

## *Referendum on the Union*

I UNDERSTOOD QUITE well that the political struggle would develop mainly over the fate of the Union—whether it would continue to exist at all and, if so, in what form. (The fate of the reforms—economic, political, and legal—also depended on the answer to this question.) Understanding all this, I held the view that all these questions affecting the fate of the people could not be decided without their participation. I was convinced that if a referendum were held, the overwhelming majority of the citizens of our country would express themselves in favor of preserving the Union in its reformed aspect.

I submitted this question to the Congress of People's Deputies. On December 24, 1990, the congress passed a resolution to hold a referendum on the fate of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. And on January 16 the USSR Supreme Soviet decreed that a referendum would be held throughout the territory of the Soviet Union on March 17, 1991. The question to be taken up in the referendum was formulated as follows: "Do you consider it necessary to preserve the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics as a renewed federation of equal, sovereign states—republics in which the rights and freedoms of persons of all nationalities will be fully guaranteed?"

The separatists in all the republics waged an intensive campaign calling on voters to answer this question in the negative. I will cite an example. At the end of January 1991 the founding conference of the so-called Democratic Congress Bloc was held in Kharkov. This bloc consisted of Democratic Russia and a number of other parties akin to it from various republics. The conference expressed itself in opposition to preserving the USSR, and the consultative council established by that congress called for mass actions under the slogans "No on the Union referendum question" and "Support Yeltsin, chairman of the RSFSR Supreme Soviet."

In this way the leader of Russia was counterposed to the idea of preserving the Union. Moreover, he did not conceal his views. I have already referred to his speech of February 19 in which he called for the resignation of the president of the USSR. Three weeks later he spoke even more fiercely, calling on his supporters to “declare war on the leadership of the country because it is leading us into a morass” and claiming that “Gorbachev is deceiving the people and democracy.”

In early February the three Baltic republics, along with Armenia, Moldavia, and Georgia, announced that they would not participate in the March 17 referendum. But citizens in those republics who wished to take part were provided with the opportunity to do so.

On the eve of the referendum, opposition to it reached the highest intensity. On March 9 Yeltsin declared, “We do not need a central government like this—huge and bureaucratic . . . We must get rid of it.” Here, as the saying goes, he was rushing through an open door. After all, the issue under discussion was to renew the union not in order to have a huge, bureaucratic central government but rather to create a genuinely democratic federation of sovereign states; that, however, was of no concern to Yeltsin.

It was quite obvious from the first draft of the Union treaty, which had been approved by the Council of the Federation on March 6 (with the participation of representatives of the RSFSR Supreme Soviet) and published on March 9, that Yeltsin knew what the real issue was. He did not want this draft to win approval. Trying to reinforce his point of view, he hastily declared that the signatures of the two representatives from the RSFSR Supreme Soviet on the draft of the treaty did not obligate him or the RSFSR in any way. On the eve of the referendum, speaking on Radio Rossiya, he added: “The referendum is being held in order to win support for the current policies of the leadership of the country. Its aim is to preserve the imperial unitary essence of the Union and the system.”

I, too, spoke on television on the eve of the voting, and said:

We are on the threshold of a Unionwide referendum. This is the first time in our country’s history that such an event is taking place. When we participate in the referendum, each of us must have the full realization that he or she is helping to decide the main question concerning the present and the future of our multinational state. At issue is the fate of our country, the fate of our homeland, our common home, the question of how we and our children and our grandchildren are to live with one another.

This is a question of such great dimension and significance that it stands above the interests of particular parties, social groups, or political and social movements. Only the people themselves have the right to resolve this question. I call on all of you, my dear fellow citizens, to take part in the Union-wide referendum and to answer yes on the question before you.

Our yes will preserve the integrity of the state which is a thousand years old and was created by the labor, the intelligence, and the countless sacrifices of many generations—a state in which the destinies of many peoples have been inseparably interwoven, the fates of millions of people, your fate and ours.

