeping pressure on conservatives.

o The nature of the discussion on economic reform, appraisal of implementation, which is going poorly, could be used by reformers to justify pushing ahead with controversial aspects of the economic reform program, such as pricing and wholesale trade. They believe that the absence of these reforms is distorting those already in place. Conservatives on the other hand, could use the confusion and disruptions resulting from the reforms to argue for a continued steady pace or even some slowdown in implementation.

o Conference speakers. Reform-minded sociologist Tatyana Zaslavskaya, who failed in her bid to be elected as a conference delegate, told Western reporters in early June that the conservative nature of the delegates could be offset by a reformist roster of speakers. Certainly, Gorbachev will want his closest political allies and lower-level supporters of perestroika to dominate the rostrum. He may also want other members of the leadership to go on record in support of political restructuring, in order to send a strong signal throughout the party that there are no divisions on the issue. The degree of leadership consensus on specific reform proposals should become apparent in the conference and post-conference speeches by other Politburo members.

If Gorbachev is able to "win" on the democratization and Central Committee issues, he will have won a significant political victory that will enhance his prestige, bolster his power, and facilitate his ability to enact future reforms. If the balance is negative, it will send a clear signal to the party and general population that Gorbachev is not able to override conservative resistance to his reform agenda and could encourage even more footdragging by officials throughout the system. Gorbachev's hold on power would probably not be jeopardized, at least in the near term, but his authority in the party could be diminished significantly and his "democratization" campaign would suffer a serious setback. If the results are mixed -- with neither reformers or conservatives winning a clear-cut victory -- Gorbachev, as in the past, will pocket his gains and try again later.

Even if Gorbachev were to receive unreserved "backing" for his full political reform agenda, there is no guarantee that reforms approved in principle would be realized in practice. On paper, the USSR is already a "democratic" system, and further

democratization could amount to nothing more than a cosmetic change -- with officials not necessarily ignoring new rules, but manipulating them in violation of the spirit, if not the letter of the law.

Gorbachev is probably serious about changing the political system, but ensuring implementation of major reforms will require an enormous exertion of political will. Consequently, the impact of whatever formal changes the conference endorses will depend on the outcome of what is likely to be a prolonged struggle between the reform wing of the party and those institutions and elites who oppose the course Gorbachev is charting for the country.