

The student factor: A new fuse in Soviet politics?

By Vyacheslav Kostikov

It looks as though the student factor, until recently barely noticeable in Soviet domestic policy, may become an explosive and unpredictable element in the development of crisis situations in the USSR.

On November 1, the Russian Federation formally embarked on a market economy, thus challenging the slower pace of the centre. On the same day a group of students was allowed into the Kremlin to meet with Mikhail Gorbachev. Seen against the background of the transition to a market economy, which raises social tensions over the expected price growth and an upsurge of unemployment, the entry of Soviet students into big time politics looks very significant.

It was students who provided the explosive material that blew up totalitarian regimes in East European countries. Everyone remembers the events in China in Tienanmen Square when brutal repression of a student demonstration signalled a sharp reverse in that country's leadership in domestic policy. Far away in his-

tory one can recall student unrest in France in 1968, which then swept over the whole of Western Europe.

The meeting between the Soviet president and student representatives is an indicator that authorities see the significance of that factor. At the same time, one must concede that, like in many other spheres of politics, the centre

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has been a bit slow in this matter, too. And the recent conversation of Gorbachev with students is like a hasty action to catch up with events which are already getting out of control.

The point is that a group of 50 students staged a hunger strike outside the Kremlin on November 1. And although the official TASS News Agency hastened to deny any connection between the president's meeting with some students and that "unauthorized hunger strike", the link between these two occurrences is apparent. It may be

recalled that recent student demonstrations in Kiev, the first to show the scale of possible student political weight, led to the resignation of the Ukrainian premier. The speed with which the Ukrainian parliament met students' demands is evidence that authorities are aware of the possible consequences of a long confrontation with them. The current hunger strike of a group of Moscow students has been a direct outcome of the events in Kiev.

In this connection the political "sterility" of Gorbachev's meeting with the students is surprising. Mainly everyday and social matters were raised at it. It is beyond question that students are one of the most neglected and least protected groups of the population. Nonetheless, to confine the discussion to hostels, canteens, stipends, and job placement at a time when hunger-striking students near the Kremlin walls advance clearly political slogans and demands (in particular, that the government resign, that Communist party property be nationalized, and that universities and the army be depoliticized) appears to me to be a dangerous "caution". A clear attempt to simplify student demands politically may only

worsen the situation.

Student leaders believe that constructive dialogue between students and the president is necessary and possible, but only if it

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covers the entire range of accumulated issues, including political ones. The last meeting, unfortunately, showed that there was no place for big politics in that dialogue as yet. That let slip a good chance of pre-emptive frankness.

The impression is gathered that the country's leadership has already felt the cracking of the fuse and found it necessary to "react" to it, but does not seem to have assessed fully the menacing experience of student politicization in East European countries.

There has been a growing awareness in the country of the need to refrain from extreme protests, large demonstrations and strikes. Some of the left-wing radical leaders who but six months ago willingly

paraded their ability to get hundreds of thousands of people into the streets are also coming to see the danger of uncontrolled anger.

Today, everyone — hard-liners, centrists and radicals — understands the perniciousness of big strikes or any other forms of social explosion. But against the backdrop of early signs of consolidation and calming of political passions, there still runs the danger of spontaneous political outbursts as a result of general destabilization and an extremely sensitive situation.

In such a situation students may

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play the fateful role of a fuse. The students hunger strike staged in Moscow, seen in this light, might have hard-to-predict consequences in spite of the pacifying meeting with the president.

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