Our yes is an expression of respect for the governmental power that has more than once demonstrated its ability to defend the independence and security of the peoples united within it.

Our yes is a guarantee that the flames of war will never again sear our country, to whose lot many ordeals have befallen.

Our yes does not mean preservation of the old order with domination by the central government and a lack of rights for the republics. The positive results of the referendum will open the road to radical renewal of the Union government, its transformation into a federation of sovereign republics where the rights and freedoms of citizens of all nationalities will be reliably guaranteed.

Our yes in the referendum and the conclusion of a Union treaty will make it possible to put an end to the destructive processes going on in our society and to make a decisive return to restoring normal conditions of life and labor. . . .

It will be difficult, if not impossible, to resolve the questions facing us without harmony and cooperation in society. Therefore it is necessary, while it is not too late, to stop the growing intolerance and bitterness and in some instances hostility. We can also do this jointly, all together—as one village, as the saying goes. A positive result from the referendum would lay the basis for the consolidation of society.

It is my firm conviction that if a profound split occurs in society, there will be no victors. Everyone will lose. All of us, both you and I, will be the losers. It is hard even to imagine how many misfortunes the disintegration of the country would bring in its wake, with the various peoples and nationalities being set against one another. And it would be a misfortune not only for you and me. The collapse of a power that today is one of the bulwarks of peace in the world would be fraught with the danger of a general upheaval, one of unprecedented proportions. . . .

Each of us now faces a historic choice. . . .

I appeal to you all, my dear fellow countrymen and women—say yes to the referendum regarding our great state, our Union, preserve it for ourselves and for our descendants.

The number of citizens taking part in the March 17, 1991, referendum was 148,574,606, or 80 percent of registered voters. Of these, 113,512,812, or 76.4 percent, voted yes. Those voting no numbered 32,303,977, or 21.7 percent. The number of spoiled or invalid ballots was 2,757,857, or 1.9 percent. These results spoke for themselves: The majority of citizens (a very substantial majority!) was in favor of preserving the Union as a renewed federation.

I cannot leave unexamined the conservatives' position on the question of preserving the Union. To the inexperienced it might seem that they were ardent defenders of the Union. Outwardly they spoke in its defense, and their group in the parliament was even called Soyuz (Union). But what kind of Union did they advocate? They spoke in favor of preserving the old Union and did not wish to see it reformed in any way. They represented forces interested in preserving the old order from the days before perestroika.

I have already indicated that the radical democrats began their offensive against the president right after the New Year in 1991. The conservative forces also stepped up their activities at that time. The founding of the Movement for a Great and Unitary Russia was announced. The leading figures in this organization were the future conspirator [participant in the August 1991 coup] Vasily Starodubstev, the writer Aleksandr Prokhanov, and Ivan Polozkov, head of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation.

Shortly after the referendum, one of the leaders of the Union group in the parliament, V. Alksnis, gave an interview to the British weekly *New Statesman* in which he essentially made public the program of the conservative groupings. He rejected the idea of the Union treaty, favored the use of force to preserve the Union, and advocated the formation of a Committee of National Salvation, to which all the power in the country would be transferred.

On April 9 a regular session of the Council of the Federation was held. I took the floor and spoke about the existing situation:

Our position is such that we must recognize the great danger that hangs over our country. It is a danger to our state system, the Soviet federation, for whose preservation the majority of the population has spoken; a danger of

economic disintegration, with all the consequences which that would have for the interests of the people and for the welfare of our country's defense capability; a danger of the destruction of our institutions of government, jurisprudence, and law. . . .

It is now necessary that we act—moreover, that we act without delay and not in isolation, but in unity with all the healthy forces of society, setting aside feuds and quarrels. We must act so as not to let our country slide into disaster.

At the same time I proposed specific measures that would incorporate in legislation the people's will, as expressed in the referendum, for the preservation of the Union, namely, to restore the vertical co-subordination of all government bodies, to halt decisively the escalation of conflicts among nationalities, and to conduct negotiations in search of mutually acceptable solutions.

