The CRACK-UP

Following the July Party Congress the radical reformers have ditched the Soviet Communist Party. Democratic Platform is set to become a rival social democratic formation. Tom Morton interviewed leading Democratic Platform member Vitaly Korotich on his recent visit to Australia.

Vitaly Korotich is the editor of the literary magazine Ogynyok, a house-journal of Moscow's radical reformers. He is a member of the USSR Congress of Deputies and a founding member of the Inter-Regional Deputies group in the Congress. He is a senior figure in Democratic Platform, the radical group now splitting from the CPSU. The interview was conducted in Melbourne in early July.

Do you expect that following the 28th party congress there'll be some kind of formal split within the Communist Party in the months ahead?

I believe the Communist Party will split into two or three parties by the end of this year. It is impossible to have 20 million different views in one big party. That can only lead to bigger demonstrations. Gorbachev must not be in the same party as those who are fighting against him. We'll do everything to split this party and I think we will be successful.

When you say "we'll do everything to split the party", do you mean the inter-regional deputies group?

Yes, I mean the inter-regional deputies group, of which I'm a member, and the so-called Democratic Platform in the party - I think these are simply bodies of people who think we need more democracy. It's impossible to be democratic with only one point of view, it's impossible having one party to throw up alternative leaders. The party must be split in the interest of the nation. Enough of having only one party and enough of the strange situation in which the words 'opposition' and 'enemy' are synonymous in our political vocabulary.

What's the relationship between the inter-regional deputies group and the Democratic Platform?

There are very close relations. Both are searching and fighting for democracy and nothing more. There's a real danger that sometimes the conservatives are fighting against personalities. In their organisations they never
have had personalities, but they have a strong and well-organised crowd that marches with sticks in hand. And for liberal people it’s not so easy because we try to give everybody the possibility to have their say. And from this point of view, the Democratic Platform and the inter-regional group are groups of personalities and it’s impossible to speak about them as a conglomerate. There are different people united in the name of democracy. We now understand that by being different, we start to be stronger.

So what will be Mikhail Gorbachev’s position if there’s a split? How will he react?

He’ll go higher, and we want him to be higher in the position of the president, higher than the positions of the leaders of the different parties. The president of such a country must be outside of the parties. He must simply be the symbol of the people’s will, and the people are not only members of parties, they are also citizens and patriots of their nation.

So in a sense it would be a tactical move on Gorbachev’s part if he resigned as secretary-general of the Communist Party - a way of strengthening his position as president?

You are quite right. But to understand the situation it’s also necessary to understand what the Party has done to our lives. All the time people are telling us that it was the Party that started perestroika. That’s all very well, but in that case, who started the period of stagnation? Mickey Mouse? It’s necessary to discuss all of the past and to understand that the party is responsible not only for the good changes but also for the terrible times we have had in our lives.

One phenomenon which has emerged in Eastern Europe since the emergence of multi-party democracy there is that people who were formerly in opposition together, now that they are able to emerge into the open, are having trouble in agreeing what they are for. They knew what they were against, but they don’t know what they are for. What are the inter-regional deputies group and Democratic Platform for?

We are for changing roads. We don’t want to find ourselves on the old road we’ve been on many times before. I think the inter-regional group has now become a democratic deputies’ club, rather than a party, where we can discuss everything freely and make real decisions. We are now having our first experience of real parliamentary life. You must understand that all these inter-regional groups, Democratic Platforms and so on, are the kinds of basic political institutions you passed on from many years ago. We are now starting to understand that it will be not so easy to have democracy but each step will be very important if we invent and suffer it ourselves. I remember the first meeting of the inter-regional group, which Sakharov attended, and to which many people came. It was announced: ‘please go and sign your name, and say you are a member of the inter-regional group’. And many people left because they were afraid to register there, and, when we signed up, we saw about 400 people around us. But it was a beginning and, after this, it became more and more popular.

Which road will you follow? Does the inter-regional deputies group want to take the high road for capitalism and liberal democracy or does it still
want a middle way between capitalism and socialism?

