

## *The Belovezh Accord: Dissolution of the USSR*

ON DECEMBER 3 the USSR Supreme Soviet approved the draft treaty for a Union of Sovereign States. At that time I sent a letter to the parliamentarians of the Supreme Soviets of the various sovereign states. The document read as follows:

I am impelled by my growing feeling of alarm over our homeland's very existence to address this message to you. Among our numerous crises, the most dangerous is the breakdown of the state system. It is also the most painful crisis as it interferes with the ability of government authorities at all levels to fulfill their duties to citizens. Further, it disrupts the economy, slows down and threatens to ruin the reform process, corrupts morals and customs, pits one nationality against another, and leads ultimately to the destruction of our culture.

In each of your sovereign states, democratically elected legislative and executive bodies have arisen. They are invested with the responsibility for policies that ought to serve the interests of the people. But things are going from bad to worse. It should be obvious that a main reason for this is the current process of disintegration, which, in violation of the historical logic of the very existence of an enormous integrated country, has gone far beyond reasonable limits to the point of becoming destructive.

The draft Union treaty has been submitted for your approval. Your decision will either bring society closer to new forms of existence or will condemn our peoples to a long and difficult road from which they will have to seek, probably in vain, to extricate themselves individually, in isolation. What specifically would lie ahead for us in that event—for each of us individually, for all of us together, for the entire outside world—it is impossible to predict. One thing, however, is certain: The consequences would be painful. . . .

Each of you has the right to renounce a Union. But this requires that those whom the people elected must consider all the consequences.

Further on in the document is a summary of the possible consequences of the Union's disintegration. In my conclusion I return to the question of the treaty:

*Two fundamental sets of ideas* are contained in the treaty's conception of confederation, which define the character of the new and unprecedented state system: that of *self-determination, national state sovereignty, and independence* and that of *Union status, cooperation, coordination, and mutual assistance*.

*My position is unambiguous.* I am for a new Union, a Union of Sovereign States, a confederated democratic state. On the threshold of your decision I want to be sure that my position is well known to you. It is impossible to delay further. Time lost may have catastrophic results.

Therefore I ask you, as authorized representatives of your nations, to discuss the draft treaty for a Union of Sovereign States in the coming days and to approve it.

I hoped that the Supreme Soviets would approve the treaty. I was told that the greatest difficulties might arise in the Russian parliament. But I knew that when the treaty was reviewed by several commissions of the Supreme Soviet of Russia it had won support. The simple fact is, however, that the deputies of the Supreme Soviets of the sovereign states were not given the opportunity even to consider the treaty.

As early as December 4, the Kiev newspaper *Rabochaya Gazeta* reported that Leonid Kravchuk, in a discussion with the U.S. president the previous day, informed him that on the coming Saturday he, Yeltsin, and Shushkevich, the head of the Byelorussian parliament, would be meeting in Minsk to discuss "domestic and foreign policy questions of the states they headed."

Before his trip to Minsk, Yeltsin met with me to say that the purpose of his visit to Byelorussia was for bilateral Russian-Byelorussian negotiations. Kravchuk had been invited in order to draw him into the treaty process. Yeltsin said that "a Union without Ukraine was unthinkable" and added: "Everything must be done to convince the Ukrainians to add their names to the Union treaty." He did make one qualification: "If that doesn't work

out, we will have to think about other variants.” I pressed Yeltsin on this point: Ukraine could be drawn into the treaty process, but the best way to do that would be for the Russian Federation to be the first to discuss and sign the treaty. Then Ukraine would seek a place for itself in this process. It would have nowhere else to go if the other eight republics signed. But if an agreement could not be reached, we could then continue the discussion in Moscow.

On December 8 the threesome met. They issued a declaration: “The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics as an entity under international law and a geopolitical reality has ceased to exist.” They signed an agreement to establish a Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).

