A Tragic Turn of Events

Outside the Soviet Union, as both researchers and political leaders now acknowledge, no one foresaw the dissolution of the Soviet Union. And judging by all the evidence, no one other than rabid anti-Communists favored such an outcome. This dire turn of events shook the whole world.

How do I evaluate these events today? The same way I did six or seven years ago. It truly was a tragedy—a tragedy for the majority of Soviet citizens and for the republics that were part of the Soviet Union. Back then, I could not agree with the dismemberment of our country, the breaking apart of the Soviet state, and today I still consider this to have been a most flagrant error. The Union could have been preserved. A considerable number, and in some respects the overwhelming majority, of difficulties encountered by the peoples of the former Soviet Union, including the Russian people, are the result of the disintegration of the state we had in common, the destruction of a single economic, political, legal, scientific, informational, and military-strategic space that had been formed over centuries.

The dissolution of the Union radically changed the situation in Europe and the world, disrupted the geopolitical balance, and undermined the possibility of carrying further many positive processes that were under way in world politics by the end of 1991. I am convinced that the world today would be living more peacefully if the Soviet Union—of course in a renewed and reformed version—had continued to exist.

What was it that led to this deplorable finale? After all, the Soviet Union seemed to be such a giant block of stone, such a vast and powerful state, uniting people of more than a hundred different nationalities. Or did it perhaps only seem that way?

No, it was not just a false appearance. The Soviet Union really was a strong and solid multinational state. Its dissolution was by no means

inevitable. At times the USSR has been called—and some still call it—an empire. But it was not an empire in the generally accepted meaning of the term.

The Soviet Union was a country that was formed historically over many centuries. In the course of its formation all sorts of events took place; for example, there were cases in which one or another territory or people voluntarily unified with Russia, and times when the tsarist government fought wars of conquest. There was collaboration among different nationalities in pursuit of mutual advantage, and there were injustices and the use of force. History is like that. The result of all this was a state that was an organic whole—of course with a tremendous range of unique qualities among its various components. It traveled a long road—and naturally there were serious difficulties, stormy turns of events, even tragedies. Yet this state withstood the test of the Great Patriotic War. Even in that tragic hour it did not fall apart, but stood its ground.

Were there problems in the Soviet Union, including ethnic problems? Yes, there were political, economic, and social problems—and problems between nationalities. *These were not, however, problems of our country as a whole but of the system that had been established*. This administrative-bureaucratic system, this totalitarian system, could not respond adequately to the problems that had built up. Not only did it fail to contribute to their solution; it deepened and intensified them. As a result, by the 1980s our country had entered a stage of severe crisis. It was in order to overcome this crisis that perestroika was begun.

Among the problems that existed in our country were those involving the various nationalities. I know this quite well from my own experience, because for many years I was in charge of one of the largest regions of the Soviet Union, the Stavropol region. I understood that relations among people of different nationalities and their common existence was an inseparable part of the real life of our society. I was aware of how important it was to adopt a cautious and sensitive attitude toward this delicate matter.

In the beginning, after the 1917 revolution, Lenin insisted on recognition of the principle that nations have the right of self-determination, up to and including secession, and he asserted the need to construct a federation of equal republics as a means of maintaining the integrity of the multinational state. It was on this basis that the USSR was founded in 1922, although events did not proceed without a certain use of force.

Stalin, during the years of his rule, drastically departed from this course. The Soviet Union was turned into a supercentralized unitary state. Within this framework, the central government, the so-called Center—that is, essentially, the party—did as it pleased. Borders were carved out arbitrarily, the rights of one or another nationality were flagrantly violated, and during and immediately after World War II many nationalities were subjected to wholesale repression. They were deported from their ancient homelands and resettled in remote parts of the country. Tens of thousands of these people perished in the process. Even under these conditions, however, closer ties and joint efforts among the various nationalities in the Soviet Union allowed all of them to accelerate their development sharply. National cultures flourished in all the republics, and each nationality developed its own working class and intelligentsia. The different nations and nationalities grew stronger, and each acquired an increasingly profound sense of its own identity.