The subsequent development of events confirmed that I had taken the correct approach on the question. The problem was that after the referendum, which had opened the door toward the signing of a new Union treaty, the conservative forces inside the CPSU greatly intensified their activity, undertaking a determined offensive. At a conference in Smolensk, a number of party leaders from Russia, Ukraine, and Byelorussia openly called for emergency measures. And at meetings of smaller groups, they urged that Gorbachev be confronted with tough demands, that an emergency congress of the CPSU be called, and that the leadership of the party be changed. Similar moves were made at plenums of the party organization in Moscow and at the Leningrad provincial party committee. The slogan was "Let the general secretary resign!" I recall that, at the very same time, Democratic Russia raised the slogan that the president should resign.

The situation was growing white hot. Events were building to a confrontation. Something had to be done to keep things under control. In early April, in the course of a discussion among a small group of the country's leaders regarding the current situation, it was proposed that the president of the USSR meet with the leaders of those republics that favored preservation of a renewed Union in order to work out a joint program of action. And of course the leadership of Russia would be included.

On April 23 a meeting was held between the president of the USSR and the leaders of the top government bodies of Russia, Ukraine, Byelorussia, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Kirghizia, Turkmenia, and Tadzhik-

istan. The assemblage met near Moscow in the suburb of Novo-Ogarevo (hence the expression used later, the “Novo-Ogarevo process”). In opening the meeting, I characterized the existing situation as both dangerous and demanding, and said that effective action would be needed to resolve the dilemma, that such action could not be routine or ordinary, and that it would have to be agreed on by all the leaders present. Differences regarding secondary matters had to be set aside, especially personal sympathies and antipathies. The country’s interests had to take priority over everything else. This was our duty and the burden of our responsibilities. It was essential now to draw up a brief document that the people could understand so that they would see that the leaders intended to act decisively and in a coordinated way. This would immediately have a calming effect on society and would defuse the threatening atmosphere.

After an exchange of opinions, all participants at the meeting supported the proposal. A joint document was drafted and adopted, entitled “Joint Declaration on Urgent Measures to Stabilize the Situation in the Country and Overcome the Crisis.” This document declared that the chief means for stabilizing the country was the signing of a new Union treaty as soon as possible. The document also indicated that the states in the Union would offer one another most-favored-nation status and that relations with the other former Soviet republics would be established on the basis of generally recognized international practices. The intention to continue with reforms was reaffirmed. The president of the USSR and the heads of the republics called on workers to stop striking and for all political forces to function within the framework of the constitution.

All this happened on April 23. The next day a regular plenary session of the CPSU Central Committee began. It was known that the party’s conservative forces had decided to turn this session into a kind of investigation into “the case of General Secretary Gorbachev.” A draft resolution had even been prepared that would have declared a death sentence on the whole course of reform.

Knowing all this, I decided to make clear to my opponents that I was not about to surrender, that I would uncompromisingly defend the policy of reform. In opening the plenum I said:

Not only in words but in deeds, attempts are being made to divert our country from the road of reform either by pushing it into one more *ultrarevolutionary adventure* that would threaten to destroy our state system or *to return*

*to the past*, to a slightly touched-up version of the totalitarian regime. I do not think it necessary to explain that I am referring to the plans of the left-wing and right-wing radicals. The tendencies of both are destructive. And the greatest danger at the present moment is that they could join forces, despite what seems to be their irreconcilable mutual hostility.

Even in such an eventuality I sought to keep myself and my supporters on firmly democratic grounds. What I said next attests to this:

Every party and movement has the right to try to attain its goals by making use . . . of democratic institutions and Soviet laws. This naturally includes contending for political leadership and power. All attempts to operate by the methods of Pugachovism [a reference to the elemental peasant rebellion in the eighteenth century led by Yemelyan Pugachov] or by means of extra-parliamentary blackmail, up to and including grinding the country's economy into dust and ashes—all this must be emphatically rejected.