In 1993, during a meeting with deputies belonging to the parliamentary group Smena, one of them told me the following. (This deputy had been an ardent supporter of Yeltsin in 1991.) After returning from Minsk, the president of Russia gathered together a group of deputies who were closely associated with him in order to enlist their support for ratification of the Minsk agreements. He was asked to what extent these agreements were valid from a legal standpoint. Unexpectedly he went into a forty-minute oration, relating in a rather inspired way how he had managed to “pull the wool over Gorbachev’s eyes” before his trip to Minsk, convincing Gorbachev that he would be pursuing one goal there when in fact he was preparing to do the exact opposite. “Gorbachev must be kept out of the game,” Yeltsin had added.

Commentary, as the saying goes, is superfluous. The president of Russia and his entourage in fact *sacrificed the Union* to his passionate desire to accede to the throne in the Kremlin.

On December 9 I made a declaration regarding the agreement signed by the three heads of state at Belovezh:

For me, as president of the country, the chief criterion in assessing this document is to what extent it corresponds to the interests of our citizens’ security and to the tasks of overcoming the present crisis and preserving the state system while continuing democratic change.

This agreement has positive aspects.

The Ukrainian leadership, which recently had not been active in the treaty process, did take part in this agreement.

The document stresses the need to create a single economic space operating on agreed-on principles, with a single currency and a single financial and

banking system. Willingness to collaborate in the fields of science, education, culture, and other areas was expressed. A certain formula for military-strategic coordination was proposed.

However, this document is of such significance and so profoundly affects the interests of the peoples, the nations and nationalities of our country, and the entire international community that it requires a further, comprehensive political and legal evaluation.

In any case, the following is clear: The agreement bluntly declares an end to the existence of the USSR. Undeniably each republic has the right to secede from the Union, but the fate of the multinational state cannot be determined by the will of the leaders of three republics. This question should be decided only by constitutional means with the participation of all the sovereign states and taking into account the will of all their citizens.

The statement that Unionwide legal norms would cease to be in effect is also illegal and dangerous; it can only worsen the chaos and anarchy in society.

The hastiness with which the document appeared is also cause for concern. It was not discussed by the populations nor by the Supreme Soviets of the republics in whose name it was signed. Even worse, it appeared at the moment when the draft treaty for a Union of Sovereign States, drafted by the USSR State Council, was being discussed by the parliaments of the republics.

In the situation that has arisen, it is my profound conviction that all the Supreme Soviets of the republics and the USSR Supreme Soviet need to discuss both the draft treaty for the Union of Sovereign States and the accord concluded in Minsk. To the extent that a different form of state system is proposed in the accord—a matter that should come under the jurisdiction of the USSR Congress of People's Deputies—it is necessary to convene that congress. In addition, I would not rule out holding a nationwide referendum (a plebiscite) on this question.

On December 10 the Supreme Soviet of Belarus and the Supreme Soviet of Ukraine, bypassing the question of the Union of Sovereign States, ratified the agreement concerning the founding of the Commonwealth of Independent States. Two days later a similar decision was made by the RSFSR Supreme Soviet.

Among those voting in complete harmony for the Belovezh accord were deputies belonging to groups totally opposed to one another.

On December 13 the leaders of the Central Asian states and Kazakhstan met in Ashkhabad, capital of Turkmenistan. Basically they approved the initiative taken to establish the Commonwealth of Independent States, but they emphasized that equal participation by all the former republics of the Soviet Union should be guaranteed in the process of developing documents and deciding the character of the new formation. A conference of eleven republics was set for December 21. I sent a message to those participating in that conference.

