Tbilisi . . . Baku . . . Vilnius

WERE WE SUCCESSFUL in keeping the course of events within this framework? After all, the events in Tbilisi and Baku, and then in Lithuania, did happen. I will go into each of those cases in some detail because a lot of nonsense has been stated and many false accusations made about these events.

First, Tbilisi. Beginning on April 4, 1989, several informal groups [groups not officially recognized] held unauthorized demonstrations for many days in front of the main government building with such slogans as "Independence for Georgia" and "Down with the Russian Empire." The local leaders, who considered political methods and direct discussion with the people to be manifestations of weakness (a typical attitude of many officials of the old school), preferred to rely on force. On April 7 they proposed that a state of emergency be declared in Tbilisi. On that same day, a meeting at the Central Committee of the CPSU (involving Ligachev, Chebrikov, and others), decided that troops would be sent there. They were not supposed to be used; it was felt that, by itself, the appearance of soldiers would return the situation to normal.

On April 7 I was in London. Returning to Moscow late in the evening, I received information at the airport about what had happened. Taking into account all the facts that were known at the time, I immediately assigned Shevardnadze and Razumovsky, a secretary of the Central Committee, to go immediately to Georgia. On the morning of April 8 the Georgian leadership informed us that there was no need for representatives from Moscow to come immediately, that the situation had returned to normal. I think Dzhumber Patiashvili did not want Shevardnadze to come there, because his relations with Shevardnadze had been completely soured. On the night of April 9, troops were used to "clear" demonstrators from the central square. In the process sixteen people were killed and many were wounded.

But who gave the order to use force? This remains a mystery, which neither the Congress of People's Deputies nor numerous commissions investigating events in Tbilisi have been able to solve. I believe that the local military command in Georgia, entirely unsuspecting, was the victim of political intrigues. Apparently even at the time military operations were being influenced by those who later, in August 1991, set into motion the events that became known as the August coup. Recently General Rodionov [who was in charge of the troops that attacked the demonstrators in Tbilisi], in reply to a question from a journalist, said he was authorized to take action by Marshall Yazov, who was then the minister of defense. This confirms our suspicions. Rodionov assumed that Yazov's orders had the approval of the top leadership of the Soviet Union.

This was a cruel stab in the back. Speaking on radio and television immediately after the events, I stated:

> What happened in Tbilisi undeniably is harmful to the interests of perestroika, democratization, and the renewal of our country. Decisions and actions by irresponsible persons have resulted in increased tensions in the Georgian republic. Anti-Soviet slogans are being heard, along with demands that socialist Georgia be broken away from the fraternal family of Soviet peoples. False orientations have led some people astray. Disturbances have broken out. People have been killed and innocent blood has been shed. The grief of the mothers and family members is immense, and the grief we feel is very deep.

A few days later, after Shevardnadze actually visited Georgia, a meeting of the Politburo sharply condemned the military action. By way of illustration, I will quote the words of Nikolai Ryzhkov, prime minister at the time, spoken at the Politburo meeting:

> We were in Moscow during those days, so what did we know? I am the head of the government, but what did I know? I read in *Pravda* about the death of people in Tbilisi. The secretaries of the Central Committee knew, but we, the members of the Politburo and the Cabinet, knew nothing . . . We must have timely and accurate information. What's the good of all this? What is going on here? The commander of the military district takes action, but we in Moscow know nothing about it. He could arrest all the Politburo members [of the Communist Party] of Georgia, and we again would learn about it in

> the newspapers. Even Mikhail Sergeyevich Gorbachev did not know. So, then, what is going on among us? The army is used and the general secretary only finds out about it the next day. How are we going to appear to the Soviet public and in the eyes of world opinion? Everywhere you look in our country, actions are being taken without the Politburo's knowledge. That is even worse than the Politburo itself making a wrong decision.

Ryzhkov was right.

At this same Politburo meeting I was obliged, in rather sharp form, to raise the question of accuracy and truthfulness of information and to point out that the agencies providing information must approach the question with full responsibility. Of course I also raised the question of the army's role. I said to Defense Minister Yazov: From then on, the army was not to take part in such matters without the permission of the country's top leadership.

