

Baltics Given Economic Autonomy

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pg. A27

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Soviet Legislature Grants 3 Republics Control of Land, Resources

By David Remnick

Washington Post Foreign Service

MOSCOW, Nov. 27—The Soviet legislature voted today to grant the three Baltic republics economic autonomy beginning Jan. 1, a move that will give the region full control over its land and resources.

The measure, which was approved by a wide margin, is intended to transform the economic relationship between Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia and the central government in Moscow. For decades, the Soviet Union's constituent republics have been forced to follow Kremlin direc-

tion on all economic decisions and management.

The autonomy law grows out of grass-roots movements throughout the Baltic republics for increased political, economic and cultural independence from Moscow. After the vote, which was 296 to 67 with 37 abstentions, legislators from the three republics cheered and embraced each other.

Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev, who has sometimes shown impatience with the independence movements in the Baltics, praised

the autonomy measure. Leonid Abalkin, deputy prime minister and key economic adviser, said that the law would "ease the transition to economic autonomy for all 15 republics and help establish a rational relationship between them and the union."

Earlier this month, the legislature rejected a bill providing economic autonomy for all the republics, asserting that the language was not far-reaching enough. Legislative

See BALTIC, A31, Col. 1

■ *Hungarian opposition wins referendum.*

Page A31

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BALTIC, From A27

committees are now reworking the bill and are expected to reintroduce it later this year or early next year.

The Baltic autonomy bill provides Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia with greater control over the local financial system and banks in the republics. While the three republics will gain control over factories and other state-run enterprises, Moscow will retain authority over the armed forces stationed in the region, as well as oil and gas lines "and other facilities that have national importance."

Tens of thousands of people have demonstrated in the region in support of full independence from Moscow, but the Kremlin leadership, Gorbachev included, has expressed adamant opposition to secession, even though that right is specified in the Soviet constitution.

The leadership is hoping that the new economic law will ease some of the separatist sentiment in the Baltics, however nearly every leader of the popular political movements in each of the three republics speaks of genuine independence as the ultimate goal.

The prestige of the central Communist Party organization in the Baltics remains low, and local party organizations are trying to maintain at least some support among the population by advocating independence

from Moscow. Despite direct warnings from Gorbachev, the Lithuanian party organization will meet next month to decide whether to sever its formal association with Moscow.

In Estonia, the party disbanded the local chapter of Komsomol, the Soviet organization for Communist youth in which membership was once a mandatory stepping-stone for any prestigious job.

Although the situation in the Baltics has been generally peaceful since the rise of the mass political movements last year, nationalist fervor in the southern part of the Soviet Union has flared into violence once again.

Hundreds of Soviet troops have sealed off the city of Tskhinvali in the Caucasus after clashes between Georgians and Ossetians, an ethnic minority in the region, left about two dozen people injured.

The strife stems from a decision earlier this month by the leaders of South Ossetia, a small autonomous region within the Georgian republic, to declare its desire to unite with North Ossetia, which is part of the adjacent Russian republic, to form a new republic.

Thousands of Georgians arrived in Tskhinvali for a "friendship meeting" that quickly turned into a brawl. Georgian Communist Party leader Givi Gumbaridze has appealed for calm and said he will keep the troops in the city to prevent further clashes.

Georgia was the center of great ethnic tension last April, when independence activists organized rallies in Tbilisi, the capital. At least 21 people died there when Soviet troops broke up a demonstration with poison gas and riot clubs.

Last summer, more than 20 people in western Georgia died in gun battles and random violence between Georgians and Abkhazians.