The following considerations determined my viewpoint. If the other republics arrived at the commonly held position that they wished to form such a commonwealth, I, as an individual devoted to the principles of democracy and constitutional rule, proceeding from these convictions and in view of my role as president, should respect that choice. But I favored a gradual process that would not contribute to chaos and dislocation. In accordance with these ideas, I wrote the following message:

The ratification of an agreement to found a Commonwealth of Independent States by the Supreme Soviets of the RSFSR, Ukraine, and Belarus, and the willingness of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tadzhikistan, and Turkmenistan to join in as founders of this Commonwealth, has changed the situation radically. The life of the numerous nations and nationalities of a great country regarding the governmental form under which they live is beginning a new history. On this country's territory several independent states are being formed. In place of the long and difficult historical era of the formation of a single country there comes a process of disunification and dismemberment. That, too, will not be easy. There should be no illusions. Society obviously has not yet realized that this turn of events is of colossal proportions affecting the very foundations of our peoples' and citizens' lives.

From the very beginning of perestroika we proceeded step by step toward having all the republics acquire genuine independence. But all along I insisted that the country should not be allowed to fall apart. That was and is my understanding of the will of all the nations and nationalities as expressed in the referendum [of March 17, 1991]—their desire for independence while preserving the integrity of the historical Union. This idea and this concern lay at the basis of my formula for a Union of Sovereign States, which initially met with your support.

I am not writing in order to return the discussion to that topic. The idea of a Commonwealth of Independent States is now becoming a reality, and

it is important, vitally important, that this very complex process not intensify destructive tendencies that can be observed in society. After all, it is obvious to everyone that the transition will take place in circumstances of profound economic, political, and interethnic crisis, with a significant decline in the living standard.

I take a completely serious attitude toward the contents of the documents adopted at Brest [i.e., the Belovezh accord] and at Ashkhabad, and in the decrees ratified by the Supreme Soviets of the three republics. In considering the points I wish to make, I have taken into account the reaction of society both within and outside our country and questions that still remain open.

The purpose of the considerations outlined here is to specify minimum conditions without which, it seems to me, the Commonwealth under present circumstances cannot be viable. Let me make an immediate qualification: Among these conditions are some that are obvious and that all of you acknowledge, but I cannot omit them from this message.

*First*, a clear-cut understanding should be recorded that the Commonwealth is a multinational formation with absolute equality not only of the states themselves but of all the nationalities, religions, traditions, and customs, regardless of their locations. Therefore a more appropriate name, it seems to me, would be Commonwealth of European and Asian States.

*Second*, it is not enough simply to give official recognition to the Declaration of Human Rights and to democratic freedoms. Given the unique situation of people who have settled across an enormous space, where over the course of centuries the fates of millions of families have intersected, where there have been tens of millions of mixed marriages, the problem of open borders and of citizenship must be worked out with special care.

I am sure that in everyone not contaminated with nationalism and separatism, and that means hundreds of millions of people, there will inevitably arise a sense of loss of a great country. And when the practical work begins of defining governmental and administrative processes and other demarcations, and the terms for citizenship, a great many will be affected most directly—in their everyday lives, in production, in human relations. Therefore, possibly for a prolonged period, it will be necessary to agree on a Commonwealth citizenship alongside citizenship in a particular country.

I fear that if all this is not thought out, resolved, and reliably guaranteed, the idea of a Commonwealth will be rejected on the national level.

*Third*, of decisive importance to ensure the stability of the Commonwealth is the creation of a socially oriented market economy and the defense of all forms of property. I share the opinion of those who consider it essential to confirm the resolute stand of the participants in the Commonwealth to abide by the economic community treaty and to complete work on a range of proposals providing for the necessary conditions to establish a common "Eurasian market." This would include coordinated measures on such important questions as the currency, the financial and banking systems, the methodology of price formation and taxation, customs collection, budgetary allocations for defense, and other common purposes.

I am convinced that appropriate structures for economic coordination within the framework of the Commonwealth will be required. I am also certain that all this will become possible and will contribute to the welfare of the people of all our nations and nationalities only under conditions of effective guarantees of economic rights and freedoms for the individual and their unconditional defense both in law and practice.