After the events in Tbilisi, the Politburo authorized army action only once—to avoid mass disturbances and bloodletting in Baku. This was related to a further worsening of relations between Armenians and Azerbaijanis in early 1990, resulting in pogroms against Armenians in Baku and to an "exodus" of Armenians from that city. The local authorities sought to restore order. But internal quarreling and divisions paralyzed their ability to act and to maintain control of the situation. Disturbances spread to a large part of the Azerbaijani republic, and destructive elements encouraged people to destroy the boundary lines [along the Azerbaijani border] over a distance of several hundred kilometers.

Representatives of the top Soviet leadership were sent to Baku—Yevgeny Primakov, a member of the President's Council, and A. Girenko, a secretary of the Central Committee of the CPSU. They reported that the situation was critical. On January 19 two documents were published simultaneously—an appeal to the peoples of Azerbaijan and Armenia from the CPSU Central Committee, the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet, and the USSR Council of Ministers; also published was a decree announcing a state of emergency in Baku, issued by the Presidium of the USSR Supreme Soviet. Late in the night of January 19 and the early hours of January 20 troops from the Ministry of the Interior and the Soviet Army entered Baku. All possible forms of provocation and obstacles were placed in their path as these troops moved forward. Gunmen of the Azerbaijani National Front opened fire on our military personnel, and our military units were obliged to respond in kind. As a result, on January 19-20, eighty-three people were

killed in Baku, including fourteen military personnel and members of their families.

On January 20 I appeared on central television to give an assessment of the situation and to explain the actions of the leadership. I said that the leadership hoped that the measures taken would be understood and supported by all the nations and nationalities of our country.

But those events and the measures taken were interpreted in varying ways (and that is still true today). Some said that once again we were late in taking action and that a state of emergency should have been imposed sooner. However, the authorities of the Soviet Union could not, according to the Constitution of the USSR, take action over the heads of the leaders of the Azerbaijani republic. The central government intervened directly only when it became clear that the authorities on the republic level were paralyzed and unable to act.

Others have simply reproached or denounced us for imposing a state of emergency. There is only one answer to such accusations: If measures had not been taken, events might have followed a totally unpredictable course. I regret that blood was spilled, but the purpose was to stop further bloodshed at all costs.

I have long reflected on what happened. The lesson I have drawn from this whole tragic history is that the authorities cannot get by without using force in extreme situations. But such actions must be justified by absolute necessity and must be kept within very carefully weighed limits. Only political measures can provide a genuine solution to such problems.

Finally there was Vilnius, in Lithuania. This time it was 1991, and again it was January. I have said that the situation in the Baltic region, above all, in Lithuania, began to worsen from mid-1987 on. But in mid-1989 matters began to deteriorate with particular speed after the Sajudis organization in fact came to power in the Lithuanian republic. Let me remind readers that at first Sajudis was an organization that supported perestroika and defended it against conservative elements. Later it gradually became a stronghold for those forces that favored secession from the USSR. I personally, and many of my colleagues, put a great deal of effort into trying to defuse the sentiment in favor of separation, but our efforts were unsuccessful.

What arguments did the advocates of secession advance? On the one hand, they sounded the alarm about alleged domination by the Russian part of the population. This was an obvious exaggeration. The Russians accounted for only one-fifth of the population in Lithuania. But warnings

that Lithuanians could ultimately become a minority within their own republic had an effect on many people.

Another argument was more practical in nature. Those favoring separation claimed that Lithuania, because of its excellent agricultural production, was supplying much of the food for Moscow and Leningrad. Yet the Lithuanian republic itself was suffering shortages of meat. This was true—or, more exactly, partly true. Nothing was said about the enormous quantity of goods supplied to Lithuania from other Soviet republics, primarily Russia, including grain, oil, metals, industrial goods, and consumer goods—or else the significance of those supplies was minimized. Nothing was said about the preferential treatment of Lithuania and all the Baltic republics out of political considerations. Owing to this preferential treatment (and of course to the higher productivity of labor there) the standard of living in Lithuania was higher than the average standard in the Soviet Union, but no one seemed to think about that. These half-truths had their effect: Not only Lithuanians but people of other nationalities began to think, "If we separate from Moscow, our lives will become better."