In other words, contradictory processes were at work. These developments required attention and appropriate responses on the part of the Center. But that did not happen. Severe problems accumulated and were not resolved. Why did this happen? The official conception was that relations among the nationalities in our country were in sufficiently good shape, that in general there were no serious problems. The mistakes made in the realm of relations among nationalities remained in the shadows, and discussion of them was unacceptable.

When perestroika began we could not avoid paying attention to this extremely important area in the life of our society. That is why, at the Twenty-eighth Party Congress, which formulated a platform for the period ahead, one point was especially emphasized: "Our achievements should not give the impression that there is no problem regarding national processes. Contradictions are inherent in all processes of development, and they are inevitable in this sphere as well. What is important is to see all facets of these contradictions, which are constantly emerging, to search for reliable answers to life's continuing questions, and to provide those answers in a timely way."

The approach taken by this congress was correct and timely. Still, we suffered many setbacks in trying to resolve the national question. For one thing, we were late in dealing with this question; for another, we made some wrong decisions. No wonder. We were moving away from traditional attitudes and heading toward a policy aimed at transforming the bureaucratic, unitary Soviet Union into a democratic federation of independent states.

Meanwhile, the course of events, life itself, made it clear that nationality problems had to be resolved. The first wake-up call came with clashes that occurred as early as March-April 1986 between groups of Russian youths and Yakut students at the state university in Yakutia. Then in December 1986 there were mass disturbances on the streets of Alma-Ata, related to a change of leadership in Kazakhstan, whose capital is Alma-Ata. A conflict had broken out among local clans. The tense situation had to be defused. And this could be done only by someone who was not linked with any of the local clans. So the proposal was made to replace D. Kunaev, the former first secretary of the Central Committee of Kazakhstan and an ethnic Kazakh, with G. V. Kolbin, an ethnic Russian (who, incidentally, was nominated by Kunaev himself). Kolbin had experience working in the non-Russian republic of Georgia. It was thought that this would take the heat out of the conflict, especially since there were many Russians, Ukrainians, Germans, and representatives of other nationalities living in Kazakhstan. It was a blunder. The appointment of Kolbin was taken as a sign of disrespect and distrust of the Kazakh people. Crowds protested on the streets of the capital and other cities of Kazakhstan.

How did we react to this significant sign that all was not well in relations among the nationalities? I must confess that we reacted in the same old way, and if anyone reproaches me for lack of decisiveness, he should know that I regret the decisiveness that I showed during the Kazakh events of 1986. [We resolutely insisted on Kolbin replacing Kunaev.] Unfortunately this was not the only case. Only later did I understand that this was not the way to proceed, that we could not live by a double standard—[calling for democracy, while imposing solutions "decisively."]

The resolution the Politburo adopted at that time was aimed not so much at discovering the cause of what had happened or drawing lessons from the events as to teach a lesson to Kazakhstan as well as to others. We were guided by conceptions formed much earlier, the notion that everything was flowing smoothly in the channel of unity and friendship and that outbreaks of nationalism represented the only danger.

Later, much later in fact, both the decision of our Central Committee's Secretariat regarding Yakutia and the Politburo resolution on Kazakhstan were withdrawn. But what had happened made me think seriously about the nationalities questions. At the January 1987 Plenum of our Central Committee I spoke about the conclusions I had reached as a result of my first reflections on the problem:

> We are obliged to acknowledge the real situation and the real prospects for development in national relations. Today, when democracy and self-government are expanding, when there is a rapid growth in national self-consciousness among all nations and nationalities, when processes of internationalization are being intensified, the timely and just resolution of conflicts that arise acquires great importance—and there is only one possible basis for resolving these conflicts: The interests of each nation and nationality must be able to flourish, as must the interests of our society as a whole. . . . The events in Alma-Ata, and all that preceded those events, require serious analysis and assessment on the basis of principle.

