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Reporter's Notebook: Cheers and Barbs in Russia

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MOSCOW, March 7 — There is something awesome about the volume of words generated at a Soviet Communist Party congress.

Over nine days, with a day off on Sunday, the 5,000 delegates to the 27th party congress sat stoically in their assigned rows in the cavernous Palace of Congresses through some 100 speeches, as well as 31 by foreign Communist leaders.

Each speech was printed in pages of solid type in the party newspaper Pravda and the Government newspaper Izvestia, with "applause," "prolonged applause" and sometimes "tumultuous, prolonged applause" marked in at appropriate spots.

The only other interruptions at the congress, which ended Thursday, have been for "votes," all unanimous, to adopt the party program, the economic guidelines, resolutions and other reports.

Signals From the Podium

But if Mikhail S. Gorbachev and his lieutenants meant the congress to set the Soviet land on a new course, then the signals from the podium were often confused and contradictory.

Virtually every speaker pledged himself to join in the bold turn toward greater initiative, dynamism and candor demanded by Mr. Gorbachev. Each dutifully criticized his own work as well as outdated ways, bureaucratism, corruption and all the other "negative phenomena" attacked at length in the leader's five-and-a-half-hour keynote speech.

Yet beyond the ritualized unanimity, few speakers seemed prepared to test the limits of candor or to match their leader in sharpness, and those Muscovites who bothered to follow the endless speeches found them less provocative than the letters and articles in the press that had preceded the congress.

"I was totally disappointed by the level of discussion," Roy A. Medvedev, the dissident Marxist historian, said. "None were a match for Gorbachev's report. The Politburo members were cautious, and the delegates were often talking as they would at a normal meeting, complaining about the lack of some machine or tool."

A Fiery Critique

The one exception was Boris N. Yeltsin, the new Moscow party chief, who followed a fiery critique of the party's Central Committee by admitting that he had hardly been so bold at the last party congress, when criticism was not so popular. This was, he said, because "I apparently lacked the courage and political experience."

The speech made Mr. Yeltsin something of an instant celebrity.

Yet many other speakers, far from following Mr. Yeltsin's lead, voiced distinct displeasure at the lengths to which openness had gone. Yegor K. Ligachev, the chief ideologist in the Politburo, accused Pravda of "allowing mistakes" in publishing overly critical letters.

To these was added the voice of President Andrei A. Gromyko: "Criticism as a mighty and effective weapon of the party, and running down honest Communists — these are not one and the same thing."

There seemed to be a sense among these delegates that too much public criticism would undermine the authority of the party from within. Many older Russians remain uncomfortable with the memory of the impact of Nikita S. Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalinism at the 20th party congress 30 years ago.

For others, like Mr. Gromyko, it was the thought of Westerners hearing all the criticism that seemed particularly galling. Nobody reading the internal criticism, he declared, "should rush to conclusions about cracks in our party, our society."

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Perhaps because of the thought that the outside world was watching, the K.G.B. seemed to remain immune to criticism. The speech by Viktor M. Chebrikov, head of the intelligence and internal security organization, was full of praise for the "chekists," as the K.G.B. likes to style its agents, after the organization's first acronym, Cheka. But the speech focused criticism only on the implacable imperialist "special services" that the K.G.B. has to contend with.

To drive home his point, Mr. Chebrikov disclosed that the K.G.B. had recently uncovered "agents of imperialist intelligence services" in several ministries and agencies who had sold "important professional secrets to foreign organizations."

He gave no further details of the dragnet.

The K.G.B. chief said another problem that demanded attention was video recorders. These recorders, he said, were being used by some to spread "ideas alien to us, a cult of cruelty and violence and amorality."

It was a problem likely to expand. On the day before Mr. Chebrikov spoke, Mr. Ligachev had announced that "measures have been formulated to start large-scale production of video technology."

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One delegate who did not address the congress, but who seemed nonetheless a major presence at the proceedings, was Abel G. Aganbegyan, the economist whose reformist ideas seem to have become the policy of the land under Mr. Gorbachev.

In talking of new methods of management, economic levers, financial incentives, more local autonomy, rapid introduction of computers and in general most his modernizing ideas, Mr. Gorbachev has been drawing on ideas long advocated by Mr. Aganbegyan and his former colleagues at the Siberian branch of the Academy of Sciences in Novosibirsk. Since Mr. Gorbachev came to power, Mr. Aganbegyan has been in Moscow as head of the Commission to Study Production Forces.

Not surprisingly, Mr. Aganbegyan was possibly the most sought-after official at the congress. Mr. Aganbegyan, a large man of impressive girth with the jet-black hair of his Armenian ancestry and the conservative suit of a successful executive, finally made an appearance Wednesday with a group of Western reporters.

Mr. Aganbegyan seemed refreshingly untroubled about how the West would view the problems, prospects and statistics that he freely shared. He seemed to speak with the confidence of a man who has often fielded the same questions before.

Glimpses of the Future

Mr. Aganbegyan gave some intriguing glimpses into future plans.

He said a commission was working on measures to permit some limited private enterprise in services like repair shops, auto garages or household renovation. One idea was to let entrepreneurs keep a fixed percentage of their gross income. Another was to have them pay a fixed sum to the state, keeping everything above it.

Mr. Aganbegyan openly hailed the limited private enterprise permitted in East Germany, Bulgaria and Hungary. "It's a healthy practice," he said. "My personal idea is that we need to develop it."

He explained that the Soviet Union required "radical reforms" at this juncture of its development because it could no longer count on endlessly tapping new resources, and because of the projected sharp drop-off of new entrants into the labor force.

The result, he said, is the drastic need for more labor productivity and automation, two of the cardinal points of Mr. Gorbachev's program.

Mr. Aganbegyan also described some of the problems in changing an economy as complex as the Soviet Union's. "We'd need several years to put any reform in practice," he said. "It won't happen tomorrow."