

Voters send Gorbachev angry signals

PRESIDENT Mikhail Gorbachev presides over a divided nation, half of which wants to remain in a union of 15 republics and the other half which wants a divorce, according to the early results of Sunday's poll.

When all the papers have been counted, Mr Gorbachev may still be able to claim victory, but the voters also sent him a number of discomfiting signals about his handling of the country.

Tass, the official news agency, was putting a brave face on the numbers as they trickled in from distant parts across 11 time zones. Tass proclaimed a massive turnout of up to 80 per cent in some remote places, such as Chita, on the Mongolian border, where they said 85 per cent of the voters had said 'Yes' to Mr Gorbachev's vision of a renewed union.

Unofficial results compiled by independent Soviet news agencies showed 65-70 per cent backing for Mr Gorbachev in the Siberian districts in general. Even in Moscow, where sentiment against Mr Gorbachev runs high, 68 per cent turned out; half of them voted for the union, according to Tass.

Other estimates said the figure was much lower for the union vote — about 34 per cent. In the Ukrainian capital, Kiev, where the independence movement is growing, 44 per cent voted to stay in the union.

According to the rules of the referendum, the Kremlin can claim success if only half of the nation votes and 51 per cent of them say 'Yes' to the union. But the local parliaments of six of the republics refused to have anything to do with the referendum, and

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the responses to the secondary questions on the ballot in the two largest republics, Russia and the Ukraine, are bound to cause Mr Gorbachev considerable distress.

In the Russian Republic, a second question on the ballot effectively asked voters whether they would like Boris Yeltsin, Mr Gorbachev's political rival, to be the elected president of the republic. Mr Gorbachev had warned against such a development, saying it would pit him against Mr Yeltsin over such delicate issues as national security.

Tass reported that only 53 per cent of the votes cast in the troubled oil field region of Tyumen backed Mr Gorbachev — a vote of no confidence from the region that earns the most hard currency for the Soviet Union.

In Leningrad, where the liberal mayor, Anatoly Sobchak, has great influence, there was a 65 per cent turnout, but no clear endorsement of the union. And in one Leningrad district a scuffle broke out between Gorbachev and Yeltsin supporters, according to *Pravda*.

In the Ukraine, there was a strong vote for Mr Gorbachev's union — up to 80 per cent in the Russified south and eastern parts of the republic, but this dropped to 44 per cent in Kiev, went down to 24 per cent in the western city of Lvov, and to 18 per cent in Chernobyl.

In Lvov and Chernobyl, where

memories of the nuclear power plant disaster remain strong voters responded to a third question on the ballot proposing independence for the Ukraine, with a huge 80-85 per cent in favour.

On the Ukrainian ballot across the republic was a question asking voters if they backed a contradictory proposal for a sovereign Ukraine within the union.

Despite the vote for Mr Gorbachev, the Ukrainian opposition claimed victory last night. A leading member of the pro-independence movement, Rukh, Dmytro Pavlychko, said: "Now we can tell parliament that people insist the declaration of sovereignty must have constitutional force and we can wage a battle to fulfil this."

Mr Pavlychko predicted that the next step for the Ukraine is to draft a referendum law and within a year to hold a vote to determine whether the Ukraine wants secession from the union.

■ Elite Soviet troops released the head of separatist Lithuania's Defence Ministry yesterday, about 12 hours after seizing him on a Vilnius street, an official at the republic's parliament said; **Reuter reports.**

The official said "Black Beret" troops freed Audrius Butkevicius about noon on orders from authorities in Moscow. His driver remained in detention and his car impounded.

Lithuania's Moscow-appointed prosecutor-general, Antas Petrauskas, had wanted to pursue an investigation against Mr Butkevicius on charges of illegally holding a weapon, but had been told by Moscow to release him, the official said.