

THE END OF THE SOVIET UNION: STANISLAU SHUSHKEVICH'S EYEWITNESS ACCOUNT

For the first time in English, this issue of *Demokratizatsiya* publishes an excerpt from former Belarus leader Stanislau Shushkevich's autobiography, *My Life: The Collapse and Resurrection of the USSR*. This book has never been published in Belarus or in an English translation, though Moscow's ROSSPEN published the entire monograph on November 5, 2012, in Russian as *Моя жизнь, крушение и воскрешение СССР*.

The excerpt translated and reproduced here describes the dramatic events surrounding the signing of the Belavezha Accords that formally ended the Soviet Union and established the Commonwealth of Independent States. These events are central to the massive regime transformations in Eurasia that started under Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev and that are the chief subject matter of our journal. The Belavezha Accords simultaneously represent an outcome of the USSR's democratization and a cause of what came next, including continued political opening in some post-Soviet countries and dramatic new rounds of political closure in others.

The following text, like the rest of Shushkevich's book, is part personal memoir and part analysis of the events he participated in. It switches among informal observations, historical description, and commentary from the author's perspective.

The events mainly take place at Viskuli, an elite Soviet-era rest facility for high-level officials, which is located in Belarus's Belavezha forest. Shushkevich relates what happens at the end of 1991 in the context of Belarusian national politics and the broader context of politics in the post-Soviet space, especially Russia. Shushkevich was the leader of Belarus in 1991, but lost power in 1994 and has been an observer of political developments since then.

Many conservatives in Belarus and the USSR as a whole were unhappy to see the Soviet Union collapse and claimed that Russia's Boris Yeltsin, Ukraine's Leonid Kravchuk, and Belarus's Shushkevich did not have the authority to disband the Soviet Union. But Shushkevich here argues that the actions that he and his counterparts took were legitimate. Shushkevich takes pride in the short and concise text of the agreement he and his colleagues authored during the two-day meeting and reproduces it

here in full. He remains extremely proud of this accomplishment and has made it clear that he would do it over again.

Since this text has intrinsic value as the viewpoint from one of the participants in a historic event, it was not subject to the journal's usual double-blind peer review process.

BELAVEZHA FOREST VISKULI DECEMBER 7-8, 1991

STANISLAU SHUSHKEVICH
FORMER CHAIRMAN OF THE SUPREME SOVIET
REPUBLIC OF BELARUS

One of the facets of singer-song writer Vladimir Vysotsky's genius was his ability to say a lot concisely and clearly, thereby making his thoughts absolutely vivid. When I recall the Belarusians who were with me in the Belavezha Forest, I cannot help the urge to exclaim once again, like Vysotsky: "if only I had known those I traveled with, those I drank vodka with..." Yet, I did not drink any vodka in Viskuli. This is a fact, even though it violated the protocol of informal meetings. My main associate, who agreed with me the most in the Viskuli affair, or at least so it seemed at the time, turned out to have so many faces that even today if they were to prosecute me for anti-state activities, I would be glad that there are no grounds to add to it Vysotsky's line: "it's alright, you are so young!"

It is immoral to reproach those who favored, and still favor a different approach, than the one established in Viskuli. Every man has a right to an opinion. Every man has a right to defend his or her opinion and to change it, explaining why that change occurred. But sacrilege is the only word that comes to my mind when I want to describe the actions of some high-ranking politicians who made possible the Viskuli decision, warmly welcomed it, but later, afraid of losing their relatively small benefits, changed their opinions to the contrary, in order to fawn in front of a powerful ruler.

The Invitation

At that time I considered Prime Minister Vyacheslav Frantsevich Kebich to be the most devoted and practical man in our government. We talked over the phone more frequently than we met in person, and, as the KGB operators assured us, we had two kinds of untapped telephone connections: a secret "triad" with three-digit numbers and a "rotator" with four. Nonetheless, in addition to these links, we decided to establish another way of communication – this time numberless. Whenever I picked up the receiver, the phone rang at the office of the premier, and vice versa.

Exploiting this new, untapped, according to the KGB, individual connection, Vyacheslav Frantsevich and I realized that we both were equally concerned about the upcoming winter of 1991-1992.

