

SOVIET SHAKE-UP

Bungled Soviet coup adds fuel to Yeltsin's reformist political fire

By Dacia Toll
Assistant State and National Editor



Soviet Shake-up

As the primary engineers of last week's bungled Soviet coup fled the capital city, they left behind a newborn vitality among Soviet reformers and propelled the reformist leader, Russian President Boris Yeltsin, to national-hero status.

Without the aid of a crystal ball, the overall direction of this vast, turbulent land will remain, in many ways, difficult to predict. But worldwide experts in Soviet history, politics and economics are venturing opinions about the nature of the country's uncertain future.

"The post-coup Soviet Union will finally rid itself of all the obstacles to development that were vestiges of the old system," said Judy Shelton, a former economic adviser to Yeltsin and author of "The Coming Soviet Crash."

"It was a dramatic case of right versus might," Shelton said. "Reformers finally reached a point where they were willing to die for their cause, and now their cause gets to reap the benefits."

With the strengthening of the reform movement comes the weakening of the conservative opposition in the KGB, the military and the bureaucracy.

Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev made a dramatic step Saturday toward dismantling the Soviet Communist Party when he formally resigned as head of the party.

"The forces of resistance have collapsed and are completely discredited," said Myron Rush, a state department consultant and Soviet specialist at Cornell University.

The age-old Soviet institutions of intimidation and coercion proved ineffective in stifling the newly democratic character of the Soviet people.

"Everyone is thumbing their nose at things they used to quake in fear over," said Robert Ruben, a UNC Soviet political science professor. "The old KGB empire has no fangs, no claws."

"There is a taste for blood in the Russian Parliament," Ruben said. Russian leaders wanted to purge government of those members who had failed to stand by Yeltsin in his defiance of the coup's conspiracy.

A DEFIANT YELTSIN

Boris Yeltsin, head of the Russian republic and the foremost opponent of the coup, rallied hundreds of thousands of reformers to resist the putsch and to reinstate Gorbachev.

His tactics succeeded in splitting off some military units, thereby damaging one of the coup's major strongholds of power. Those defections, and statements of support for Yeltsin from senior military officers, sent a shudder through the armed forces.

"Gorbachev is bristling a bit," Shelton said. "He owes his soul to Yeltsin. The Soviet people view Gorbachev as a vic-

tim and Yeltsin as a hero. A hero looks valiant while a victim looks weak."

Ruben points to an unofficial transference of power between the two foremost Soviet leaders.

"Yeltsin has become number one and Gorbachev has become number two," Ruben said. "It's as if time in Moscow and with Yeltsin had been running fast-forward. For Gorbachev, it was in slow-motion. When Gorbachev returned, he had fallen behind and was unable to absorb the years of change that had taken place in three short days."

Many experts expect the enhancement of Yeltsin's political stature to spill over so that he will now be able to dictate economic reform.

But it was the five years of Gorbachev's glasnost and perestroika reforms that made the defiance of the Soviet people possible, Ruben said.

LOOKING TO ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL REFORM

As the reins to the chariot of reform now fall into the hands of Boris Yeltsin, progress looks to be rapid and irrefragable.

Already, with Gorbachev's announcement to resign from the Communist Party, Soviet citizens took to the streets, demolishing statues of former premier Communist leaders. Riled Russian citizens graffitied the walls of the KGB building, signifying an unprecedented spirit of dissent among the Soviet people from the old regime.

"We can expect Yeltsin's economic agenda to prevail," Shelton said. "It will be a much faster, much purer laissez-

faire system. If it's not explicitly illegal, it's OK."

Although the path is cleared for more radical economic reform, the magnitude of the existing Soviet financial crisis threatens the success of any reform.

"Economic reform cannot go forward without a stable economy," Rush said. "The problems run so deep — three digit inflation, an erratic ruble ..."

The forces of progress and democracy are truly irreversible now, Ruben said.

"They were not only tested, but strengthened," Ruben said. "You just can't exaggerate just how important this is."

WHY THE COUP CRUMBLED

In the wake of the coup, many Soviet experts have taken a retrospective look at the political mistakes that preceded the failure.

Most charge the coup's failure to the sheer ineptness of the coup's engineers. "It's inconceivable how incompetent they were," Ruben said. "It's a clear case of the gang that couldn't shoot straight."

The coup leaders lacked the courage to take the bold actions necessary for a successful military putsch.

In contrast to the Chinese episode in Tiananmen Square, where tanks crushed an unarmed resistance, the Soviet tanks refused to attack.