I regard it as my paramount duty to stop the violations of the democratic process and by all legal measures to strengthen decisively the constitutional order in the country. It is quite evident that without this constitutional order even the most ideal programs for overcoming the economic crisis would remain mere good intentions. Of course restoration and strengthening of the constitutional order is a direct obligation for all government bodies and for every person in office. But it is also a task for our society as a whole and for all genuinely democratic groups, forces, and organizations.

Naturally I had paid special attention to the meeting held the previous day at Novo-Ogarevo. Here is the context in which I discussed what had been said there:

The situation requires that all political forces and movements which take a patriotic position—and not just in words—must renounce ambitions and set aside their mutual claims at least for the time being in order to help our country get itself together at a particularly difficult time. I must say that at yesterday's meeting an understanding of this need was displayed by the presidents, chairpersons of Supreme Soviets, and government leaders of nine Union republics. The statement adopted at that meeting has been published. If the measures proposed in that document are carried out consistently—and we will do everything possible to ensure that they are—this

could be the beginning of a turnaround in the development of the present situation. . . . First and foremost, to overcome the crisis we must undertake the task of concluding a new Union treaty, keeping in mind the results of the voting in the recent Unionwide referendum.

There followed a stormy debate during which the conservative wing of the Central Committee persistently attempted to “remove” the general secretary and to bury the reforms. (One of those who spoke, Gurenko, a secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Ukraine, bluntly proposed that “the status of the CPSU as the ruling party should be embodied in law,” that the previous system by which leading party cadres were assigned government positions should be restored, and that the party’s control of the mass media should be reestablished.) Despite all this the plenum ended on a constructive note. The declaration by the nine leaders of the Soviet republics and the president of the USSR was supported, and the following assertion was made: “In order to overcome the imminent catastrophe it is vitally necessary that (1) a new Union treaty be signed on the basis of the results of the nationwide referendum on the preservation of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics; and (2) constitutional order and legality be reestablished in the country.”

Thus the desperate attempt to divert our country from the path of reform, including reform of the Union itself, failed. We had passed through a critical stage.

The struggle over our political course in general, and over the Union treaty in particular, did not end there. Attacks against the idea of the Union treaty continued. The pressure campaign against the president and his supporters did not stop. But all these activities took new forms. I should emphasize that the conservative forces were especially active then. It is clear from evidence that was partially known at the time and well known much later that the conservative forces at that very time were beginning to prepare for the coup that began on August 19. In June they attempted to carry out a “coup by legal means,” so to speak, through the parliament, by limiting the president’s powers and transferring a substantial share of those powers to the prime minister, Valentin Pavlov (who later became one of the leaders of the coup). This attempt was also thwarted.

As for the Union treaty, preparations for its signing proceeded at full speed. There was no time to delay. On May 24 a session was held of the preparatory committee that had been established in accordance with the



decision of the Fourth Congress of People's Deputies of the USSR to work on a draft of the new Union treaty and the procedure for its adoption. At this session it was emphasized that, as a result of the March 17 referendum, our country's nations and nationalities had expressed themselves firmly in favor of preserving and renewing the Union government. A broad constructive exchange of opinions was held regarding comments by the republics after the draft treaty was published in the press.

The participants unanimously supported the principle of constructing the new Union as a federation of equal republics. There was wide-ranging discussion of the procedure for the signing of the treaty by representatives of the sovereign states constituting the Union and on the structure and powers of the Union bodies of government. Special attention was paid to ensuring the participation of all the republics in the formation and functioning of the government bodies of the new Union. The goal adopted by the preparatory committee was to submit an agreed-on draft of the treaty for approval by the Supreme Soviets of the republics as early as June.

