

Gorbachov, Yeltsin 'win' in Soviet referendum—now what?

by Konstantin George

The voters of nine of the fifteen republics of the U.S.S.R. voted March 17 in the referendum called by President Mikhail Gorbachov on whether they supported the continued existence of the U.S.S.R. in a still not totally defined "renewed federation." The preliminary overall results based on tallies released by the Soviet government on March 19, proclaimed a 77% "yes" vote, based on half the vote having been counted, and a U.S.S.R.-wide 82% voter participation. At first glance this gives the appearance of a resounding victory for Gorbachov. But to what extent was the referendum indeed a victory for Gorbachov, what do the voting results actually signify, and, above all, how important is the referendum as such, measured against the real on-the-ground situation in the country?

As we shall see, the results do have an importance, especially when the fine points are critically reviewed, but this importance pales before the impact of the storms about to break out across the Soviet empire this spring.

'Contain, postpone, buy time'

First, to get even an approximately correct analysis of the outcome in the nine republics which did participate, one must ignore the irrelevant category of "U.S.S.R.-wide." The astute observer must focus on the singular ethnic and regional components of this amorphous mass, and see what actually happened in each case.

Broadly speaking, the referendum was boycotted in the Soviet Union's six Christian non-Slavic republics: the three Baltic republics of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, the republic of Moldova, and the republics of Georgia and Armenia in the Transcaucasus. All of these republics have small populations, ranging from 1 to 4 million people. The nine republics which held the referendum, embracing the empire's Slavic core and the Turkic Muslim republics of Central Asia and Azerbaidzhan, contain the overwhelming bulk of the U.S.S.R.'s population.

In nearly all of these nine republics, a carefully constructed second question, varying according to each republic, which followed the lead question on the new Union Treaty, was placed on the ballot. The aim of this tactic was to use the anticipated large "yes" vote on the lead question to pro-

vide the Moscow regime with a mandate for containing the process of dissolution, while the anticipated "yes" vote on the second question would open up the most critical battlefronts in the raging internal crisis—in the populous republics of Russia, Ukraine, and the Muslim republics—new political safety valves to postpone or contain future pro-independence and anti-regime upsurges in these regions.

Moscow's priority task is to achieve at least relative stability in the Slavic core and the Muslim republics. If it succeeds in this, it can deal with the current drive by the other six smaller republics to achieve full independent statehood.

The initial results

In Russia and Ukraine, majorities of over 75% voted to accept a new Union Treaty. Similar majorities approved on the second question on the ballot. In Russia, the second question was whether the president of Russia should be elected by popular ballot. Thus, Gorbachov got his victory on question one, and his arch-rival, the Russian populist President Boris Yeltsin, emerged victorious on the second question, given that Yeltsin is the only conceivable Russian presidential candidate of nationwide stature and popularity, and would win any direct vote. The vote pattern provided a clear profile of where potential mass ferment is greatest, namely, in the large cities. While for Russia as a whole the "Yes" vote for direct presidential elections was 71%, it was 78% in Moscow, and 86% in Yeltsin's native city of Sverdlovsk.

This vote is being heralded in Western media as a "victory" for Yeltsin and a "defeat" for Gorbachov. The truth is that the vote has been a qualified victory for both. The vote has saved Yeltsin from early demise by stopping what would probably have been a successful vote of no confidence to topple him in the Russian Parliament after it convenes March 28. In reality, Yeltsin pulled off a short-term coup, but, over the mid term, committed a probably fatal blunder in having confined the second question to the matter of electing a President; in other words, the voters were not told to call for new Russian parliamentary elections as well. This means that the anti-Yeltsin majority will continue to sit in the Russian Parliament, biding their time until something occurs to sour Yeltsin's fortunes, and then they will strike.

A similar pattern with different predicates occurred in the Ukrainian vote. Gorbachov won his vote on Ukraine accepting a new Union Treaty. But the degree of anti-Moscow mass ferment in the republic was clearly shown in the resounding "Yes" to the second question, which called on the "Ukrainian Supreme Soviet" to put into practice the far-reaching "Declaration of Sovereignty" adopted by that Parliament on July 16, 1990. However, as in the Russian Federation case, there was a catch to this. The resolution that was voted up specified "sovereignty . . . within the Union," i.e., keeping Ukraine in the empire, and, worse, by mandating the "Ukrainian Supreme Soviet," i.e., the present Parliament with its two-thirds communist majority, to put sovereignty into practice, quietly dropped the promise that Moscow had made last autumn at the height of the mass strikes and demonstrations in Ukraine for "free elections" in 1991 to elect a new Ukrainian Parliament.