In any case, the situation gradually became hotter and hotter. On May 11, 1989, the Politburo discussed the situation in the three Baltic republics. The leaders of the Communist parties of those three republics took part in the meeting. During the discussion, especially after the secretaries of the Baltic Communist parties had left, different views were heard concerning what should be done. It was obvious that some participants at the meeting were not averse to applying pressure. In my concluding remarks, I said:

> Let us take as our starting point the idea that all is not lost. We also must be cautious in our assessments so as not to reach a point of desperation or of breaking off relations. . . . We cannot dismiss as extremists the various national fronts, which have the support of 90 percent of the people in those republics. We must be able to talk with them. . . . We must have confidence in the people's good sense. . . . We must not be afraid of experiments allowing republics to become fully self-financing entities. . . . We must not be afraid of differentiation among republics in terms of the level at which they exercise their sovereignty. . . . In general, we must think, and think hard, about how in fact to transform our federation. Otherwise everything will indeed fall apart. . . . The use of force is excluded. It has been ruled out in foreign policy and is absolutely inadmissible against our own people. . . . Let us take our analysis of what is going on to a higher level. . . . And we must

be more cautious than ever with any final qualifications or use of labels. After all, this is *the national question*.

At the First Congress of People's Deputies (May 25-June 9, 1989) the full range of national problems in the Soviet Union was posed for discussion and consideration in the broadest sense. The report I presented to the congress defined key aspects of nationalities policy under perestroika:

> In a federated state, that which falls within the competence of the Union as a whole and that which is the sovereign right of the republic or autonomous entity should be clearly defined. Legal mechanisms need to be worked out for resolving conflicts that may arise in the relations between the Union and its component parts.
>
> *In the economic field*, relations between the Union and the republics must be harmonized on the basis of an organic combination of economic independence and active participation in the Unionwide division of labor. From this standpoint, it follows that we need a restructuring of the way the unified economic complex of the country is regulated, by allowing republics, regions, and provinces to make the transition to a self-governing and self-financing basis as an organic part of the overall process of renewing the Soviet economy.
>
> . . . *In the spiritual realm*, we take as our starting point a recognition of the multiplicity and diversity of national cultures as a great social and historical value and a unique advantage belonging to our Union as a whole. We do not have the right to underestimate, still less to entirely lose, any one of these cultures, because each is irreplaceable.
>
> We are in favor of the full and rounded development of each nationality, national language, and culture and for equal rights and friendly relations among all nations, nationalities, and national groups.

The congress supported what I proposed as a basis for action. During 1989 and 1990 a great deal was done to put into practice the policy line I had projected. Several laws were adopted, for example, one on general principles of local self-government and the local economy in the USSR, which expanded the rights and powers of union republics and autonomous republics; a second on the languages of the peoples of the USSR, which set forth guarantees for their development and utilization; a third demarcating the respective powers of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and the component parts of the federation; as well as others.

As for the Baltic republics, they were granted broad rights in the economic realm by a special law passed by the second session of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, rights that were extended to Byelorussia and Sverdlovsk Province as well.

In September 1989 a plenum of the Central Committee adopted, as the official position of the CPSU, a document entitled "The Nationalities Policy of the Party in Present-Day Conditions." This document formulated the main tasks we faced, and these are summarized as follows:

- transforming the Soviet federation into a genuine political and economic entity;
- enlarging the rights and powers of autonomous national entities of all forms and types;
- ensuring equal rights to every nationality;
- creating conditions for free development of national cultures and languages;
- strengthening guarantees that would rule out any restriction on the rights of citizens for reasons of nationality.