“You and Boris Nikolayevich [Yeltsin] are on very good terms,” Kebich used to tell me quite often, “it would be wrong not to use this fact to keep our citizens warm. Invite him to come hunting in the forest; we will receive him as is appropriate for the president of Russia, and I have no doubt that we will convince him to help us with oil and gas.”

I always replied that this was exactly what I myself wanted to do, adding that so far there had been no good opportunity for extending an invitation. Vyacheslav Frantsevich, in turn, regularly reminded me: we have little time, hurry.

Finally, the opportunity presented itself. On October 20, 1991, Gorbachev gathered the State Council at Novo-Ogarevo, and gave each of its members, the heads of the republics that made up the USSR, a new draft of the Union Treaty. For a long time, everyone flipped through the pages of the document, but no one rushed to say something. I could not help myself and spoke up, and I said something along the lines of the following:

“Dear Mikhail Sergeyevich. I have strange feelings about this project. The agreement assumes the joining of the republics into a Confederation. But I would feel uncomfortable presenting this document to the [Belarusian] Supreme Soviet, since it does not abide by the ordinary definitions of words. Our deputies are intelligent people and they will reproach me for presenting them such a document. The draft describes as a confederation something which is essentially a unitary state. The president is endowed with extensive power. In other words, this is another Soviet Union, except with a president in the place of the Communist Party Politburo.”

Everyone became silent and Gorbachev did not say a word. After a small pause, Yeltsin stood up. His speech was significantly less reserved than mine. He decisively rejected the project. Silence.

Gorbachev stood up and left the room. The chairman's seat now stood empty. After a minute or two, without standing up, Islam Karimov broke the silence.

“You, Stanislav Stanislavovich, and you, Boris Nikilayevich, started a quarrel between Mikhail Sergeyevich and us. Go find him and bring him back to chair this meeting.”

All members of the State Council nodded in agreement with the President of Uzbekistan and Boris Nikolaevich and I went to find the president of the USSR. This was an excellent opportunity to realize Kebich's and my idea. As the President of Russia and I followed in the direction of Gorbachev's retreat, I invited him to Belavezha Forest.

He readily agreed.

And Gorbachev?

We found Gorbachev too. For me, the corridors, halls, and balustrades of Novo-Ogarevo seemed like a maze, but Yeltsin felt at home. Mikhail Sergeyeovich did not express the smallest displeasure when we discovered him near a vase with fruits. He pulled out a bottle of fine Armenian cognac, and filled up shot glasses for the three of us. We drank. And, as if nothing had happened, we returned to the meeting of the State Council.

I was eager to inform Prime Minister Vyacheslav Kebich that Boris Nikolayevich had agreed to come to Belavezha Forest, but I did not resolve to call him from Moscow with the, so it seemed to me, good news. There were plenty of people who could impede the meeting. Only in Minsk did we manage to make a detailed analysis of the situation; Kebich assured me once again that Belavezha Forest was ready for the meeting.

Kebich and I discussed the situation in Russia: it was clear that President Yeltsin was very much in control. In order to gain his sympathy it was necessary to casually mention at the meeting that we were happy about his success and that our words were not a mere formality, but a genuine recognition of his personal achievements, ingenuity, resourcefulness, and the timely and appropriate use of power in such a high office. Personally, I was truly fascinated by Yeltsin, but I did not want to look like an ordinary admirer of the greatness of the first president of Russia, and especially, I did not want to fawn.

Despite our readiness, we did not have an opportunity to express our excited feelings about the President of Russia, neither before, nor after his visit to the forest. All conversations that we had with Yeltsin were focused solely on business. The situation in Russia, and in the world, was becoming quite favorable for Belarus.

And indeed, on June 12, 1991, for the first time in history, the people of Russia elected a president. Yeltsin won in the first round – none of the candidates were nearly as popular as he was. His inauguration speech statements were radically different from those made by all the Communist Party and USSR leaders who had previously acquired governing offices. “For centuries, the state interest stood above man, his needs and aspirations. We have realized, unfortunately later than other civilized nations, that the strength of the state is rooted in the welfare of its citizens...The basis reviving our state is the spiritual liberation of man, true freedom of conscience and absolute rejection of any ideological dictate.”

