

Muslim Support for Baltic Independence

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A number of political parties and informal groups in Azerbaijan recently issued a joint statement in support of independence for Lithuania. Published in *Istiklal* (Independence), the organ of the Azerbaijani Social Democratic Party, the statement maintained that the peoples of the Soviet Union had entered the most important stage of their historical development. It said that the breakup of the Union started peacefully with the declaration of Lithuanian independence and that, to the credit of Lithuanian leaders and the central authorities, this process had remained peaceful.

In addition, the authors called on the Azerbaijani people to forgo payment of the part due to Azerbaijan of Lithuania's debt to the rest of the USSR, which has been demanded by Moscow, and asked that other nations do the same. They stated that Azerbaijanis were prepared to conduct trade and to establish political and cultural ties with an independent Lithuanian state. Azerbaijanis, the statement continued, supported movements for democracy and independence throughout the USSR and condemned any attempt to set one nation against another. The statement was signed by Laila Yunusova, the head of the Social Democratic Party, and representatives of the Azerbaijani Liberal Democratic Party, the National Democratic Party (also known as New Musavat), the Republican Party, the Baku Fine Arts Center, the Association of the Union of Peoples of Azerbaijan, and the Dede Gunesh Movement.

One of the first and certainly boldest gestures on the part of Soviet Central Asians was made by the women's group of the Uzbek popular front, "Birlik." On March 18, the group sent an open letter in support of Lithuania to Mikhail Gorbachev, Anatolii Luk'yanov, Vytautas Landsbergis, Uzbek Supreme

Soviet Chairman Islam Kerimov, leaders of the Union republics, popular front movements, and the United Nations. Earlier in 1990, "Birlik" sent a telegram to Landsbergis to protest against the Uzbek Communist Party's condemnation of the establishment of an independent Lithuanian Communist Party. The condemnation, said "Birlik," did not reflect the views of all Uzbek citizens.

Elsewhere in the predominantly Muslim regions of the USSR, there have been demonstrations over the events in Lithuania. In early April, Kazakh informal groups participating in an officially sanctioned rally in Alma-Ata sent messages to the governments of Lithuania and the Soviet Union to express support for Lithuanian independence. There was a similar demonstration in April in the Tatar Autonomous Republic. Also in April, the Kirgiz popular front appealed to Muslims and Turkic-Language speakers living in Lithuania to support that nation's drive for independence. Providing a different perspective, a source in Ashkhabad registered a complaint about the impact of the economic blockade on Turkmenistan's oil and gas exports and its imports of manufactured goods.

FOOTNOTES:

1-Istiklal, March, 1990.

2-Radio Liberty Uzbek service, April 5, 1990

3-Birlik, January 1, 1990

⁴ Radio Liberty Kazakh service, April 11, 1990. ⁵ Radio Vilnius, April 10, 1990

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6-Radio Liberty Turkmen service, April 26, 1990