

## **EDITORIAL NOTE: TO THE STREETS! DEMOCRACY OR CHAOS?**

“To the barricades!” was the revolutionary cry of the nineteenth century. Between the volcanic days of the 1789 French Revolution when the French people overthrew the *ancien regime*, and the 1871 Paris Commune when their descendants deposed what was left of it, civil war and wars of secession in the name of national liberty were launched at the barricades—the “trenches” of the streets.

Since 1905, street demonstrations without barricades—both peaceful and violent—have brought havoc to states unwilling to bow to the will of the masses. So it was, for example, during the last stages of Imperial Russia, throughout the short-lived Weimar Republic, and the initial days of Italian Fascism. At mid-century these mass rallies came to naught—in Berlin in 1953, in Budapest in 1956, and in Prague in 1968—though in the latter year they had some success in Paris.

More recently, however, the fortunes of those taking politics to the streets have improved dramatically. In the late 1970s, during the Soviet Union’s war in Afghanistan, Central Asian mothers openly protested the war and the drafting of their sons. They were followed by Lech Walesa, leading the workers through the streets of the shipyards of Gdansk, giving birth to the Solidarity movement and ushering in the decline of communist rule in Poland. In 1988, the peoples of the Baltic republics gathered in the streets, literally singing for political independence. In Yerevan, Armenia, they assembled in the center of the city calling for the independence of Nagorno-Karabakh from Azerbaijan. And in 1989, East Germans filled their cities’ streets, demanding an end to communism. The results culminating in 1991 are history.

More recently, politics has spilled into the streets of post-communist states with ever greater frequency and, as yet, unknown definitive results. Last year, (probably in the wake of the frightful Chechnya war which repelled most people in many countries and heightened awareness of their government’s ineptness, corruption, and highhandedness) half a dozen major incidents of politics spilling into the streets took place.

In response to President Alyaksandr Lukashenka’s near-dictatorial plans to subsume Belarus’ sovereignty into a political merger with Russia, the republic’s opposition came out in great numbers, forcing Lukashenka at least to postpone his plans and prompting Russia to reconsider seriously the wisdom of this move, initially hatched by the Yeltsin government. Similarly, in Yerevan, Armenia, following the flawed presidential re-election of Ter Petrosian, large crowds expressed their anger at his unilateral and rather brutal de-registration of the opposition Dashnak party. As

a result, Ter Petrosian has indicated he would reinstate the party, clearly bending to the pressure mounted against him in the streets.

Better known are the daily street demonstrations in Belgrade, where, since November 1996, President Slobodan Milosevic had to witness growing opposition to his refusal to allow electoral results to municipal governments to take effect. Only after weeks of clamor, abroad and at home, did he finally consent to let the opposition candidates take their seats. His advisors even urged him to take a more conciliatory stand on Kosovo, a clear demonstration that there can be power in the streets if properly directed and sustained.

Early in 1997, Bulgaria witnessed a series of demonstrations in Sofia. This time the wrath of the opposition was against a democratically elected but do-nothing government. What the demonstrators wanted was less talk and more action, *i.e.*, serious economic reforms. Indeed, some speeches suggested an impatience with the democratic process when it led to inaction on the economic front.

Finally, most recently, turmoil has struck Albania. The outcry in the streets began with the revelation of a pyramid scam. However, it quickly escalated into a direct confrontation with President Belisha. In short order, southern towns were taken over by locals who seized arms from abandoned military stockpiles and challenged the government's authority. The protesters were joined by defectors from the army. At the moment of writing, President Belisha has ordered to hold early elections, but his opponents are calling on him to resign. Whether this will deteriorate into a regional, north-south confrontation of Albanian clans, or if it will be peacefully resolved cannot be guessed. The danger of its spilling over into Albanian populations in Macedonia, Montenegro and/or Kosovo is obvious.

The question that remains is whether these streets scenes against governments are a stage in the political evolution towards a more regulated form of democratic dialogue or a stage towards instability. So far it remains an open question. Will this new explosion of politics-gone-to-the-streets temper autocratic tendencies? Or will it also lead to more responsible representation? Or, in turn, will it plunge a nation into civil war? In Serbia's case, the opposition leaders are even more ethnocentric than Milosevic. In Bulgaria, the call is for efficiency, for economic improvement, regardless of constitutional rules. While in Albania there is little reason to believe any one can do better than Belisha.

One thing is certain: whether in southeastern Europe or elsewhere in the ex-communist zone, the dire conditions driving people into the streets are mounting daily, especially in Russia, so far quiescent. When will the millions of unpaid Russian workers, the unemployed, the pensioners, the angry junior officers and rank-and-file sailors and soldiers raise their voices and take to the streets? When they do, will Russia emerge stronger and more united or will it become seriously divided, bordering on civil war, as some observers in Russia and abroad have predicted? Can popular wrath there be contained? If so, by whom and what? Much depends on the discipline of the opposition, on the flexibility of the confronted government, and,

above all, on sheer luck. Politics in the streets could point the way back to the halls of parliament; but, it can also, just as well, lead “to the barricades!”

HRH