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Soviet Elections

The main reporting telegrams have been copied to No 10. You may find useful a brief look at the overall results and their implications.

The turnout was generally good, at around 85%, except for Armenia, where a nationalist-inspired boycott reduced it at least to 53%.

Not all the results have yet been published. But in nearly 300 of the 1500 seats voted on recently there either has to be a run-off between the two leading candidates, or, where only one or two candidates were on offer and no-one secured a majority of votes cast, a new election with new candidates. The Congress of Peoples Deputies is unlikely to meet until well into May at the earliest. It is unclear how the 542-member Supreme Soviet will be elected and therefore how open the system will be to manipulation. Mr Gorbachev himself should have no difficulty being elected Chairman of the Supreme Soviet but it may not be unanimous.

The single most dramatic result was that of Yeltsin in the all-Moscow national-territorial constituency where he received some 89% of the vote, over 5 million votes in all. But elsewhere in Moscow, Leningrad, Kiev, and a string of other Soviet cities, senior party officials and mayors were defeated, often when unopposed. The most notable casualty was Solovyov, the Leningrad party leader and candidate Politburo member who failed despite being the only candidate. In the Baltic States, the Popular Fronts did extremely well, notably in Lithuania. There and in Estonia, the party first secretaries were elected only because the Popular Fronts did not run against them. In Latvia, where the Latvian population is less than 50%, the party first secretary just scraped in.

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The official reaction has been slow to appear. The main press virtually ignored the results for several days. Gorbachev has now set the tone. The people are the masters and have spoken. The vote was for perestroika and accelerated reform. The appropriate conclusions have to be drawn. It is not yet clear how far the party losers will be encouraged to step down, but Gorbachev has ruled out an immediate purge.

There is only one possible interpretation of the voting trend, patchy though it was: a clear protest against unpopular, out of touch party officials and particularly against those who sought to make a mockery of the elections by standing unopposed. The vote for Yeltsin was a specific phenomenon but again directed at least in part against old-style party methods used against him, both when he was sacked and more recently, during the election campaign. It is far from clear what people were voting for. The traditional party apparatus was what they were voting against.

Gorbachev almost certainly did not anticipate the results. He may have been shocked by some of them. Having seen the clear popular mandate given to Yeltsin he has probably been asking himself how he would have done if he had stood himself rather than using the party list where no choice was given and only the Central Committee voted. The results could stiffen the resistance of the orthodox. Party morale has certainly suffered. But Gorbachev is likely to exploit the result to his own advantage, and that of radical reform. He is already presenting the outcome as a vote for more change and is not doing too much to soften the impression that losers should look to their future in public life.

For the longer term the people have shown that they are not sunk in apathy and cynicism, that they are no longer afraid and that they have had enough of old style party domination and falsification. The logic of the situation demands some form of organised pluralism. Gorbachev has ruled out a multi-party system but the orthodox fears of loss of party control are clearly growing. The Baltic popular vote in effect for autonomy/independence will no nothing to calm such fears. The warning noises out of Moscow about Baltic nationalism are growing louder but in today's circumstances Pravda editorials do not have the effect they once had.

/Mr Gorbachev

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Mr Gorbachev is now riding his own tiger. He has allowed the people a voice. They have used it to more drastic effect than he expected. In New York he spoke of freedom of choice for all nations. His own people are now beginning to demand it. For the moment they may be with him in wanting to go forward with reform despite the lack of material success so far. They could decide that they want to go further than he seems willing to contemplate. The Prime Minister will no doubt want to explore all this with him.

I am copying this to the Private Secretary of Sir Robin Butler.

Yours ever,  
Richard Gozney

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