

Czech it out: Gorby's the winner

News of the resignation of Czech party leader Gustav Husak got little more than yawns from most of the North American media. But to those who understand something of the murky ways of Eastern Europe, Husak's departure was big news indeed.

The new Czech leader, Milos Jakes, is no barn burner. A typical, grey-skinned bureaucrat, Jakes seems just the man to continue Husak's conservative communist policies of the past 20 years. Husak, readers will recall, was installed as Czech leader by the Soviets when they invaded Czechoslovakia in 1968 to squelch the more liberal regime of Alexander Dubcek.

The 74-year-old Husak, a dour hard-liner, came to represent East Europe's leading exponent of traditional Brezhnevian communism. Along with East Germany and Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia was regarded as Moscow's most faithful ally. All this changed when Mikhail Gorbachev came to power.

Husak stoutly resisted Gorbachev's reform program and quickly took over as unofficial leader of East Europe's conservative communists who strongly opposed any change in the status quo. How could the Czech leader stand up to Gorbachev and Soviet pressure?

Whenever there is a struggle for power inside the Kremlin—a time when the Soviets become absorbed with their own affairs—Moscow's East Bloc satellites assert themselves and become more independent.

The most extreme example of this tendency was during Nikita Khrushchev's de-Stalinization campaign of the mid-'50s when revolts broke out in East Germany, Poland and Hungary. During the latter years of Leonid Brezhnev, and those of his infirm successors, East Europeans managed to gain a fair degree of latitude in their own internal affairs. This gave East European party

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bosses strength in dealing with the Kremlin—sort of an in-house union.

Even more important, each East European leader has a patron inside the Soviet ruling elite. Poland's leader, Gen. Jaruzelski, is closely linked to Gorbachev's reform movement. So too is Bulgaria which has lately been almost frantically "restructuring" everything but the kitchen sink.

Gustav Husak, by contrast, was a close ally of conservatives within the Politburo. According to some experts, Husak drew his main support from Ygor Ligachev, the powerful Soviet party leader who is a leading rival of Gorbachev. Similarly, East Germany's conservative leadership also sided with Kremlin conservatives—and the Czechs.

Kremlin watchers have for some time believed that the first sign of a winner in the Kremlin's secret power struggles would come in East Europe. If Jaruzelski fell, for example, this would be taken as a sign of defeat for Gorbachev and his allies. Now that Husak has fallen, the reverse holds true.

It appears that Gorbachev and his reformist faction have won a clear and perhaps even decisive victory over Kremlin conservatives. Gorbachev returned triumphant from the Washington

summit and used the momentum of this success to steamroller his more conservative opponents on the Politburo and Central Committee. Ligachev, who was reportedly a leading backer of Husak, seems to have suffered a stinging defeat.

Interestingly, this comes right after Ligachev gave a most curious interview to a French newspaper in which he said that he more or less made decisions and chaired meetings that, at least formally, ought have been done by Gorbachev. This embarrassing replay of Alexander Haig's "I'm in charge here" gaffe, added fuel to the speculation that an internal power struggle between Ligachev and Gorbachev had peaked.

If Husak's resignation really does symbolize the triumph of Gorbachev reformists, then this is good news (good, mind you, not euphoric) for the West. No one wants to see the Ligachev hard-liners running Soviet policy. What next?

Attention will now focus on East Germany and Romania. East Germany is already due for a change of leadership. But don't expect too much change in Moscow's most important bastion facing the West. And the Russians, being Russians, still don't trust the East Germans who, red banners notwithstanding, still remain Germans.

Yet there is much pressure for change on the wrong side of the Berlin Wall and Gorbachevism is popular among young East Germans.

Then there is Romania, the sick man of East Europe. Romania has been run into the ground by party boss Ceausescu and his sticky-fingered family. This once rich nation's economic squalor and Ottoman-style regime are a prickly embarrassment to all right-thinking communists. One must suspect that Ceausescu is next on Mikhail Gorbachev's little list.