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Bargaining chips are counted

HUNDREDS OF flag-waving Ukrainians gathered outside the imposing Central Committee building yesterday to cheer city council authorities who bypassed the Ukrainian parliament to lock and seal the doors of the communists' headquarters in Ukraine and cut off its communications.

The parliamentary presidium also met to pardon the imprisoned opposition deputy, Stepan Khmara, arrested last November following a scuffle with an undercover police officer, which his colleagues say was a KGB set-up. The opposition presidium member, Dmytro Pavlychko, reported that Ukraine's head of state, Leonid Kravchuk, had announced his intention to leave the Communist Party at this session.

Nervous onlookers in front of the parliament cheered when independence was proclaimed on Saturday but voiced fears their new state might be hijacked by the

From Susan Viets in Kiev

Communist Party scurrying to carve out independence for itself following President Mikhail Gorbachev's moves against Soviet communists at the weekend.

While democratic MPs moved to stop the activities of Ukrainian communists, the Communist-dominated parliament agreed only to ban the party from government and defence organisations, including the army and KGB.

Yevhen Hryiv, a democratic deputy, yesterday released documents proving the proposed introduction of a state of emergency in Ukraine was approved by the Communist Party of Ukraine.

Independence must be ratified in a December referendum and it is unclear how quickly the republic will be able to implement it. Political union for the republic is, however, now out of the question.

In its emergency session on Saturday, the Ukrainian parliament seized control of all Union property on its territory. The 52-million-strong Ukraine is the Soviet Union's second most populous republic and provides one-fifth of its products. It will be in a strong bargaining position when it negotiates economic ties with Russia and other neighbouring republics.

According to the Ukrainian economist, Oles Semikhodsky, Ukraine provides 70 per cent of the Soviet Union's manganese, used to fortify steel. This is 30 per cent of the world's supply. It also possesses 80 per cent of the Soviet Union's sulphur and 40 per cent of its titanium. Ukraine's chief bargaining chip will be grain. Its output accounts for one-quarter of the total for the Soviet Union, which already imports grain.

Parliament also voted to create a Ukrainian army and national guard by October and immediately to subordinate to itself the 1.5 million Soviet troops on Ukrainian soil. Half of these come from other republics.

While information on nuclear weapons is still classified, Ukraine is one of four nuclear republics and is known to have a substantial share of the Union's arsenal. In last summer's declaration of sovereignty, parliament pledged that Ukraine will "abide by the three non-nuclear principles: not to participate, not to produce and not to obtain nuclear weapons". Both the opposition and ruling Communists vowed that nuclear weapons would be handed to the centre. Until its course is clear, however, Ukraine will rank as a world nuclear power, likely to use this position to press for recognition from the West as an independent state.