In mid-February 1987 I traveled to Latvia and Estonia. Once again I felt the great intensity of the national question. In the middle of that same year we encountered the problem of the Crimean Tatars, one of the nationalities that had been forcibly removed at the end of World War II to settlements that were run like concentration camps in the Urals, Siberia, and Central Asia. Ever since the 1960s the Crimean Tatars had been demanding justice and the right to return to their homeland in Crimea. With the coming of perestroika they sensed it was possible to have their national dignity fully restored, in deeds and not just in words. In July 1987 the Crimean Tatar protests became intense. For three days they demonstrated without interruption by the walls of the Kremlin, shouting the slogan "Homeland or Death." On July 9, 1987, the problem of the Crimean Tatars was discussed at a session of the Politburo. Rather than paraphrase the contents of the discussion, let me quote a section of the record:

> GORBACHEV: Up to this time there has been a derogatory label circulating among us [referring to the Crimean Tatars]—traitors during the Great Patriotic War. But where were there not traitors? What about the Vlasovites [soldiers of Russian nationality who fought on Hitler's side]?
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> LUKYANOV: There was a Tatar division in the Wehrmacht.
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> GORBACHEV: Well, there was a Kalmyk division also. They operated in the Stavropol region. But we still restored the Kalmyk autonomous republic. Was there something exceptional in the behavior of the Tatars? It is true that some of them collaborated with the Germans, but others fought the Germans, just as the rest of us did. Over a period of forty-four years, 250 volumes of signatures and statements have accumulated calling for justice to be restored. Today, according to the census, there are 132,000 Crimean Tatars,

but in fact there are 350,000. Can't better arrangements be made for them in Uzbekistan? What is your opinion?

The question is addressed to CHEBRIKOV *[head of state security].*

CHEBRIKOV: (states that they have had to confront this problem for twenty years, then continues): It seems likely that it will be necessary to organize an autonomous district in the Crimea. Otherwise we will keep coming back to this question again and again. But Shcherbitsky [head of the Ukrainian Republic, in which the Crimea is located] is opposed.

GORBACHEV: That is also democracy.

CHEBRIKOV: And how shall we deal with the question of the southern coast of the Crimea?* The Tatars will return and say, "This is my house, give it back." At the same time we have to solve the problem of the Germans. There are two million of them.** We can't get away from having to solve this problem no matter how long we postpone it. These problems have come to a head.

SOLOMENTSEV: Yes, although the problem is not simple, it must be solved. And it must be solved at the same time that we solve the problem of the Volga Germans. We have acknowledged that their deportation was unjustified. And we returned the Ingush, the Kalmyks, and the Karachai [other nationalities deported during or just after World War II]. . . . Almost all [deported nationalities] have been returned to their homelands. But not the Volga Germans and not the Crimean Tatars. I am not in favor of an autonomous district, however. The national composition of the population in the Crimea has changed greatly. Before the war Ukrainians comprised 15 percent; now they account for 26 percent. Russians comprised 49 percent; now they account for 68 percent. . . . An autonomous district would be a mongrel solution. Maybe I'm a maximalist, but we have a good decree signed by Lenin in his day. Since we are seeking to live according to Lenin, we could base our actions on his decree. It would be difficult for anyone to take offense against it. Neither Russians nor Ukrainians. The nationalities would learn to get used to living with one another.

*The Crimea's southern coast is a beach and resort area, a highly prized location.—Trans.

**These are descendants of German colonists invited to settle mainly in the Volga region in the eighteenth century. During World War II they were deported from the autonomous area created for them after the Soviet revolution.—Trans.