"Quite simply, the Soviet army refused to shoot on its own people," said Janos Radvanyi, director of the Center

for International Security and Strategic Studies at Mississippi State University.

Additionally, the coup's engineers moved slowly to impose a curfew and crowd-control measures that might have hampered the tens of thousands of reformers from taking to the streets in vocal defiance.

Shelton points to the open telephone lines that allowed Yeltsin and his ally, former Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze, to communicate with President Bush and other foreign leaders to rally international support.

"Television and radio liberty informed the Soviet population and they were willing to take to the streets," Radvanyi said.

Backers of Yeltsin and Gorbachev found strong support among Soviet workers, as coal miners across the country responded to the coup by staging their third strike in two years.

Such a powerful display of labor unrest signaled that the proletarians, the working class whose discontent propelled the Communist Party to power in 1917, had turned decisively against it, Shelton said.

RESTRUCTURING THE REPUBLICS

Gorbachev was ousted the eve of his signing of the Union Treaty, a proposal which would have surrendered some of the political and economic power of the central government to the individual leaders in the republics.

The proposed treaty threatened the authoritative domains of all the institutions represented in the conspiracy —

the overlords of the central economy, the demoralized military, the state police agencies and the Communist Party.

As these opposing powers fled the country, the breakaway Baltic republics were quick to recognize an opportunity. Since the bungled takeover, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia have intensified their push for independence.

"Everything that once depended on a balance of power with the central government will have to be re-evaluated," Ruben said. "Power has shifted to the republics."

Shelton agreed, saying she foresees increased autonomy and sovereignty for the Baltic states.

"The republics will break off and establish a federation relationship with the central government, which dictates limited, carefully defined functions to fall under central authority," she said.

Some experts envision the more drastic alternative of total independence as the only viable possibility in a post-coup Soviet Union.

"There is absolutely no question — we will soon see complete independence for the Baltic nations," Rush said. Russia, the largest and wealthiest Soviet republic, is expected to inherit several of the roles formerly delegated to the central government.

"Russia has saved the Soviet Union — it will now be the trail-blazer," Shelton said.

Non-Russian republics like the Ukraine, which lack the natural resources to operate self-sufficiently, could end up being the real losers, Ruben said.

Americans voice mixed reactions to news of Soviet coup failure, Gorbachev's return

The Associated Press

In coffeehouses and churches, on editorial pages and street corners, Americans spoke with excitement, disdain and fear about the Soviet shakeup that one man likened to the battle for American independence.

"It's the most exciting thing that's happened over there," said Los Angeles stock trader Kevin Lewis, 36, as he watched a Buddhist archery ritual at a local park. "The coup made the people much stronger than they thought they were."

"To me, it's almost like the American Revolution without the fighting," said Jerry Wensloff of Roswell, Ga., relaxing Saturday night at Reggie's British Pub and Restaurant in downtown Atlanta.

"I think it's going to unite the world because it leaves China, North Korea and Cuba as Communist powers," said Wensloff, a computer company owner. "China can't stand alone against the whole world."

On the heels of a failed coup by hard-liners, President Mikhail Gorbachev resigned Saturday as Communist Party chief and dismantled the party that held the Soviet Union in its stern grip for 74 years.

The failure of the coup and Gorbachev's freedom from house arrest in the Crimea was a direct result of heroic efforts by Boris Yeltsin, president of the Russian republic.

"I was impressed with Yeltsin's courage," said Michael Walsh, a railroad brakeman from Des Moines. "Boy, when he was on top of the tank, he was golden. What a move. He made

his entire career crawling on top of that tank."

But others worried about what lay ahead. "I'm really afraid there's going to be civil war over there," said Nancy Leonard, 29, an administrative assistant in Chicago.

Alexandra Astor, 55, of Omaha, Neb., who left Kiev in the Ukrainian republic in 1974, praised Gorbachev.

"I still think Gorbachev is a great man, and he deserves our respect and what he did is unbelievable," said Astor, a researcher at the University of Nebraska Medical Center in Omaha.

"What I worry about is Yeltsin," said her husband, Peter Astor, 64, an engineer.

"The more he will have power, he will approach dictatorship," Peter Astor said. "Gorbachev has lost a lot of prestige, but he is still a good man," said Al Barnett, 76, as he sunbathed Sunday on a bench at Boston's Faneuil Hall marketplace.

"He has done more for Russia in the last few years than anybody else did in all the 76 years I have been alive," Barnett said.

In Indianapolis, Rep. Lee Hamilton, D-Ind., a member of the House Foreign Relations Committee, said the West cannot rely on Gorbachev to carry through democratic reforms.