*Fourth*, I believe I can say, with full responsibility and knowledge of the matter regarding an integrated system of military-strategic security for our country, that the slightest attempts to disintegrate that system are fraught with the danger of international disaster.

From the perspective of establishing genuine sovereignty of the Commonwealth members, there is no need whatsoever to divide up this complex and extremely costly system. The parties to the agreement could, *on an urgent basis*, specify certain structures for unified control and command of the strategic forces, including all the basic military, technical, and scientific defense components. Monitoring of the status and composition of the armed forces can be collective, and so can the pursuit of a coordinated military policy. But the notion of collective command is an absurdity.

The problem of reforming and reducing the size of the army also requires joint decision making. This is a very big *social* problem at the present time. It is also a problem of political security for the entire country, which, for centuries, has had unified armed forces.

*Fifth*, the independent, sovereign activity of each member of the Commonwealth in the world arena is valid. But if there is a Commonwealth and it is a political formation, it should have political representation within the international community. This could follow the model, let us say, of the European Community, which has status as an *entity under international law*. Such a status for the Commonwealth cannot be renounced because it inher-

its from the USSR the status of a nuclear superpower. It is not so easy to escape such a legacy. Otherwise international confidence could be undermined, and the treaty on the nonproliferation of nuclear arms could be violated, a treaty that all the sovereign members of the Commonwealth seem obliged to reaffirm.

I cannot imagine how a strategic defense system could possibly be maintained in common without a minimum common policy. The most sensible solution would be to have a structure for foreign relations adapted to the needs and principles of the Commonwealth, including the question of membership in the United Nations Security Council.

The signature of the Soviet Union is affixed to some of the most important documents of our era, both declarations and treaties. Fifteen thousand foreign economic agreements are now in effect. Simply to erase all this would injure the international prestige of the Commonwealth and its genuine interests from the very start.

Just as all members of the Commonwealth have apparently confirmed their commitment to principles of contemporary democracy (free elections; separation of powers; political, ideological, and religious pluralism; a government based on law, civil society, and human rights), they should also adopt a foreign policy course based on the new thinking, which has been recognized throughout the civilized world.

*Sixth*, irreparable harm will be done to the spiritual development of all our nations and nationalities if the members of the Commonwealth do not reach an agreement on coordination (and agencies for coordination) in the fields of science, culture, a language for communication among the nationalities, preservation of monuments, sources for maintaining museums, world-class theaters, libraries, archives, major institutes, laboratories, observatories, and so forth.

*Seventh*, regarding procedures for legal continuity, a new era in our country's history should begin with dignity, with the observation of legitimate standards. Indeed one of the reasons for our nations' and our nationalities' historical misfortunes has precisely been crude ruptures, destructive upheavals, and predatory or aggressive methods in the course of social development.

Both the necessary prerequisites and experience exist for us to function in a democratic framework. I therefore propose that, after the document on the Commonwealth is ratified and the ratification documents exchanged, a final session of the USSR Supreme Soviet be held at which a decree would



be adopted terminating the Soviet Union's existence and transferring all its legal rights and obligations to the Commonwealth of European and Asian States.

These are the most general considerations I wish to raise. They are dictated by a feeling of responsibility for the ultimate success of the great work begun in 1985.

The scheduled conference of the heads of the independent governments was held in Alma-Ata on December 21, 1991, and there a declaration supporting the Belovezh accord was signed. The declaration stated: "With the formation of the Commonwealth of Independent States, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics ceases to exist." The considerations I had presented in my message to the participants at the conference remained without sequel. At Alma-Ata no one was concerned any longer with the fate of our country. They were all in a state of euphoria, busily dividing up the inheritance. Yesterday hardly anyone had heard of them, but tomorrow they would be heads of independent states. What did it matter what fate they were preparing for their nations? Of course this unhappy fate became clear later on. And then they began searching for scapegoats.