The “Expanding” of the Invitation

Boris Nikolayevich and I agreed that our staffs should coordinate the date of our meeting. Yeltsin’s helpers and mine immediately began to search

for a mutually acceptable option, but Vyacheslav Kebich proposed inviting [Ukrainian leader] Leonid Makarovich Kravchuk if Boris Nikolayevich did not object.

I called Yeltsin. He not only did not object, but on the contrary, seemed rather glad. Kravchuk's invitation caused a delay, since on December 1 there were presidential elections in Ukraine, and Kravchuk, as a candidate, could not leave the country during the campaign. We agreed to meet immediately after the Ukrainian elections.

Why was Kravchuk necessary? There were factors for and against. Against was the fact that the three-way agreements are much harder to achieve than two-way agreements. The argument "for" was that Ukraine and Belarus had the same major problem – the need for energy resources during winter. Starting an unhealthy competition of who can please Russia most to acquire what is needed would have been absurd. Working together, everything would be honest, mutually transparent, and understandable.

The second reason for expanding the number of participants in the meeting was that many industrial sectors, especially the ones that used a lot of energy, needed to have a clear understanding of the energy supply perspectives for the near future. That is why the delegations arriving to Viskuli included executives and representatives of the ministries and departments concerned with the questions of energy.

Thus, these reasons, as well as other, less-significant factors, explained the arrival in Belavezha Forest of representative delegations from Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus — all capable of making quick decisions at the highest governmental level of the three countries.

What Remained in People's Minds

In December 1991, the Soviet Union was still a country where, as a matter of inertia, the majority of the population thought one thing, said another, and did yet something else. There was more openness than in Khrushchev's, Brezhnev's or Andropov's times, but no one dared to threaten the most sacred thing – the country itself. The program of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union adopted by the XXII Congress in October 1961 – the program which required the building of communism – had been overturned two years previously by the USSR Congress of People's Deputies, together with the Communist Party's guiding role. Still, the program had not vanished from the minds of the millions of naïve advocates of the most just society on Earth. And indeed, how could one reject a dream so quickly which promised:

“...a classless social system with common social ownership of the means of production; absolute social equality for all members of society, where together

with the comprehensive development of humanity, the productive forces would grow on the base of constantly developing technology and science; all of the sources of national wealth will flow in full streams realizing the great principle “From each according to his ability, to each according to his need.” Communism is a highly organized society of free and conscious workers, in which self-government will be strengthened and where labor for the good of the society will become the first life necessity for all, a conscious need; the abilities of all will be applied with the greatest advantage for the public...”

How was it possible to reject immediately and abruptly the heaven on Earth promised by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) Program – particularly since it would be a heaven for everyone! More than 200-pages long, the Program ended with the following words: “*The current generation of the Soviet people will live under Communism!*”

All citizens of the USSR were obliged to study the Program; students of all levels and numerous other categories of citizens were required to learn the definition of Communism and the final words of the Program by heart.

Paradoxically, many people became used to believing in all this. Some still have faith in Communism and believe that greedy capitalists and democrats unable to understand the teachings of communism hindered its creation.

Solidarity of Global VIPs

On the day of our meeting in the forest, not all of us had a clear understanding of the political situation in the world. Much of it we only found out later. However, the majority of those who arrived to Viskuli were aware of the fact that the world’s top politicians – U.S. President George Bush, German Chancellor Helmut Kohl, French President François Mitterrand, and the retiring British leader Margaret Thatcher – were decisive adversaries of so-called separatism, that is, the division of the USSR into independent states. All of these leaders and ex-leaders of the most important capitalist countries thought that it would be more profitable for them to deal with a single Gorbachev rather than with numerous unpredictable new leaders.

Not everyone who came to Viskuli understood why the leaders of the most powerful states opposed the division of the USSR into its component parts. Effectively, the collapse had already taken place in August 1991 after the coup makers were driven out. But the disintegration could be uncontrollable. Mitterrand predicted “The chance to speak about the Soviet Union in recent times has placed a sacramental question on the agenda:

‘What next?’ The disintegration of a state, the crisis of power, the loss of faith, accompanied by economic decline – all this could lead to an outburst by the population which would make it practically impossible to govern the country, which could collapse into anarchy.”

