

THE SOVIET UNION: THE REPUBLICS

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UKRAINE

Thousands rejoice but Kravchuk may rue his hesitancy

THOUSANDS of jubilant Ukrainians flooded into October Revolution Square in central Kiev last evening to celebrate the failure of the coup.

Shouting "Victory" and "We won", they pushed against barricades set up earlier by police to keep demonstrators off the square. Eventually smiling officers pulled the barriers aside to let the swelling crowd pour in.

News of the plight of the State of Emergency Committee was greeted by confusion and then optimism by opposition and government leaders in Kiev. After a day of mounting tension, Ukraine was finally coming out firmly in support of Boris Yeltsin.

An early-morning meeting of Narodna Rada, the parliamentary opposition faction, culminated in a telephone call at 3am to Leonid Kravchuk, the republic's leader, demanding that he contact Moscow to denounce the Committee unequivocally, thus strengthening earlier statements.

Mr Kravchuk did eventually telephone through a strong statement saying he did not recognise the Committee. He demanded Mr Gorbachev's presence at the emergency session of the all-union parliament on 26 August.

He added that if a state of emergency was declared in Ukraine, the people would have the right to defend themselves.

Military leaders took independent moves to support Mr Yeltsin by contacting Ukraine's opposition leaders.

From Susan Viets
in Kiev

Ivan Drach, the chairman of Rukh, the pro-independence movement, told a press conference: "The head of the Kiev Military District proposed a meeting with me on Thursday. Police and soldiers are now asking for information and taking leaflets from Rukh."

The leaflets urged soldiers and KGB members: "Make a choice! Stand on the side of the working people. Defend our mothers, fathers, wives and children from the putschites."

Mr Drach, clearly pleased with the news from Moscow, added: "Our main concern now is to protect Ukraine's sovereignty and people."

Ukraine's ambiguous stand in the early days of the putsch will have an impact on internal and inter-republican relations. Yesterday, the celebrating crowd in the square chanted "Yeltsin" and "Down with Kravchuk".

Oleksander Yemets, a former police captain and opposition MP, said: "The only reason Ukraine is now taking firmer steps is because of pressure from Narodna Rada."

Volodymyr Gryniiov, the deputy chairman of parliament, said yesterday: "It seems that Kravchuk has lost authority and popularity these past days."

Parliament will meet in emergency session today or tomorrow.