On December 25 at 7:00 P.M. I made a final declaration on television:

In view of the situation that has developed—the formation of the Commonwealth of Independent States—I hereby cease my activity in the post of president of the USSR. I make this decision based on considerations of principle.

I have been a firm advocate of independence for the nations and nationalities of our country and for the sovereignty of the republics. But at the same time I have favored preservation of a Union government and the integrity of the country.

Events have taken a different road. The line favoring dismemberment of the country and the dismantling of the state has won out, something I cannot agree with . . .

Nevertheless I will do everything within the realm of possibility so that the agreements . . . lead to genuine harmony in society and facilitate the reform process as well as our emergence from the crisis.

Thus the Soviet Union ceased to exist, and perestroika was interrupted. With the beginning of 1992 one could no longer speak of perestroika—a

different policy had begun. Instead of preserving the Union in a new form and with new content, the breakup of the country was accelerated. Instead of deepening reform in a gradual, evolutionary way—"shock therapy" was the rule, along with the collapse of production and people's living standards. Instead of the consistent use of democratic measures, force came into play, including the shelling of the parliament in October 1993, and the use of force was elevated to a principle of government policy. All this taken together could no longer be called perestroika.

After all I have said, the question arises: Could the Union have been preserved? Yes, absolutely. The signing of the new Union treaty was disrupted by the so-called State Committee for the State of Emergency. Even after the attempted coup of August 1991, however, as I have indicated above, the process of reforming the Soviet state could have continued. After the August coup, the conspiracy at Belovezh dealt a final blow to the Soviet Union.

Today the assertion can often be heard that the Union treaty that was to be signed in August 1991 would have meant the destruction of the Union anyway. No! The signing of that treaty would have been a real alternative to the breakup of the Union. It would have meant preservation of Union-wide citizenship, which was recognized as a separate point in that document. The citizen of any state belonging to the Union was simultaneously a citizen of the Union. That was Article 2 of the treaty. The new Union treaty would have meant preservation and development of a unified Unionwide market. Armed forces under a single command (not "joint command") would have been preserved. The state security of the Union as a whole and a unified foreign policy would have been assured.

Preservation, renewal, and reform of the Union was my main political and, if you will, moral task in my position as president of the USSR. I consider it my greatest sorrow and misfortune that I did not succeed in preserving the country as a single whole. All my efforts were focused on trying to preserve that unity.

Incidentally, more and more statements are heard today, including some by participants in the Belovezh accord, that the "soft form of Union Gorbachev proposed" might have protected our nations and nationalities from painful experiences. But, as the saying goes, the train has already left the station.

A fundamental question remains unclear to this day: Why did the Supreme Soviets of the republics support the Belovezh accord? I have given

this much thought. I believe that the Supreme Soviets, however paradoxical it may seem, were acting on the basis of a desire to preserve the country. But in fact they helped cause its dissolution. In a literal sense they miscalculated: They thought that only seven or eight republics would sign the treaty Gorbachev proposed, whereas eleven republics were immediately ready to sign the Belovezh accord. And therefore they voted in favor of the accord.

Other forces were also operating. In the Supreme Soviet of Russia the vote for the Belovezh accord was almost unanimous, with only six opposed. In the Supreme Soviet of Belarus only one deputy (Lukashenko, the current president of Belarus) spoke out against it. What was this all about? The party nomenklatura [or bureaucracy] which had supported the August coup in order to prevent the signing of the Union treaty—supposedly to preserve the Union—now voted for its dissolution.

There was another motivation. A Communist delegate named Sevastyanov, notorious for his fundamentalist positions, made the following argument in the debates on the Belovezh accord: I am voting for the Belovezh accord, and I urge everyone to do so—so that we can get rid of Gorbachev. And on this basis the extreme Right and the extreme Left came together.