Formally, everything stayed the same. The West, as in the post-war Stalin years, continued to fear the Russians. Europe sought paths and forms of unification. The main political goal of this unification was to command enough power to counter the Russians. It followed from the crowning phrase of Winston Churchill’s September 19, 1946 speech at Zurich University: “It would be a measureless disaster if Russian barbarism overlaid the culture and independence of the states of Europe.”

And these “Russians,” that is citizens of the USSR, would be split into numerous states, four of which have nuclear weapons. Thanks to their inherently wild nature, they will clobber each other and, moreover, drag our well-off countries into the conflict. The West did not believe it would be possible to prevent war as the USSR broke into pieces, therefore all of the most competent politicians persistently opposed the disintegration of the USSR. No disintegration, no war.

The Western countries’ policy of opposition to the division of the USSR to a significant degree was based on their good understanding of politicians in the Soviet Union. Having come to know Gorbachev, they understood that nurturing several Gorbachevs would be difficult. It would be better to work with the existing one since he had to some extent been taught. With others it would be more complicated, they work like stubborn dogmatic Marxist-Leninists, not like combine operators who managed to succeed in their party work. The real members of the partocracy are convinced that the USSR is a great power, a nuclear superpower, that the whole world is against them, that if the enemy does not give up, it is necessary to destroy him, that all wealth is amassed through dishonest means, that money is not the most important thing...

In 2011 Swedish Minister for Foreign Affairs Carl Bildt convinced the Swedish parliament to allow the ministry to publish on its web site all the diplomatic cables sent by the Swedish embassies up to 1991. Usually such documents remain secret for 50 years, but Bildt effectively reduced that term to 20 years. The most important discovery made on the basis of analyzing the published correspondence is the terrible fear of a civil war on the territory of the Soviet Union, which could affect other countries.

Regarding the domestic situation of the formally existing Soviet Union, the center had already lost its grip on the last bits of power. On the referendum that was conducted at the same time as Ukraine’s presidential election on December 1, 1991, 90.32 percent of the voters backed Ukrainian independence. It was not difficult to guess that in other republics the proportion of citizens desiring independence was not smaller.

Arrivals

The airplane with Russian president Yeltsin and his staff arrived in Minsk on the morning of December 7. The Russian delegation was first taken to Zaslavl', where they could rest and prepare for the short flight to the airbase in Pruzhny, and from there a drive to Belavezha Forest.

Yeltsin planned to address the Belarusian Supreme Soviet. There the deputies hoped to hear directly from the Russian leader the basic principles of the Russian conception of its relations with the USSR republics which had adopted declarations of state sovereignty.

However, Yeltsin met with failure in that task. He had to explain the gross oversight of those who had prepared for him an old charter, which he wanted to present as a gift to the Supreme Soviet. The ancient charter turned out to be a document confirming the imperial character of its compilers, which the deputies, highly educated professional historians, immediately understood. They quickly announced their opinion, after which the hall was filled with relatively friendly shouts of condemnation. The chamber became unmanageable and, although Yeltsin withdrew as fast as he could, the roar and din chased him into the corridor.

I was not happy about what had happened because it complicated implementing what we had planned. But I did not have the right to defend Yeltsin. His political mistake was obvious and, if I had spoken up to help him, many deputies would have rightly jeered at me, not just deputies from the Belarusian Popular Front. I was disappointed with what happened because everything started in an undesirable way, but I could do nothing to smooth out the situation. I did not have a chance to speak with Yeltsin right away during the break in the session because he had already left, presumably for Zaslavl'.

I went to the airport and managed to get there at the moment Ukrainian President Kravchuk's plane arrived. I met Leonid Makarovich and congratulated him on his victory in the presidential elections and then was supposed to fly on my YaK-27 with our delegation behind him to the airbase in Pruzhany, but decided that I could have some extra time for conversation with the Ukrainian president and volunteered to join him on his plane. However, our conversation on the airplane did not provide any additional information about the Ukrainian position.

Accordingly, all the planes arrived at the airbase, where the genial and hospitable Brest Oblast Governor Viktor Ivanovich Bursky met them. Then everyone left for the former Communist Party Central Committee recreation center, which was now managed by the Belarus SSR government. There was no problem accommodating the guests, though such a massive number of arrivals to Viskuli was unprecedented.