GORBACHEV: In other words, you think the Crimea should once again become part of the RSFSR (Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic), as in Lenin's decree? Don't you remember that Podgorny insisted that Krasnodar and the Kuban be given back to Ukraine? Because, in his opinion, the Cossacks were Ukrainians. Most likely from the historical point of view it would be correct to return the Crimea to Russia. But Ukraine would rise up against that.

VOROTNIKOV: This question should be postponed. There is a risk of creating one more enormous Ukrainian problem? I am in favor of an autonomous district, but for the time being it is necessary to create [better] conditions [for the Crimean Tatars] in Uzbekistan. I am against trying to solve the Volga German problem at the same time.

SHEVARDNADZE: I am in favor of creating [better] conditions in Uzbekistan and gradually allowing all who so desire, and are able, to move back to the Crimea.

YAKOVLEV: Set a fifteen to twenty year transitional period, for example, for returning to the Crimea. And for the time being, [have them remain] in Uzbekistan.

DOLGIKH: I support this position.

GROMYKO: Why are we being so hasty? No disaster has yet befallen us. So what if delegations are constantly traveling to visit the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet and other institutions? Let them travel. The decision to deport them was justified by wartime conditions. Transfer [of the Crimea from Russia] to Ukraine was of course arbitrary. But how can we take that back now? I am in favor of leaving the problem to the judgment of history. And don't create an autonomous district. Make arrangements for the Tatars in Uzbekistan. If this doesn't provide a complete solution, at least it will ease the pressure for a Crimean variant of the solution. Once again, I propose that we think about it and not make a final decision.

LUKYANOV speaks in favor of an autonomous district in the Crimea.

GORBACHEV: We cannot succeed in avoiding a decision. We must think everything through thoroughly. The idea of restoring a Crimean autonomous area, as in Lenin's decree, is unrealistic today. Over a period of forty-five years a great deal has changed in the Crimea. . . . It is no longer possible to give the Crimea to the Tatars. . . . Returning the Crimea to the RSFSR

would create a fissure in a place where it would not at all suit our purposes now, that is, within the Slavic nucleus of the "socialist empire." Before the revolution, the strongest support for independence of the country was the Russian nation. Now it is all the others, too. It is necessary to create conditions for a full and satisfactory life for the Tatars in Uzbekistan and to be concerned and take care of them. Those who have already turned up in the Crimea, let them live there. They, too, must be given assistance. But steps must be taken to restrain resettlement to the Crimea. People should be urged to base their actions on reality.

A commission is created consisting of Gromyko, Shcherbitsky, Vorotnikov, Usmankhodzhaev, Demichev, Chebrikov, Lukyanov, Razumovsky, and Yakovlev.

GORBACHEV: For now we will not take up the Volga German problem. And if this commission shows its capabilities in resolving the Tatar question, we will assign it to the German question next. And let the commission go out to meet Tatar delegations and make statements for the press. In a word, we have to approach this process in a democratic spirit.

(Later, after the commission had worked for a while, a conclusion was reached jointly with the Ukrainian authorities: It was deemed possible to return some of the Tatars to their former places of residence. Thus a step was taken toward meeting the Tatars halfway, but the problem was not resolved. Later, in 1989, all the Crimean Tatars were given the right to return to the Crimea, but the commission reaffirmed the refusal to restore the Crimea to the status of an autonomous republic of the Crimean Tatars.)

I have cited the transcript of this Politburo discussion in order to show how we discussed such problems at that time. After mid-1987, the question of relations among the nationalities was practically always on the Politburo's agenda.

In August 1987 signs of intensifying national ferment in the Baltic republics became evident. Such ferment had always existed there, but earlier it had remained beneath the surface. The main cause was discontent over the Russification of the region. But there was no plan for dealing with this matter. Discussion of the question went nowhere. Besides, the local authorities themselves were seeking investments for industrial construction for which workers and specialists were needed. And since they did not exist

locally, that meant more Russians would move to the area, and not only Russians. That's the way things were in real life.

