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Special Analysis

USSR:

Gorbachev Faces Tough Test in Lithuania

General Secretary Gorbachev will lead a group of senior party officials to Lithuania—reportedly in the next few days—to try to persuade the Lithuanian Communists to reconsider their split with the national party. In agreeing to lead the delegation, Gorbachev temporarily stayed off calls by hardliners at last week's Central Committee meeting in Moscow for a forceful response to the Lithuanian party's declaration. Even Gorbachev and other reform-minded national party leaders, such as Foreign Minister Shevardnadze, however, are worried that the Lithuanian party's decision would, if allowed to stand, trigger a chain reaction in other republics, endangering the stability of the union.

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The maverick party has set the achievement of Lithuanian independence as its ultimate goal. And Communist parties in neighboring Latvia and Estonia are already preparing to discuss their own future relationship with the national party. The Latvian Supreme Soviet, moreover, took a first step last week toward establishing a multiparty system in the republic by abolishing the Communist Party's constitutionally guaranteed supremacy.

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Gorbachev will try once again to persuade Lithuanian party leaders that their current course makes it increasingly difficult for him to keep hardliners at bay. He will argue that, unless they soften their stand on independence, any prospect of substantial autonomy for their republic is doomed.

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The Lithuanian party will not be easily moved. Its members are convinced that they will be overwhelmed in Lithuania's legislative election next month if they do not end their subordination to Moscow and embrace a nationalist agenda. Support for an independent state, fueled by events in Eastern Europe, is widespread among ethnic Lithuanians—roughly 80 percent of the republic's population. Last week, the maverick party officially registered as a political party with the Lithuanian government.

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Compromise

The best Gorbachev can probably expect from his Lithuanian trip is a compromise that allows each side to save face and eases tensions temporarily. He might promise to use the Central Committee meeting scheduled for later this month to advance the next Soviet party congress from October to this spring and to structure the congress to

continued~~Top Secret~~
TCS 2703/90
4 January 1990

1106

~~Top Secret~~

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6.2(d)

discuss a significant expansion in the autonomy of republic parties. In return, the Lithuanians might pledge to reconsider their position after the February election, possibly through a referendum among the republic's 220,000 Communists to gauge support for the split from the national party. [Redacted]

6.2(d)

No Compromise, No Clash

It is more likely that the two sides will fail to reach an agreement. In that case, Gorbachev will probably still be able to fend off calls for a harsh response while holding out the prospect of Lithuania's return to the fold after the Soviet party congress. The central leadership might intensify threats of economic sanctions against the Lithuanians but would be unlikely to follow through because such measures would carry a high potential for escalating tensions. [Redacted]

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No Compromise, Subsequent Clash

Fear of instability arising out of the Lithuanian party's secession and pressure from his right flank might force Gorbachev to choose a tougher response. In that case, Moscow probably would expel Lithuanian mavericks from the national party and order them to turn over all party assets, including buildings, mass news media, and printing facilities, to those Lithuanian party members who remain loyal to the center. If the independent party members refused, Moscow would be prepared to arrest them and deal with public reaction. It probably would not take more drastic actions, such as imposing martial law, unless there were a major outbreak of violence. [Redacted]

6.2(d)

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TCS 2703/90
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