I am often asked this question: Are you sure you used all your powers as president to preserve the Union after the Belovezh accord? Yes, absolutely. I used all political methods available. I have also been asked why I did not use force, why I did not arrest participants in the Belovezh accord? But that would have meant taking a road that could have become bloody. For me such a road was closed, but, I was mistaken in my expectations regarding the positions the Supreme Soviets of the republics would take.

Essentially the decisions of the Supreme Soviets and the deluded expectations of the citizens of the Soviet Union deprived me of the authority to take firm measures toward abrogating the Belovezh accord. It was both strange and surprising; it seemed that in December 1991 only the country's president wanted to preserve the Union. But today it turns out that most people regret the dissolution of the USSR. Apparently it has become clear to everyone that a terrible mistake was made. It was clear to me at the time, and I spoke out about it more than once to the citizens of the USSR.

Above all, the initiators of the breakup of the Union contended that everyone would live better by going separate ways. But subsequent years have refuted this argument. Everywhere in the "post-Soviet space" the economy and culture have declined, and a majority of the population has fallen into poverty. In practice it has been confirmed that no economic meth-

ods can be effective in conditions where integrated systems are falling apart—transport, power, communications and information, health care, science, education, and social security. Even Russia, which had the greatest economic potential and natural resources, could not save itself from a massive collapse of production unheard of in peacetime and a decline in literally all areas of activity.

Furthermore, at the time that the signing of a new Union treaty was proposed a foundation for democracy had been laid in the country. Civil society and a government based on the rule of law had begun to take shape. The dissolution of the Union not only interrupted this process but resulted in the emasculation of democratic institutions. These institutions are being increasingly used as a screen behind which bureaucratic-nomenklatura capital dominates. Russia, which had set the tone for the democratization of Soviet society, provided a bad example for the Commonwealth. The dismissal and shelling of the Supreme Soviet of Russia, the imposition of an antidemocratic constitution on the country by means of force in 1993, infringement on the legislative branch of government, on freedom of the press, on freedom of conscience, and bureaucratic domination—all these are ominous signs that the country is slipping back toward authoritarian rule.

The years since 1991 have destroyed the hope that Russia would become a worthy heir to the Soviet Union and would inherit its international authority. Weakened by economic uncertainty and political instability, Russia has lost many of the previous positions it held in the international arena. Fewer and fewer people take Russia's opinion into account. Nor can it be said that the other former Union republics have gained great advantage from their present sovereign existence. Some are threatened with the fate of becoming objects of geopolitical intrigue and neocolonial plunder.

The dissolution of the Union greatly complicated the process of forming a new international climate that could have taken hold after the Cold War. The USSR was the cement that held together an enormous Eurasian space. Russia cannot take this kind of mission upon itself. The "post-Soviet space" has more than once become the scene of armed conflicts and terrorist actions, with crime and the drug trade running amok.

Outwardly the Commonwealth of Independent States seems to function—top-level meetings take place on the ministerial level and sessions of a parliamentary assembly are held. (This assembly is probably the most active element in the Commonwealth.) Agreements on customs and tariffs as well as other matters have been signed. On the whole, within the frame-

work of the Commonwealth, several hundred documents have been adopted. But in the overwhelming majority of cases these agreements have no effect; they have only a formal status. An infrastructure for the Commonwealth as a whole either does not exist at all or is ineffective. Thus far there is no locomotive powering the integration of the CIS.

Yet I wish to remind readers that some far-reaching goals were solemnly proclaimed in the Belovezh accord. It provided for preservation and support under united command of a unified military-strategic space. It spoke of the coordination of foreign policy and collaboration in establishing and developing a common economic space, a coordinated financial policy, development of transport and communications systems, environmental protection, and a migration policy. In a supplemental statement to the Belovezh accord, the governments of the three countries signing it (Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus) promised to coordinate economic policy, to pursue radical economic reform in a coordinated way, to conclude banking agreements among the members of the Commonwealth aimed at limiting the printing of paper currency, and so forth. What happened to these goals? They went no further than the paper they were written on.