Gorbachov was most successful in the Muslim republics, where under the not-so-democratic guiding hand of the local party mafias that run these fiefdoms, votes of 90-95% were scored for the new Union Treaty. The same huge majorities were produced for companion questions, calling for full sovereignty for each of these Muslim republics.

For Gorbachov and for the Moscow leadership as a whole, these qualified successes come at a critical juncture, where mass ferment against the economic debacle is rising fast and threatening to explode. Spearheading this is the nationwide coal miners' strike, which on March 22 will enter its fourth week. What began on March 1 in the Donetsk region of eastern Ukraine, has since spread to involve some 300,000 miners in over 165 coal mines, and to affect every major coal region of the U.S.S.R.: Donetsk, the huge Kuznetsk Basin in Central Siberia, the huge Karaganda coal fields in Kazakhstan, the Rostov on Don region in southern Russia, the Vorkuta mines in the far north of Russia, the coal mines of western Ukraine; and as of March 19, the strike had spread to the coal mines of the Chelyabinsk region in the Urals.

The Kremlin's tough attitude toward the striking coal miners, refusing to give in to their wage and other economic demands in total contrast to the posture adopted by Moscow in previous miners' strikes, reveals how supercharged the political atmosphere is. Moscow has chosen the policy it sees as the lesser of two evils, preferring to take the production losses and ripple effect on other industries on the chin, rather than granting the miners a victory, and thus opening the floodgates for strikes in Soviet industries across-the-board, which would create far greater economic damage and unforeseeable political consequences.

For Gorbachov, it's far easier to win a "mandate" on paper than to win the people's support in practice. The March 17 referendum was not a crucial test, but merely an episode. The real test will come in April as the mass unrest seething just below the surface comes closer to erupting.

Yugoslavia

Odd bedfellows act to avoid civil war

by Konstantin George

As of this writing on March 20, the Yugoslav Federation may have pulled back from the brink of civil war. The threat of catastrophe has been building up over weeks, as the Federation's largest republic, Serbia, is pitted against the independence-seeking northwestern republics of Croatia and Slovenia, and the Serbian-dominated Armed Forces have actively threatened a military coup. Fear of the totally unpredictable consequences should that Rubicon be crossed, however, has produced a new constellation of political forces, both in Croatia and Slovenia, and most emphatically in the ranks of the Serbian elite, to pull back from the abyss. These forces, while having no love for each other, have, ironically, a common interest in preventing a civil war this spring.

The tactical form this operation has taken is the drive to undermine the key player seeking to plunge Yugoslavia into civil war, the demagogic bolshevik who is President of Serbia, Slobodan Milosevic.

A series of events that occurred on March 19 points to likely success for the operation to declaw, if not dethrone, Milosevic. To start with, a declaration by the Serbian-led Yugoslav General Staff, read on Yugoslav TV, confirmed that the Yugoslav Army will not stage a military coup as had been desired by Milosevic. The General Staff declared categorically that the Army will "not interfere in the political conflicts" in the country, and "under no circumstances" will the Army allow the situation to devolve into "armed clashes" let alone "civil war."

Beyond that, the Army issued demands which were remarkably balanced, in that while some of these were directed against Croatia and Slovenia, others rejected the Milosevic policy of trying to forge a Greater Serbia this spring by force of arms, through detaching Serb-inhabited territories from Croatia and the central republic of Bosnia, sandwiched between Serbia and Croatia.

The part of the declaration aimed at Croatia and Slovenia was: 1) the demand that the Territorial Forces of the Army be again placed under the command of the Yugoslav Army (last year, Slovenia and Croatia had removed their Territorial Forces from the central command of Belgrade); and 2) the demand that the financing of the Armed Forces be guaranteed (Croatia and Slovenia had considerably reduced their contributions to the federal budget, above all to the Armed Forces).