

At the time, President Gorbachev had to deal with nationalist eruptions in every Republic, even the dominant Russian one. Some of these events were extremely violent and in regions with unstable external borders, as in Nagorno-Karabakh. This may have played a role in Moscow's relatively accommodating and cautious approach to events in the Baltic Republics.

Estonia

Estonia was the first republic to put national autonomy on the agenda with the Proposal of Four, released on 26 September 1987. This proposal, named for the four who signed it, called for long-term economic autonomy to be the means for sovereignty and independence. The proposal came from within the Estonian Communist Party (ECP) and was released in a communist journal, albeit a minor one. Unlike events that were to transpire later in Lithuania, Estonian nationalism from the very first involved factions from within the Communist Party itself.

By May 1988, an entire political platform and nationalist movement had grown up around the Proposal of Four, culminating in the founding of the Estonian Front for *Perestroika* (Rahvarinne) in an inaugural congress on 1 and 2 October of that year. The programme of Rahvarinne was to become the model for the other Baltic republics: free elections; constitutional guarantees for private property; economic autonomy; and the protection of Estonian culture and language. Rahvarinne announced its intention to contest future elections.

In July 1988 a rival popular organization -- the Internationalist Movement -- was set up with aid from the ECP. Its purpose was to counter nationalist tendencies and to counteract Rahvarinne. Made up of Russians, it was apparently led by the directors of large state enterprises.

Meanwhile, public unrest continued. On 23 August 1988, mass rallies to commemorate the signing of the 1939 Non-Aggression Pact were held throughout the Baltic Republics.

The CPSU held its nineteenth party conference in June 1988. It was an extremely important meeting, resulting in the creation of a Congress of People's Deputies as the higher body of state authority in the USSR. The conference caused much discussion and agitation in the Baltic republics, where it was feared it would lead to increased central control. The publication of its constitutional proposals led to mass petitions and demonstrations.

On 16 November 1988, the Estonian Supreme Soviet -- the parliament of Estonia dominated by the Estonian Communist Party -- declared the republic sovereign. Laws passed by the USSR Supreme Soviet were to be subject to approval by the Estonian parliament. Control of economic resources was to be transferred to Estonia. The Presidium (Cabinet) of the USSR Supreme Soviet rejected this act, declaring that it undermined the very basis of Soviet existence. A week later, President Gorbachev publicly denounced Estonian actions as political adventurism, but declined to introduce the matter into the Supreme Soviet or to take other political action. At the same time, changes in the CPSU's constitutional proposals were announced, designed to meet Baltic concerns over their right to secede. In early December, in an apparent compromise gesture, Estonia postponed its plans for economic autonomy. However, it reaffirmed its right to veto