

# AT THE HARRIMAN INSTITUTE

Volume 2, Number 5

## The Process of Democratization in the Baltic Republics

The past year has seen dramatic political activity in the Baltic republics of the USSR. Unprecedented nationalist demonstrations have caused a shift in public mood and possibly a transformation in the nature of Soviet power in that region. Dr. Romuald Misiunas of Yale University delivered a lecture at the Harriman Institute November 3, in which he questioned how deeply the process of democratization has affected the Party-state in Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia.

Because of its relatively advanced economy, the Baltic region traditionally has been a testing ground for Moscow's reform experiments, and if *perestroika* does not work in the Baltics, it will not work anywhere. Yet it is unlike previous reform efforts because it hinges on ordinary people speaking out against bureaucratic bottlenecks. Misiunas pointed out that while Baltic peoples have many grievances to air, their concerns are generally not economic. Instead, their passions focus on nationalist goals, which could lead to anger toward Soviet authorities.

### Genesis of Mass Movements

The Estonian creative unions took the first steps toward the formation of a national front. At a joint plenum meeting on April 1, 1988 they issued a radical resolution calling for economic self-management, the creation of Estonian citizenship, and the declaration of Estonian as the state language. This resolution "directly attacked" the First Secretary of the Estonian Party, Karl Vaino, calling for his removal. Two weeks later the economist Edgar Savisaar appeared on a television program in which he proposed a popular front. The Front got started right there in the television studio and two months later it claimed over 40,000 adherents. Membership has been growing steadily since. In June, a few days after an Estonian economist active in the popular front spoke at the Lithuanian Academy of Sciences about economic self-management, the Lithuanian Reconstruction Movement got started. Much

like their Estonian counterparts, the Lithuanian and Latvian movements began as fronts for *perestroika* and then "mushroomed into mass movements."

The 19th Party Conference in June was the occasion for the movement's first political action. When the Party bureaucrats appointed their regular cronies as delegates to the Conference, the fronts staged massive protests, calling for more genuine representation. Misiunas interpreted this demonstration as a convenient example of "in-system, loyal opposition." The mass rally in Estonia led to the ouster of the first Party secretary. He was replaced by Vaino Väljas, who, as former ambassador to Venezuela and Nicaragua, was "untainted by intra-republic power plays." The fronts have taken to the streets on many occasions since June, including the anniversary of the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact. Misiunas looked toward a massive rally on November 18 celebrating Latvia's "bourgeois" independence day — which is not recognized by the Soviet regime — as a test of the Soviet regime's tolerance for the popular fronts.

The popular fronts in the Baltic republics resemble opposition parties. They have offices, run newspapers, and aim to field candidates for upcoming political elections. The creative intelligentsia organizes these quasi-parties; they are the traditional national elite in Eastern Europe and the Baltic region because, among other reasons, "politics had become largely a question of cultural policy." Because of this, the fronts have had to respond to criticism that they are exclusively organizations of the intelligentsia. The Estonian Popular Front produced data showing that 40% of their members are laborers. Misiunas noted that young people are quite visible in all three fronts, perhaps because they did not grow up during Stalin's time and do not fear Soviet authority.

The three movements seem to cooperate with one another. At one Lithuanian movement gathering, an Estonian addressed the crowd and Armenian guests spoke



THE W. AVERELL HARRIMAN INSTITUTE FOR ADVANCED STUDY OF THE SOVIET UNION  
COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY • 420 West 118th Street • 12th Floor • New York, New York 10027

about the issue of Nagorno-Karabakh. Inter-front communication is facilitated by exchanging videotapes of the various front meetings. The meetings are taped for many reasons, most significantly to preclude accusations of slander from Moscow.

"Everybody talks about independence [from the Soviet Union] as a goal of the fronts, yet it has become taboo to make that a formal aim." The code word that is used in its place is sovereignty, meaning autonomy and self-management in all matters except defense and foreign affairs. In Väljas' interpretation of sovereignty, Estonians cannot be allowed to become a minority in their own country because of Russian migration, and Estonian should be the language of all public affairs in the Republic. Some Baltic scholars are thinking about what a restructured Soviet Union would look like. The frequent historical reference is the pre-1922 period, when the republics were technically independent.

## Relations with the Party

Party-front relations vary because the parties are somewhat different in each of the Baltic republics. The Estonian Party elite consisted almost exclusively of Estonian "emigrés" who had grown up and begun their political careers in the Russian republic. (Misiunas suggested that Aleshin, the Estonian Party's second secretary and a strong Gorbachev and *perestroika* supporter, may have prodded the Estonian creative intelligentsia to make their move.) Once the Popular Front got under way, it quickly grew because the old Estonian Party could not appeal to nationalism

with any credibility. Now the Party fully supports the Front, to the extent that it has appointed members of the creative unions to the Politburo.

The Lithuanian and Latvian parties were not as quick to accommodate the fronts in their respective republics. The Lithuanian party chose to "lay low," a strategy which left them scrambling to keep up with events. Pressure for personnel changes later became quite dramatic. The Party First Secretary, R. Songaila (whom demonstrators branded as the "shame of the nation") was deposed on the eve of the Founding Congress of the Movement. The Latvian Party is the most unreconstituted of the Baltic Parties. Documents from the June plenum revealed a "dramatic exhibition of their inability to think outside the code-words they have been used to operating in for a whole lifetime. The clichés abound." They resisted even the most basic historical revisions, such as admitting that their republic was occupied in 1940.

Party leaders in the Baltic region find themselves in the dilemma of wanting to prove to Moscow that they are in control of events and yet at the same time trying to show the popular fronts that they are willing to cooperate. The popular fronts may occupy a vague legal position in the Soviet one-party system, but they have also raised the question of the role of the Party in a reconstituted Soviet state. So far the fronts have been careful not to raise the two taboos — independence and questioning the roles of the local parties. They have followed a cautious strategy that combines pro-reformism with anti-Soviet and anti-Russian sentiment.

*Reported by Rachel Denber*

The Harriman Institute  
Columbia University  
420 West 118th Street  
New York NY 10027