I think that it's not even about labels. I told that cynical old Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping that. He said there's no difference between a black cat or a white cat, so long as it catches mice. Our Soviet cat has stopped catching mice, and we are simply trying to build a society which can feed and defend people. I think it will be mainly socialism because our property is mainly collective or government-owned. Capitalism is possible when you have private property. We still don't have it. After we have private property it will be possible to talk about a multi-based economy. I simply think that we must build a good life.

Yes, but to build the good life, you have to have some kind of economic blueprint in mind. At the moment everybody in the Soviet Union is talking about the transition to a market economy. What do you think that means to ordinary Russians?

Nothing. People know nothing about this. They want to have a market economy, but at the same time they don't want to have unemployment and they want lower prices. They want such a strange market economy, one that doesn't conform to reality. I think when you want to win the war it's necessary to understand that some of your cities may be destroyed. In this war we will have prisoners of war, as well as people killed and wounded if necessary. We have never had a real market - we are starting to build this market without private property, without real differences in our economic organisations, and with shares we have just started printing. It's only the beginning, but we intend this free market to be one of the ways to salvation.

When you spoke about war a moment ago, you were using a metaphor for what would happen when the market is introduced, but is there a possibility that there will be real violent social conflict as a result of the changes that will have to happen?

A lot of people in our country, a lot of the conservatives, want this kind of conflict because it will make it possible to announce martial law and stop democratic changes. We want to avoid this kind of conflict. All the time I'm visiting my voters, and others are going to their constituents trying to tell them about the real economic situation and about how workers never will be better off if they strike now and stop the process of change. We're living in great danger of strikes now. Two or three big strikes now would be catastrophic. Workers have nothing and they are fighting for a better life. It's easy to understand their readiness to strike. I think we need quick changes. We need things in our stores, we need a direction for change and people must feel that direction is stable and that tomorrow will be better. If things develop this way I feel that we'll have people's support and if not, tomorrow, our conservatives may provoke new uprisings and it will be a real danger.

It's only just a little less than a year since the strikes in the coalfields and the mines. What sort of view do you think the strikers had then and the workers who may be preparing to strike now have of the process of change. Do you think that they, on the whole, support Gorbachev?

They support change for the country, yes, but at the same time they need change for themselves. They have nothing, they still live in terrible houses, they still lead impossible lives and they're on the last frontier. Coal and mine workers will have more strikes if there are no changes. Last month they had a big all-Soviet miners' congress. In the same way, it will be a real danger for us, if now at harvest time we have even one strike on the railways, and railway workers are ready to strike, too. We have many local strikes now and it's a real danger. People are waiting for change, but the country is tired and if there is no change, the so-called simple people will go into the streets. All the time we have before us the Romanian example and the hatred there which started to kill people. I am afraid that something similar will be provoked in my country.

What can be done immediately to stop that happening, to stop those strikes?

More food. It's very nice talking about democracy and free press, but miners who are working underground, when they come up, want good bread, butter, milk, everything. If we improve food supplies, nobody will starve in the Soviet Union, but people will be very poor. If we give them better food they'll be happy and it will be possible to go forward.

What's necessary to provide that food? Is the only thing that will help now a massive aid package from the West?

First there must be privatisation of our agriculture. We must have farmers; we must give land back to peasants. This process is now moving but local rural bureaucracies are fighting against private enterprises there. We'll try to give land back to the peasants and if they work better it will solve a lot of our food problems.

Just how formidable an opponent is the bureaucracy?

Our country has a population of 285 million. We have 18 million bureaucrats in the apparatus. We have no private industry. In my country, the end of active work for our bureaucrats is the end of everything - the end of privileges, black cars, special resorts and they are fighting for their bread and butter, for quite concrete things. And they will fight until the last. They will serve Gorbachev, they will serve anybody, but Gorbachev doesn't
need so many bureaucrats. Nobody knows what to do with them. Now it's a big problem. Bureaucrats on our streets and out of work who are around 50 are young enough to want to destroy everything around to survive themselves. I mean it. I've talked about giving land to the peasants, but we have 40 million peasants. In the United States they have two million farmers who feed themselves and a lot of other people, including us. In our country out of 40 million peasants four million are local bureaucrats, who will never give land back to the peasants.