Thus, although belatedly, we formulated a principled political platform on the national question. This platform made it possible to resolve the accumulated problems. In the Baltic region, however, those who had made up their mind in favor of secession from the Soviet Union intensified their activity. Members of our party's leadership, including myself, met many times with representatives of the three republics, separately and together. I emphasized that the right to self-determination, up to and including separation, is an inseparable sovereign right embodied in the then operative Soviet Constitution. But I tried to convince people that secession would contradict the real needs of the nationalities of our Union. Decentralization, autonomy, a redistribution of powers—yes—but with the maintenance of cooperation and coordination. It made no sense to criticize the idea of a federation. We had never had such a system. We had lived in a unitary state. Let us first try living under a genuinely federated arrangement, I argued, and then decide what to do. The positive experience of federated states in other parts of the world was there for us to see.

On January 29, 1990, the Politburo considered several draft laws and amendments to the Soviet Constitution having to do with the national question.

On April 3, 1990, a law on secession from the Union was adopted. However, on the eve of its adoption the new leadership in Lithuania demonstratively declared that republic's independence. On March 22, during a discussion in the Politburo about the situation that had thus arisen, General Varennikov proposed that a state of emergency be proclaimed, that presidential rule be imposed, that troops be sent in, that the leaders of the Lithuanian republic be "isolated," and that all this be carried out under the pretext of an appeal from "patriotic forces." Naturally the Politburo refused to consider this "proposal." But the very fact that he made it was symptomatic of the mood in certain Soviet military circles, and not only in the military.

I presented my position publicly in a discussion with delegates to the Twenty-first Congress of the Young Communist League (the Komsomol):

> To be sure there is the constitutional right to self-determination. A law has now been adopted on the procedure for solving problems associated with the secession of a republic from the USSR, so let us begin the 'process of divorce,' but for them, that is, the Lithuanians, to adopt a decision overnight without consulting the people, without any referendum—that is an adventure.
>
> As the saying goes, you can't force someone to like you. Granted there is a desire to leave—but we must first tell the Lithuanian people what the consequences will be—these will be territorial, economic, defense-related, and will impact the arrangements for those who do not wish to remain in a separate state. That is one option. Here is another: If the republic remains in the Soviet Union, [we need to specify] what rights and powers it will have—political, economic, cultural-technical, and so forth, and what freedom and autonomy it will enjoy. In that case, the Lithuanian people, who are a wise people, will figure out for themselves that what Lithuania needs is autonomy within the framework of ongoing vital links with all the other republics.

I wish to remind readers that all these events were unfolding at a time when political reform was deepening in our country. The Congress of People's Deputies had been operating for a year by then, as had the Supreme Soviet elected by that congress. Free elections had also been held for government bodies in the Union republics and bodies of local self-government. A political struggle was mounting—a so-called radical wing had taken shape among the democrats and, in opposition to it, a no less radical wing of

so-called patriots had been formed. Events in the Baltic region provoked strong reactions on both sides. The entire country was seized by a sense of alarm.

When I was in the city of Sverdlovsk at that time, I had occasion to answer numerous questions on this matter. The following is just one of my replies:

> We are encountering increasing strain in relations among nationalities, greater conflicts. Some say, Let this "empire" fall apart; others say, What are Gorbachev and the other leaders thinking about? They should have restored order and put everyone back in their place long ago. Neither of these two approaches is consistent with serious politics. As a Russian, as a Soviet citizen, and as a political leader, I cannot accept such extreme ways of approaching these questions. . . . Let us reorganize our federation and think about renewing the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Everything that contributes to carrying out the idea of renewal corresponds to the interests of Russians and of all other nationalities in our country. That we must take as our starting point.

In late April 1990 signals began to come from the Lithuanian leadership indicating a willingness to enter into a dialogue with representatives of the central government, suggesting that the decisions made by the Supreme Soviet of Lithuania could be considered a subject for discussion. Lithuania would not object to an interpretation of its declaration of independence as a document in which the status of the republic could be considered as "an associated member of a renewed, reorganized Soviet Union." The implementation of this kind of approach would have to be the result of a step-by-step process involving consultation and coordination with the central government of the Union. This was a basis on which to search for a practical solution.

This little-known fact tells us that at the time there was indeed a possibility for a political solution that would not have undermined the idea of renewing the Soviet Union. What prevented us, then, from reaching an accord? A new situation arose that radically changed the entire atmosphere—above all, in matters having to do with nationalities.