"I think that in the last couple of years he has been indecisive," Hamilton told the Indiana Democratic Editorial Association on Saturday. "He has zigged and he has zagged."

Bob Hass, of Berkeley, Calif., said giving aid to the Soviets would "be throwing money into a pit at this point

... like handing it over to the Mafia."

Doug Kulisich, 43, of Seabrook, N.H., a Vietnam veteran who was washing windows Sunday at Boston's Exchange Place, said President Bush should concentrate first on the homeless in America.

"Bush should walk around the streets of Boston and see everyone sitting in the street with their tin cans and signs that say 'Please Help,'" he said.

But college student Beth Berg, 23, of Alameda, Calif., near San Francisco, said the Communist Party's demise means massive military spending will no longer be needed.

"Everyone should gain," he said. "Money will be freed up so it can be spent on fighting poverty and other problems."

The Seattle Times said the Baltic states of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia should be prime beneficiaries.

"Now is the time to help the Baltic states pull free of Soviet domination and let them, as sovereign nations, become part of the emerging nations of Europe," it said in an editorial.

Rabbi Alvin Sugarman of The Temple in Atlanta, who has worked with Soviet Jews, said the real victory belongs to the Soviet people.

"I was really pleased to see the will of the people come to the forefront," he said. "I thought of the Germans under Hitler, and how they kept saying we couldn't do anything, and wondered what might have been. Granted, they are two different societies ... but I couldn't help but think of that parallel."

Lithuanian leader asks Soviet officials to annul 1940 annexation documents

The Associated Press

VILNIUS, U.S.S.R. — Amid a groundswell of international support for the breakaway Baltics, Lithuania's president called Sunday for the Soviet parliament to annul the last documents relating to the three republics' annexation.

Byelorussia, a pillar of the Soviet Union's traditional Slavic heart, on Sunday became the sixth republic to declare independence and dealt a final blow to efforts to keep the country's historic center together.

Byelorussia, the Ukraine and Russia formed the Slavic core of the country once known as the Russian empire, which became the Soviet Union after the 1917 revolution.

The Ukraine had declared independence Saturday, leaving Russia the sole Slav-governed republic still officially committed to signing President Mikhail Gorbachev's proposed Union Treaty to bind the 15 republics together.

The Lithuanian president, Vytautas Landsbergis, told reporters he would travel to Moscow on Monday if he could arrange meetings with officials including Russian leader Boris Yeltsin, whose power has greatly increased since he helped foil the coup against Gorbachev.

Yeltsin, the Russian Federation president, has long been sympathetic to the Baltics' cause and has issued decrees recognizing their independence on behalf of the Russian republic.

Most of the major Western democracies — including the United States — indicated Sunday that they were mov-

ing toward diplomatic recognition of the republics. A few countries were granting it outright.

Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia have intensified their push for independence since last week's coup by Kremlin hard-liners. They started breaking away last year.

During the hard-line coup, the Soviet military and KGB leaders — who bitterly opposed independence for the Baltics — sent in troops to crack down on the republics.

In the wake of the takeover, the republics have moved to ban their Communist parties, taken steps to punish the collaborators of the coup plotters, sought to limit the power of the KGB secret police, toppled Communist monuments and cheered the pullback of Soviet troops deployed during the coup.

The Baltic republics were independent between the two world wars, but in 1939 the Soviet Union signed a non-aggression pact with Nazi Germany, including a secret protocol placing all three in the Soviet sphere of influence.

An agreement in 1940 between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany formalized the secret 1939 agreement. The Soviet parliament in Moscow has abrogated the 1939 treaty, and Landsbergis wants the 1940 document annulled.

"It's a formal question only, but it

would then be completely resolved. It would be easier for us," Landsbergis told journalists.

Landsbergis also appealed Sunday for foreign countries to begin recognizing his republic's independence.

French Foreign Minister Roland Dumas said France was prepared to establish diplomatic relations with the Baltics but would favor doing so jointly with other members of the 12-nation European Community. He spoke in an interview with the French television network TF-1.

European Community foreign ministers will meet Tuesday in Brussels to debate whether the EC should recognize Baltic independence, the Dutch Foreign Ministry said Sunday.

Norway and Denmark moved even faster. They said Sunday they were establishing formal ties with all three republics.

"We had to find the right time for establishing diplomatic relations," said Norwegian Foreign Minister Thorvald Stoltenberg. "We have followed developments from hour to hour, and on Sunday morning, the time was right."

Landsbergis said he expected the United States to recognize the independence of the Lithuanian republic "within a week," but the Bush administration sent somewhat mixed signals.

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