On June 3 the preparatory committee met once again in Novo-Ogarevo. Some decisive progress had to be made. To illustrate the totality of problems we had to confront, I will quote from a portion of the transcript of that session's discussion:

M. S. [MIKHAIL SERGEEVICH GORBACHEV]: I think that extensive discussion on the general character of the treaty should have ended at the last meeting. How many months now have we been going around in circles? Let's proceed page by page, clause by clause. First, the name of the treaty.

*LUKYANOV reports that the opinion of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR is to call it a "Union treaty," not a "treaty on a Union of sovereign states."*

*The basic principles of the proposed treaty are easily agreed on, if we discount the argument with Kravchuk, who has insisted on the term state sovereignty.*

*Discussion is then diverted to a side issue: LUKYANOV demands that the treaty be signed at a congress. Later on, basic principles are again discussed.*

LUKYANOV: We need to abide by the will of the congress, which passed a resolution that the name Union of Soviet Socialist Republics should be preserved.

*KARIMOV, and after him KRAVCHUK, object to Lukyanov's statement. ("If each of us begins talking about the will of his own Supreme Soviet . . .") LUKYANOV partially gives in, but he continues to argue about the order of words in the modified form of the name: whether it should be the Union of Soviet Sovereign Republics or the Union of Sovereign Soviet Republics.*

M. S.: If this kind of divisiveness goes on, we will never stop arguing. If the processes of disintegration continue at this pace, all the peoples of our country will be placed in a desperate situation; we will create chaos. . . .

*There is a break.*

NAZARBAEV: The most urgent questions are these:

1. Who will be a subject [component entity] of the Union?
2. Will there be equality between Union republics and former autonomous republics?
3. The Council of the Federation.

Let us assign these questions to specialists and continue to go through the other articles and clauses.

YELTSIN: Let the experts go into session.

M. S.: Experts are no substitute for the will of the republics. We must submit these ideas to them.

*There follows a long and intense argument over the first article, membership in the Union, and then over taxes. YELTSIN, whose election campaign is at its height, gets ready to leave. SHAIMIYEV, not allowing Yeltsin to leave, is in a hurry to bring up a sore point: "On our territory, 80 percent of the enterprises are subordinated to the Soviet Union. But Russia is not paying its assigned amounts to the Union and so these enterprises are not receiving any funds from the Union budget."*

*YELTSIN leaves. The discussion flows into another channel. NAZARBAEV proposes that Gorbachev "at least for once use force."*

LUKYANOV: And would you, Nursultan Abishevich [Nazarbaev], would you endorse such powers for the president?

*(Silence in reply.)*

NAZARBAEV: What would Russia's position be after the June 12 elections [for president of the RSFSR]?

*The discussion returns to the article on membership, then suddenly jumps over to the question of the composition of the Supreme Soviet.*

*A break follows.*

*We then go on to Article 2, citizenship. SHAIMIYEV returns again to Article 1. We finish the discussion of Article 2. Next comes Article 3, territory.*

M. S.: We shall now find out who among us has territorial claims.

*Outside it has grown dark, and the discussion proceeds more quickly. M. S. tells a story from Stavropol, "The best speech is the one that isn't made," after which there are fewer comments.*

*Then follows a discussion of Article 5, distribution of powers between the Union and the republics. Arguments regarding the name of the article proceed for more than an hour. Then, for some reason, everyone quickly agrees on the article as a whole.*

*A discussion then ensues about property, and there is an argument. LUKYANOV appeals to Article 10 of the USSR constitution. NAZARBAEV proposes a compromise, which is supported by KARIMOV.*

*There is a break. The meeting opens again with a question: Shall we adjourn until tomorrow?*

M. S.: No. Let's keep working to a victorious conclusion . . .

*We then go through the article on taxes in only two minutes. We get stuck on the next article, the constitution. Who would adopt it? It's approaching midnight. Discussion of the remaining articles proceeds quickly. NAZARBAEV makes some objections.*

M. S.: Why are you grumbling like an old man? We have accepted your proposals . . . (then to everyone:) Thank you, Comrades! I congratulate you. We have worked well together. The new treaty is nearly done.

