

December 8, 1989

USSR: Lithuanian Decision Will Reverberate Widely

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Summary:

An analysis of the Lithuanian Supreme Soviet's decision to legalize a multiparty political system.

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English

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USSR:

Lithuanian Decision Will Reverberate Widely

The Lithuanian Supreme Soviet's move yesterday to legalize a multiparty political system in the republic will help raise the issue of the Communist Party's role to the top of national and republic legislative agendas; it will further erode the party's status and prestige.

The Estonian party Central Committee yesterday endorsed removing the constitutional guarantee of the republic party's leading role, a decision that must be formally approved by the republic's Supreme Soviet. This week the republic legislature in Armenia failed to draw a quorum to consider a similar constitutional change but is likely to return to the issue soon.

The Lithuanian legislature's decision comes on the eve of a series of local and republic legislative elections throughout the USSR that will end in March. In local elections in Estonia and Latvia this weekend and in elections that follow, most candidates backed solely by the Communist Party apparatus are expected to fare poorly.

President Gorbachev has repeatedly rejected calls for a multiparty system. Last month, moreover, the USSR Supreme Soviet voted not to put the issue on the agenda of the Congress of People's Deputies, which reconvenes Tuesday. Andrey Sakharov and five other prominent Deputies, however, have called for a nationwide warning strike on Monday to demand the Congress remove the guarantee of the party's leading role from the USSR Constitution.

Comment: In the short run, the Lithuanian party's decision and its all but certain move later this month to declare itself independent from the CPSU may improve its competitive position in February's republic elections by removing major sources of public resentment toward it. In the long term, however, leveling the playing field in the republic's political arena will undercut the party. The Lithuanian and Estonian decisions will also encourage other republics, including Latvia, Georgia, and perhaps Armenia, to follow suit.

Gorbachev and his allies are almost certainly concerned by the Lithuanian vote. To forestall other republic legislatures, they probably will try to work out a constitutional compromise that guarantees the legitimacy of other parties but preserves a special status for the CPSU. The Lithuanian decision, and events in Eastern Europe, will raise the public's awareness of the debate over the party's role and might increase popular participation in the nationwide warning strike Monday.

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Republic and Local Elections Begin in the USSR

Republic	Local Soviets	Supreme Soviets
Russian (RSFSR)	4 March 1990	4 March 1990
Armenian	(not set)	(not set)
Azerbaijan	(not set)	(not set)
Belorussian	4 March 1990	4 March 1990
Estonian	10 December 1989	18 March 1990
Georgian	17 June 1990	25 March 1990
Kazakh	24 December 1989	25 March 1990
Kirghiz	25 February 1990	25 February 1990
Latvian	10 December 1989	18 March 1990
Lithuanian	24 March 1990	24 February 1990
Moldavian	25 February 1990	25 February 1990
Tajik	24 December 1989	25 February 1990
Turkmen	7 January 1990	7 January 1990
Ukrainian	4 March 1990	4 March 1990
Uzbek	18 February 1990	18 February 1990



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