

The Nationalities Question

Gorbachev has described this question as the "most burning one" because of the threat it poses to *perestroika* and the integrity of the Soviet multinational state. The threat, marked by outright secessionist demands and opposing Russian minority strikes in the Baltic Republics, and by inter-ethnic violence, strikes and transportation blockades in the republics and autonomous regions of Central Asia and the Caucasus, continues to grow. To the Baltic Popular Fronts, the Russian Pamyat and Interdvizhenie groups in the north, and the various Muslim and nationalist movements in the south-east should now be added the appearance of Ruch in the Western Ukraine. Gorbachev's two-pronged reaction to these various challenges is to use military and police forces against inter-ethnic violence, as in the troubled southern republics of Azerbaijan and Armenia and neighbouring ethnic communities, and to rely on conciliation and dialogue elsewhere while firmly opposing the possibility of secession of any republics.

In contrast to a straightforward policy of force to deal with inter-ethnic violence, the Baltic demands for independence pose a more complex and politically sensitive challenge and they could, in addition, run athwart Gorbachev's designation of these republics as the spearhead of economic progress. In the light of the international sympathy these republics attract because of Soviet annexation during World War II, he seems to realize that the treatment of their national and cultural aspirations will be the gauge of the sincerity of his peaceful European policy.

Gorbachev's announcement in Vilnius in favour of political pluralism generally, and of a humane and fully democratic socialism, constituted a virtual acceptance of the already existing local situation of political pluralism. This clearly defused the seriousness of the dispute with the Lithuanian Communist Party that had brought him to Vilnius -- their declaration of independence from the Soviet party in mid-December as a means to avoid being politically demolished in the coming Republican elections. At the February Plenum he was able to avoid a condemnatory decision on the Lithuanian Party's stand and thus to gain more time to pursue the resolution of such critical inter-Party disputes and secessionist demands in general within the longer framework of his programme of far-reaching revision of the Soviet political and constitutional system. However, his professed