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Gorbachev's Visit to Lithuania

General Secretary Gorbachev failed to reverse the Lithuanian Communist Party's split from the Soviet party or to dampen secessionist sentiment in the republic during his visit last week. Leaders of the newly independent Lithuanian party apparently emerged from their meetings with Gorbachev firmly committed to preserving their new status. Moreover, nationalist leaders quickly rejected as a ploy to buy time Gorbachev's proposal of a law to establish procedures for secession. Nevertheless, in a speech to republic party activists, Gorbachev insisted his visit was not "in vain," indicating that he intends to continue the dialogue with republic leaders.

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Lithuanian party chief Brazauskas was elected president of the republic's legislature yesterday. According to a recent poll conducted in the wake of the December split with Moscow, the popularity of the new party among Lithuanians has increased substantially.

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Comment: The Lithuanian party's rising public prestige reflected in the poll results and in the election of Brazauskas suggests there is little possibility it will reverse its split with Moscow. Gorbachev's relative inattention to the Lithuanian schism during his trip suggests he recognizes that efforts to reverse it would prove futile. At its meeting reportedly scheduled for 29 January, the CPSU Central Committee will probably limit its actions to excluding the renegade party from participation in national party decisionmaking.

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Gorbachev is likely to shift his immediate attention to attempting to dissuade other republic Communist parties from following the Lithuanian party's lead. He probably hopes that, by gaining Central Committee approval for draft regulations granting greater autonomy to republic parties, he can persuade the Estonian and Latvian parties—support for schism is less solid in them than in the Lithuanian party—to defer a split.

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At the same time, Gorbachev is likely to push preparation of the draft law on procedures for a republic's secession in the hope of slowing the drive for independence without resorting to force. The quick rejection of the proposed law by nationalist leaders in Lithuania underscores the difficulty Gorbachev will face in getting them on board regardless of the law's provisions. By underscoring Moscow's reluctance to use force, the proposal of the law will almost certainly be read by nationalists as a green light to pursue their independence strategy.

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