

Ukrainian parliament votes to hold its own poll on Soviet unity

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THE Ukrainian Supreme Soviet cautiously followed the Baltic republics yesterday by voting to hold a separate Ukrainian referendum on the continued unity of the Soviet Union. It also decided, however, to hold President Mikhail Gorbachev's all-union referendum on 17 March.

The question for the Ukrainian referendum will be set only next week but Oles Shevchenko, a member of Narodna Rada, the parliamentary opposition, said it was likely to contradict President Gorbachev's question by asking Ukrainians whether they favoured a "union of Soviet sovereign nation states in which every nationality can decide its own fate".

President Gorbachev's referendum will ask Soviet citizens: "Do you feel it is necessary to keep the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics as a renewed federation of equal sovereign republics . . . ?"

Sergei Odarych, the under-secretary of the pro-independence Rukh movement, said: "Today, practically speaking, we face the same situation as Latvia and Estonia."

Passionate MPs from both the Communist Party and Narodna Rada fought for the podium in a prolonged parliamentary debate to argue about whether the all-union referendum was unconstitutional as it had not been approved by the republican parliament.

From Susan Viets
in Kiev

MPs rejected a Russian-style referendum, in which extra questions would be added to Mr Gorbachev's ballot. Instead, they voted 288 to 47 for two separate ballot papers on 17 March.

The Ukraine, the Soviet Union's second largest republic, with a Communist-dominated parliament, has been slow to reach a decision on the referendum. Its stand is less radical than that of the Baltic republics, which are waging an open battle with the Kremlin.

Yesterday Leonid Kravchuk, the Communist Ukrainian President, argued in favour of a continued union because "even Western economists and lawyers understand that breaking up the union would destroy everything we have". He told MPs that the Soviet parliament had violated the constitution by failing to consult the republics on the referendum, and said: "We cannot continue to be slaves and close our eyes to the fact that indeed our sovereignty is being encroached upon . . . Let's not, however, draw ourselves into a war with the parliament of the Soviet Union."

Mr Shevchenko said: "This is a victory instead of the blow we expected."

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