The discussions on all the questions taken up at this session proceeded not only among the heads of the republics. The Supreme Soviet also partici-

pated, as did the country as a whole. Numerous explanations had to be given in view of the various points brought up. I took an active part in all of this.

Opinions were expressed to the effect that the new Union treaty would conflict with the referendum. But the treaty defined the future Union as a sovereign democratic federated state. That was what people had voted for. That it would be a new federation was expressed, above all, in the affirmation of sovereignty for the republics and the expansion of their rights, powers, and responsibilities. The republics would essentially be reborn as sovereign states. And if someone thought this was a new idea, invented only at that moment, of course that wasn't the case. These very same ideas were written into the treaty of 1922 under which the USSR was formed; the needs of our present times and the desires of the people were thus expressed.

Further on, there was the question of the distribution of functions and powers between the Union and the sovereign republics—this division was such that there would be both strong republics and a strong center. This is an important point: In international affairs the Union acts as a sovereign state, the legal heir of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.

The people who voted for the referendum voted for the kind of Union that would guarantee the rights, freedom, and security of citizens of all nationalities throughout the territory, wherever they chanced to reside. This idea was fixed in the form of principles and was expressed in particular sections of the new Union treaty.

There had been debates at the congress on whether to include the word *socialist* in the name of the new Union, and the congress had expressed itself in favor of that. But the debates continued in the Supreme Soviets of the republics. The proposal at first was for the name “Union of Sovereign Republics,” because many had simply changed their names to republics—such as Moldova and Kyrgyzstan—and because everything having to do with nationality policy, the relations between nations and nationalities, everything to do with this whole delicate subject, required a respectful attitude. But it turned out that we reached an agreement to include the word *Soviet* in the name—that is, Union of Soviet Sovereign Republics. This would emphasize continuity. The name would be linked with the whole preceding period, which was the product, so to speak, of the creativity of the masses. After all, “soviet” structures were still in existence as such, despite the appearance of mayoralties and other structures of executive power.

On July 12 the USSR Supreme Soviet, after once again discussing the subject of the new Union treaty, passed a resolution entitled “On the Draft Treaty for a Union of Sovereign States.” It said in part:

To support in all fundamentals the Draft Treaty on the Union of Sovereign States presented on June 18, 1991, by the president of the USSR in the name of the preparatory committee established by the Fourth Congress of People’s Deputies of the USSR. To recognize as possible the signing of the treaty after appropriate further work and agreement among the republics with the participation of an authorized delegation from the Union government.

Subsequent points in this resolution contained clauses about the composition of the delegation from the USSR Supreme Soviet for the signing of the treaty, and the tasks to be assigned to this delegation were formulated.

On July 23, at a regular session attended by leaders of delegations from the republics, work on the draft Union treaty was completed. I will cite a brief excerpt from the transcript of that session:

*Novo-Ogarevo, July 23*

*(Also present were Lukyanov, Laptev, Nishanov, Pavlov, Yarov, Bessmertnykh, and Shcherbakov. The task of the day was to resolve five questions on which there had been significant commentary: membership in the Union; the Union budget and taxes; property; the Supreme Soviet; and the constitutional court.)*

M. S. [GORBACHEV]: A certain tendency keeps showing up in our discussions. We seem to reach an agreement but then, when we adjourn, we start to erode everything we had agreed on. The time has come for full clarity.

Second. Adherence to the Union as a federation.

Third. The fate of Russia to a significant extent will determine the future of the Union.

I feel there are dangerous tendencies. We must complete the treaty more quickly.

Karimov objects to the text that had been worked out, as usual, by a group of experts at Volynskoe [a Moscow suburb like Novo-Ogarevo used as a work site by official groups]. These experts had taken into account all the commentaries or observations that had been made.

KARIMOV: Where did this text come from? We agreed on something different on June 17.

M. S.: What do you mean, where did it come from? You remember that I was asked, as always, to take suggestions into account . . .

