

'Democratic Russia' takes to the streets

by Konstantin George

On Sunday, Feb. 25, hundreds of thousands of people will rally in Moscow and Leningrad, and of tens of thousands in dozens of Russian provincial centers, demanding that Russia "join Europe" and enjoy full political freedom, an end to social and economic misery, abolish Communist Party rule, and install a constitutionally guaranteed multi-party system. These demonstrations will not be confined to Russia, but are also set for the major cities of Ukraine and Belorussia. They are occurring one week before the March 4 elections for republic parliaments, regional and local governing bodies in the Soviet Union's "big three" Slavic republics: Russia, Ukraine, and Belorussia. These elections will witness a rout of the existing Communist Party apparatus.

The process of democratic revolution that has totally transformed Central and Eastern Europe since October has crossed into the Russian heartland. Where it goes is an open question, but as of early February, a movement campaigning for Russia to follow the path of the democratic revolutions has come into existence.

The first taste of this was seen in the Feb. 4 crowd of over 300,000 in Moscow who demonstrated for creating a genuine democracy in the Soviet Union. Throughout late January and the first half of February, mass protests in the Russian provinces and in Ukraine forced the resignation of more than a dozen regional party leaderships, from Sverdlovsk and Ufa in the Urals, to Volgograd, to the Ukrainian industrial and coal-mining centers of Donetsk and Voroshilovgrad.

'Russia at a crossroads'

The movement has crystallized around a new electoral bloc called Democratic Russia, which was formed on Feb. 19, to run candidates in the March 4 elections for the Russian Federation's Supreme Soviet, or parliament, and for local and regional bodies throughout Russia. Democratic Russia's platform demands that Russia not miss its historic chance to join the path taken by "most other European nations," referring to the democratic revolutions in Eastern Europe. Its platform has been given maximum publicity by its publication in *Ogonyok*, a weekly read by 20 million Russians.

The program contains the dramatic and true statement that "Russia now stands at the crossroads, whether it follows most of the other European countries and takes the difficult but peaceful, democratic, parliamentary path, at the end of which bread and freedom await everyone . . . or whether

Russia is plunged into bloody convulsions."

This statement encapsulates the great hope and great fear, seen so vividly in the faces of the hundreds of thousands who turned out in December to pay their last respects to Dr. Andrei Sakharov, that is serving as the "now-or-never" motor behind the growing mass movement.

The Democratic Russia bloc consists of, among others, the Russian component of the recently created All-Union Social Democratic Association; the historical association called "Memorial" (not to be confused with Pamyat, or "Memory," the Russian chauvinist movement), dedicated to erecting monuments to the victims of Stalin; the informal soldiers' trade union-type association called "Shield," and the "April" grouping in the U.S.S.R. Writers' Association. The program includes the demand that human rights, in conformity with the U.N. Convention, be incorporated into a new U.S.S.R. Constitution; that a multi-party system be formally created; that the powers of the KGB be drastically limited; and guarantees for freedom of enterprise, the right of land ownership, and broad powers for each republic, including the right to veto any laws from Moscow conflicting with their constitutions.

The Russian movement suffers most from the absence of any leaders of national stature. The untimely death of Dr. Sakharov in December deprived it of someone who had the potential to emerge as a genuine non-communist national leader. This vacuum is being actively exploited by populist, power-hungry demagogues such as Boris Yeltsin, who will win a seat in the new Russian parliament and intends to use it as a springboard for election to the post of President of the Russian Federation. As the Yeltsin case shows, Russia being Russia, this mass movement is open to manipulation.

But the candidates of Democratic Russia, and of allied pro-democracy, national sovereignty movements in the other Slavic republics—the national Ukrainian Rukh movement and the Belorussian Popular Front—will win heavily in the March 4 elections, at the cost of Communist functionaries. These elections will be preceded by Feb. 24-25 elections in the three Baltic republics, which will serve as the means for these republics to attempt to achieve full independence already this year. The March 4 electoral sweep will pave the way for the next surge of mass demonstrations and demands for Russia, Ukraine, and Belorussia to "join Europe."

The effect of the democratic revolutions in Eastern Europe on Russia and Ukraine is so strong that it has become a primary reason behind Moscow's rush to remove all its troops from Czechoslovakia by early 1991. Were it not for huge logistical problems—like how to provide housing back home for these troops and their families—Moscow would be removing them even faster. According to Czechoslovak sources, the Soviet side in the troop withdrawal talks has made no secret of the fact that they want the troops out because they fear that these 75,000 troops are being "contaminated" by the Czechoslovak revolution.