On June 12, 1990, the Supreme Soviet of Russia adopted a declaration on the state sovereignty of the RFSFR. In the wake of that action similar declarations were adopted by other republics, not only Union republics but

also autonomous republics. The "parade of sovereignties" began. The search for ways of coming to an agreement with Lithuania was consequently frustrated and made impossible.

The declaration of sovereignty by Russia, as is well known, had even more far-reaching consequences. Not only was agreement with Lithuania undermined. Essentially the events of the summer of 1990, with the Russian declaration of sovereignty as the fuse, ignited a process that eventually led to the dissolution of the Soviet Union. That, if you will, was the prime cause of its dissolution. I will return to this point below.

At the end of 1990 the authorities in Vilnius continued to function according to the letter and spirit of their declaration of independence, and this led to a significant internal struggle within that republic. Those opposed to secession from the Soviet Union created their own organizations. The Communist Party of Lithuania broke apart at that time, and its fragments scattered in different directions. One element supported independence; another opposed it and acted, moreover, in an extremely radical way, sometimes in violation of the law. This segment of the former Communist Party of Lithuania began systematically to request that the central government impose a state of emergency, place Lithuania under rule by presidential decree, and so on. These demands, in fact, were met with sympathy and support on the part of certain forces in Moscow, forces exerting similar pressures (for example, as mentioned above, General Varennikov's statement in the Politburo meeting). In December 1990 and January 1991 these forces in Vilnius and Moscow were in fact coordinating their actions.

Even so, I felt, as before, that I did not have the right to take extreme measures. On January 10, 1991, I appealed to the Supreme Soviet of the Lithuanian republic and called for full and immediate restoration of the Soviet Constitution since the situation was becoming explosive. The Lithuanian authorities did not respond. As a result, those who demanded that Lithuania remain within the framework of the USSR sharply increased their activities and created a Committee for National Salvation. Anticonstitutional activities by some had called forth anticonstitutional activities by others. The struggle had passed from the channel of constitutional procedures and was flowing into the path of direct confrontation.

Yazov, Kryuchkov, and Pugo [ministers of defense, state security, and the interior, respectively] reported to me that they had taken measures in case the situation grew out of control and direct clashes began between supporters of Sajudis and the Communists, necessitating rule by presidential

decree. That was the only factor considered, nothing else—just the need to act in the event of bloodshed. After arriving in Vilnius, General Varennikov reported that the situation was dangerous, and he again proposed imposing rule by presidential decree.

Under these conditions, one more attempt was made at a political solution. On January 12 the Council of the Federation discussed the situation in Lithuania. I stated that we were one step away from bloodshed and proposed that representatives of the Council of the Federation be sent to Vilnius immediately to investigate on the spot and suggest possible action. But before the delegation even arrived in Vilnius, the tragedy occurred. I demanded explanations from Kryuchkov, Pugo, and Yazov: How could this have happened, and who gave the order for the use of troops? All three denied any involvement in these events.

To this day all the details of what happened in Vilnius (and then in Riga) are not known, but as time passes, more and more facts are being disclosed. After I had ceased to function as president of the USSR I received information lifting the curtain a bit on the events of January 13, 1990, in the capital of Lithuania. Ultimately, without question, we will know exactly who gave the order for the troops to act, who led the entire "operation," and how they went about it.

In a speech on January 22, 1990, I said the following: "The events that occurred in Vilnius are in no way an expression of the policy line of the president; it was not for this that presidential power was established. I therefore emphatically reject all speculation, all suspicions, and all insinuations in this regard." The declaration stated firmly that any social organizations, committees, and fronts can aspire to come to power only by constitutional means and without the use of force. All attempts to resort to armed force in political struggle are unacceptable. Arbitrary actions on the part of the armed forces are equally unacceptable.

It is evident from the above discussion that these three crises—in Tbilisi, Baku, and Vilnius—were quite different in character. Only in Baku was the use of troops the result of a decision by the central government. The actions in the other two cases were totally opposed to the policy line of our country's leadership, which was oriented toward a peaceful, political resolution of the situations that had developed.