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THE SOVIET CONGRESS OF PEOPLE'S DEPUTIES

The Congress of People's Deputies opened on 25 May in Moscow and is expected to finish today. It is a new body, created to further popular participation in the business of Government as part of Gorbachev's programme of political reform. Many of its 2,250 Deputies (of whom 2,155 are present) won their seats through genuinely competitive elections. The Congress has elected a Supreme Soviet of 542 deputies, which is expected to go into session as a permanently functioning body when the Congress ends.

2. Atmosphere The Congress has built on, and taken further, the atmosphere of unfettered debate introduced at the Party Conference in June/July 1988. From the first minutes it was clear that the Congress was not going to follow the traditional pedestrian scenario of previous Soviet "Parliaments". The first substantial speech from the floor was by Academician Sakharov, who challenged the official agenda. Thereafter virtually every official proposal has been challenged. Nationality issues have been debated, in the case of Armenia/Azerbaijan and the Tbilisi events, with bitterness. The entire proceedings have been shown live on Moscow's second television channel. (Gorbachev turned down a proposal in the course of the Congress that TV coverage should be abandoned as it was allegedly encouraging some Deputies to indulge in self-advertisement.) Gorbachev was prepared for all this; he has handled the debate with an adroit mixture of sympathy and firmness. He has insisted on the importance of procedural points, despite the impatience of many delegations. Here he has had to make up for a remarkable absence of detailed preparation for the Congress. Moreover, the technical arrangements have been scarcely adequate; much time has been lost through the laborious counting of heads and the failure to produce on time the necessary lists of those standing for elections.

3. The "Moscow Group". Much of the impulse for real debate has come from a loose grouping of Moscow radicals, including the former Moscow Party

leader, Eltsin, Academician Sakharov, the special investigator into corruption, Gdlyan (himself now under investigation) and a number of intellectuals (Gavriil Popov, a leading academic economist, Academician Zaslavskaya, the historians Yuri Afanasiev and Roi Medvedev and a young researcher, Stankevich, recently returned from studying US congressional practices). Their main aims have been: to enhance the status of the Congress, which will convene only occasionally, over that of the Supreme Soviet; to ensure that democratic procedures are established for the functioning of the Congress; and to ensure genuine elections to the Supreme Soviet and its Chairmanship. This group, together with well prepared Deputies from the Baltic Republics, have dominated the debate, but, to no one's surprise, lost the voting. They are a small minority in the Congress. They have managed, however, to muster some 400 votes for their procedural proposals, and a respectable 831 votes for a proposal to suspend for the duration of the Congress unpopular legislation from last year regulating the holding of public meetings.

4. Elections. The Congress had to elect a Chairman of the Supreme Soviet, a new quasi-presidential office. There was never any doubt that Gorbachev would get the job, but the principle of competitive elections was established by an unknown Deputy putting himself forward as an alternative; and Gorbachev's election was not unanimous. In the debate preceding the election, Gorbachev was subjected to questioning about his country houses, his wife and, more substantially, the whole principle of combining Party and State office, to which he gave a spirited reply. Gorbachev's nominee for the post of First Deputy Chairman, Lukyanov, was similarly treated.

5. The elections to the Supreme Soviet were more contentious, largely because the amended Constitution stipulates that the Supreme Soviet's two chambers should reflect the balance of population and national minorities in the country, but gives no indication as to how this principle should be incorporated into practice. In the event, Deputies were, as expected, presented with a list of nominations exactly corresponding to the seats available. The Moscow group insisted that in areas affecting them, the lists should be extended so as to offer a genuine choice. But they paid the price: they themselves were largely voted out by what one of their number called "the aggressively subservient majority". The major casualty in this process was Eltsin, who, however, later gained a seat after an elected Deputy stepped

down in his favour, thus defusing a potentially ugly situation (there had been large demonstrations in favour of Eltsin in Moscow on Sunday). Time will show what role the new Supreme Soviet will play. Perhaps the most important fact is that as a body it will be loyal to Gorbachev and provide him with a counterweight to the Party and Government bureaucracy.

6. Set speeches. Two are on the agenda - Gorbachev's as Chairman of the Supreme Soviet, which he made yesterday, and Ryzhkov's as Chairman of the Council of Ministers, reporting to its superior organ - the Congress - which he will make today. First reports of Gorbachev's speech indicate that he took a line designed to strike a balance between traditionalists and reformers, as he has throughout the Congress. He will have pleased reformers by revealing a defence spending figure of 77 billion roubles, nearly four times the official figures hitherto (but about half what we and the CIA believe to be the real figure), and proposing its reduction. He also proposed a Commission to investigate excessive Party privilege. But he will also have pleased Party officials, now on the defensive after their electoral debacle in March, by calling for a postponement of the local elections, due in the Autumn, ostensibly because the legislation is not ready.

7. Interim Conclusions. A success for Gorbachev's "democratisation" programme and for Gorbachev himself. The further enhancement of his powers and his masterly performance at the Congress have already set him apart from and above the rest of the Politburo. The Congress so far has shown that debates in the embryonic Soviet Parliament can be as lively and disorderly as in any Western parliament. But there is a lack of any established procedural mechanism to focus and channel the debate. At the moment, Gorbachev's personal authority alone keeps the proceedings under control. The Constitutional relationship between the Congress and the Supreme Soviet has also been shown to be too vague, and will continue to be a source of friction. In the longer term, the question may well arise of how long the radical minority will maintain its enthusiasm for a system in which it has no prospect in the foreseeable future of winning the important votes.

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