It seems that one of the great dilemmas for Gorbachev is that, on the one hand, many people are arguing that there's a need to decentralise, to take control away from the centre. But, on the other hand, if you do that, there's a chance that the process of change will be thwarted at the periphery, away from the centre, by the local party bosses and bureaucrats.

The republics must be allowed to have independence, and the Soviet Union must become an association of independent republics. It's impossible to continue as an empire any longer. It's easier to pursue economic reform in the smaller parts of the Soviet Union. It's not necessary to pursue the same reforms in Estonia as in Kazakhstan in Middle Asia. It's necessary to permit people to do what they like, to rescue themselves according to their national conditions and traditions. Our country needs to be decentralised.

Let's talk a little about the issue of nationalism. Both Soviet and foreign commentators have detected signs that there's a kind of alliance emerging at the moment between the conservatives in the communist parties and Russian nationalists.

Sometimes there does seem to be a real alliance between the Russian national communist party and Russian nationalism. The danger here is that the nationalism of the dominant nation always provokes smaller nations to their own even sharper versions of nationalism. Russian nationalism is really dangerous in a multi-national country like ours. If Russian nationalism becomes even stronger it will encourage other nations to leave the Soviet Union. I think Russia is finished. In many countries in the West, the Soviet Union is called Russia, because the Russian language is the official language. But the Russian nation must not be allowed to stand for the Soviet Union. Russia must be Russia, Lithuania must be allowed to be Lithuania, and the Ukraine must be allowed to be the Ukraine.

And yet the coalition of the conservative faction in the Communist Party and Russian nationalists is likely to resist that decentralisation, that breaking-up.

Yes. They want an empire but at the same time they cannot understand that they will simply break the Soviet Union in trying to build up Russia. That is the only possible result. Each nation should see its own potential and develop in its own way. We can restore our economy by uniting, in the same way we destroyed it.

Do you think there's much popular support for this kind of Russian nationalism? Already people are starting to say there's a risk if the process of reform doesn't succeed that Russia will relapse into some kind of populist authoritarianism.

Always in large countries - even in Australia - it's possible for the locals to say: "all our problems are due to the emigrés, the people of different nationalities. If we had only Australians we would live better." The same slogans are uttered in France by Le Pen. There are conservative groups of that sort everywhere. I think it's the same in Russia. When we started having economic problems, the Russian nationalists started to say that if there were only Russians, of course it will be better. But that's a stupid slogan. It's necessary to understand that it's not nationality but the system that decides how you live. In a democratic society we must have all points of view.

One last question. When you talk about this process of decentralisation, of the nation, if you like, coming apart so that it can come together, I wonder if you think the central Asian republics can be part of that process too. Because at the moment we are seeing a strengthening of ties between the Soviet central Asian republics and their ethnic counterparts in China. And there is some possibility of an emerging Islamic bloc in the Muslim parts of the USSR.

China is very unpopular in my country, especially after the Tiananmen events. But the Muslim republics close to us - Iran, Turkey, Pakistan and Afghanistan - are popular with our Muslims, because for many years we were Christian chauvinists and always let Muslims know that they stood somewhere below us. Soviet Muslims, in this time of Muslim revolution, share the same language as Muslims abroad - Tadjiks speak the same language as Iran, Azerbaijanians speak the Turkish language - and so they start to look to their neighbours abroad. Especially since the Afghan war, which they saw as a big success for Muslims, they have been talking about this. I think a Muslim revolution would be very dangerous for us, because we have a lot of hungry and angry people on both sides of the border. I never believed that the European part of the Soviet Union, including Russia, would stray very far, because those people are united by their common ethics, by common ideas and, even after being educated in atheism for so many years, are still a biblical society. But the Islamic parts of the Soviet Union will be a different question.

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The Europeans.