(It was then necessary to return to the text of June 17, in which there were more imperfections and several commentaries or observations from the republics that had not been taken into account.

(A very long and difficult discussion ensued on how relations should be regulated between a former autonomous republic and the republic of which it had been a part. A discussion on taxes then followed.)

DEMENTEI: If I don't participate in the formation of the property of the Union as a whole, at least through my 2 percent, with my two kopecks, which is the share due me as a citizen, then when I arrive in Kazan I will feel as though I am a foreigner; or if I travel to the Crimea, I will feel like an outsider. If someone comes to visit me in Byelorussia, he will also feel like an outsider.

*(There is a break.)*

M. S.: You have been drinking and eating, but we have been working. The proposal is as follows: Anatoly Ivanovich [Lukyanov], Boris Nikolaevich [Yeltsin], and Ivan Stepanovich [Silaev, chairman of the RSFSR Council of Ministers] are to work on the tax formula, in which it will be clearly stated that this matter will be monitored and will remain open at all stages until the percentages have been set in all cases.

*(Further discussion followed: on the war of laws [laws being adopted by republics that conflicted with Union laws]; and on the structure and composition of the Supreme Soviet. Regarding the latter, a distinct point was made by Tataria: "The Tatar Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, as a sovereign republic, which has adopted an official resolution to sign the Union treaty on its own, declares its right to have a full quota of deputies' seats in the Council of the Republics of the Supreme Soviet of the Union of Sovereign States." Shaimiyev responded: "Our position is unchanged." An argument then erupted among Shaimiyev, Gorbachev, Plyushch, Nazarbäev, and Revenko.)*

M. S.: Revenko has in this instance revealed qualities that are typical of the great Ukrainian people. This whole problem should be addressed to Boris

Nikolaevich [Yeltsin] and to Comrade Shaimiyev. Whatever they agree to, that's the way it will be. All right?

*Once again the argument returned to relations among the republics.*

M. S.: Well, comrades, I know that there is no Solomon among us. My mission is to keep you from losing the attitude you have today. We are very close to the signing of the treaty; just one more step . . . At the end, the procedure for the signing was discussed.”

This procedure was proposed by two working groups under the leadership of Georgy Kh. Shakhnazarov and Grigory I. Revenko. Everything was spelled out in detail—from the seating of the heads of the delegations to the kind of paper on which the text of the treaty would be printed, from the issuing of special postage stamps to souvenirs for the participants in the ceremony.

On August 2, 1991, I appeared on television and reported that on that day the leaders of the delegations authorized by the Supreme Soviets of the republics had been sent a letter with the proposal that the treaty be made available for signing on August 20. This letter was also sent to those republics that had not yet clarified their positions. The first to sign the treaty would be the delegations from the Russian Federation, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan.

In that speech I said the following:

We are entering the decisive stage in the transformation of our multinational state into a democratic federation of equal Soviet republics. What does the conclusion of a new Union treaty mean for the life of our country? Above all, it is the realization of the will of the people expressed in the March 17 referendum. The treaty proposes the transformation of the Union on the basis of both continuity and renewal.

The state system of our Union, in which the labor of many generations of people and of all the nations and nationalities of our fatherland are embodied, will be preserved. At the same time a new, truly voluntary unification of sovereign states will take place, and in this unification all the nationalities and nations will direct their own affairs separately and freely develop their own cultures, languages, and traditions . . .

Of course matters should not be oversimplified. The treaty provides for a significant reconstruction of the bodies of government and administra-

tion. A new constitution needs to be drafted and adopted, electoral laws need to be renewed, elections need to be held, and the judicial system needs to be reorganized. While this process is unfolding there must be the active functioning of the Congress of People's Deputies, the USSR Supreme Soviet, the various governments, and other Unionwide bodies . . .

We have taken the road of reforms that are needed by the whole country. And the new Union treaty will help us overcome the crisis more quickly and return life to a normal channel. Today this is—and I think you will agree with me—the highest priority.