Suppression of the real history of how the Baltic region was unified with the USSR played a considerable role in this whole problem. Demands that the truth be established and the actual history revealed began in 1987. At first it was only a question of restoring historical truth, but later demands were made that the situation existing before 1939 be restored. At the time we did not realize the full import of the processes that were taking place. We were late in responding adequately to what was happening.

In October 1987 there began a movement to reunify the Karabakh region with Armenia. A wave of public meetings and rallies swept across the region, and this provoked the emigration of Azerbaijanis from Karabakh. In response, a protest campaign developed in Azerbaijan with the slogan, "Karabakh is an inseparable part of Azerbaijan." In Karabakh, matters moved very quickly to the point of direct clashes between representatives of the two different national communities and a short while later to outright war between those communities and between the Armenian and Azerbaijan republics.

This forced the leadership of our country to view these national problems differently. At the February 1988 Central Committee Plenum the following statement was made: "We must examine the nationalities question at its present stage very thoroughly, both in theory and practice. This is a vital question of principle for our society."

On February 26, 1988, I appealed directly to the peoples of Azerbaijan and Armenia, urging the citizens of those republics to act only within a legal framework and within the boundaries of the democratic process, not to allow the question of their nations' fate to fall into the hands of blind passion and elemental emotions. But I did not succeed in stopping the mounting animosity. By the end of February, bloody conflict broke out, culminating in the massacre at Sumgait.

I remember well the intensity with which these events were discussed at the Politburo session of March 3. Summarizing the discussion, I urged everyone to remain calm and maintain a principled approach: "Don't make enemies out of people. . . . Function politically. Of course the government must be the government. Law must prevail." I also said that there could be no victors in this conflict, but that agreement must be reached. It was necessary at this time to affirm a carefully balanced, *political* approach to solving national problems.

Not only among ordinary citizens but in the Politburo as well, proposals were being made for the use of force. On July 4, 1987, Andrei Gromyko said: "Let the army appear in the streets, and immediately there will be order." We did not agree with this point of view. But it reemerged from time to time. Old ways of approaching things, attitudes that had been entrenched for decades, continued to make themselves felt.

Did we realize at the time that what was at issue was not so much resolving our most acute problems as changing our way of approaching them, working out policies that would be new in principle regarding the national question?

The answer is yes; by that time the idea that new policies were needed had matured in our thinking. At the February 1988 Central Committee Plenum I proposed that one of the next plenums be devoted entirely to problems of policy on the nationalities question.

Naturally the amount of attention we had to pay to national problems continued to mount. At the Nineteenth Party Conference I presented the Politburo's position: "Despite all the difficulties encountered along our way . . . the Soviet Union has withstood the test of time. It remains the decisive precondition for the further development of all the peoples of our country."

But matters were not limited to that statement. A program of practical measures was essentially formulated. We considered it of paramount importance to develop and implement measures on a large scale in order to strengthen our Union. We prepared proposals defining the jurisdiction of the Union and that of the Union republics, transferring a number of administrative functions to the republics, determining optimal variants for the possible transition of the republics and regions into self-financing entities, and developing direct ties among the republics so as to clearly specify how each might contribute in carrying out programs on the level of the Union as a whole.

Life confronted us with the need to make changes in the legislation concerning Union republics and autonomous republics, as well as autonomous regions and districts, and to expand legal guarantees to ensure that the national-cultural needs of the various national groups living outside their own territories would be met. A Unionwide law was urgently needed regarding the full development and equal use of the languages of all the peoples of the USSR. Thus we viewed the national question within the framework of the policies of perestroika as a whole. The orientation we adopted was, on the one hand, to respect the rights of the different nations

and republics, ensuring them maximum satisfaction; on the other hand, we wished to strengthen the Union thoroughly and transform it into a genuine federation.

We had reached the next stage of political reform. And political methods for solving our persistent national problems had to be placed at the forefront.