Viskuli, Day One

In the main building of the former residence of the Central Committee, there are apartments for the most important guests. Thanks to my attention to detail, three suites of rooms of the highest quality had essentially the same level of comfort, design and size. Two were given respectively to Yeltsin and Kravchuk. I refrained from taking the third, thinking that anything could happen and set up in a two-floor cottage, which I liked as much as the suite. Two of my bodyguards also stayed there.

On the evening of December 7, we met in Yeltsin's rooms. In addition to the head of the Russian delegation, also present were Gennady Burbulis, Yegor Gaidar, Andrei Kozyrev, and Sergei Shakhrai; from Ukraine, Vitold Fokin, and three deputies from the Rada; from Belarus, there was Vyacheslav Kebich, Mikhail Myasnikovich, and Petr Kravchenko.

We talked about oil, gas and much else, but inevitably the main question arose: What to do in a situation in which neither Gorbachev nor any other political body was running the USSR?

Everything that happened subsequently I remember in detail for the simple reason that I expected little from Gennady Burbulis, who was like all Marxist philosophers. I never once heard anything from a Soviet philosopher that had not already been announced in the latest appeal of the Communist Party Central Committee or the USSR Council of Ministers or printed in the Short Course History of the CPSU or in university textbooks that summarized the Short Course. But Gennady Eduardovich Burbulis, the philosopher who was the first (and apparently the last) State Secretary of the Russian Federation, took the floor.

"Gentlemen, would you agree to put your signature under the following proposition: The USSR as a geopolitical reality and subject of international law ends its existence?"

I understood the gist of Burbulis's proposal instantly and I will not hide the fact that I liked it immediately. I felt uncomfortable that I had not related to him in the best manner before this. Therefore I did not wait until someone else stated their opinion and said drily, "I would sign."

I could compliment the philosopher and, I am not afraid to admit it, even envy him. Then everyone present confirmed that they were ready to sign under the words of Russian Federation State Secretary Burbulis. Thus, the Marxist-Leninist philosopher (those two names were always inserted in front of the title philosopher in the USSR when discussing a university teacher or researcher) effectively determined what we would discuss in Viskuli for the rest of the time. This suddenly became clear to everyone gathered in the residence of Russian President Boris Yeltsin. Here we said, and frequently repeated subsequently, the phrase about the Belavezha Accords that "We had to do what it was impossible not to do!"

Yeltsin's "You understand!" frequently punctuated the babel.

"We have a good skeleton, you understand, but we have to put the meat on it. But we have to take care of everything, leave nothing uncovered. We cannot leave any questions hanging in the air. Otherwise, history will judge us harshly. Above all, no one should be afraid of what we are announcing to our citizens and the entire world. In the first place should be creation and not destruction. We should show, you understand, that there is a way to remain united without hypocrisy and the violation of rights and freedoms along national or any other distinctions. We've had enough of the USSR, the CPSU and now the SSG, the Commonwealth of Sovereign States. Independent, you understand! It should be the Commonwealth of Independent States!

I was happy for Boris Nikolaevich. He had forgotten about his morning speech in the Supreme Soviet, which meant that the original goal of the meeting, a chance to agree on oil and gas, had not been lost. And though Yeltsin did not say anything that had not already been said in the general part of our discussion, which I described above as "babel," he summarized everything very well. There is no need to provide additional information about who joined the group to prepare the document. We had agreed on everything and set a deadline for preparing the document by early the next morning.

Rethinking: What Are We Creating?

The group of drafters went off to complete their work. Kebich also stepped out to make sure that all the arrangements were in order and that the staffs had everything they needed. A little later he rejoined the conversation of those who remained – Yeltsin, Kravchuk, Burbulis, Fokin and I.

What happened? We had decided to denounce the 1922 treaty on the creation of the USSR. This part of the proposed agreement was all correct and legitimate. As presidents, Yeltsin, Kravchuk, and I were empowered by the constitutions of the Russian Federation, Ukraine, and Belarus to sign international treaties on behalf of our states. Such treaties would immediately have the force of law, but we were required to immediately submit them for ratification by our respective parliaments. If the parliaments ratified them, the treaties would remain in effect. If not, they were no longer valid.

In 1922, the Russian Federation, Ukrainian, and Belarusan Soviet Socialist Republics, and the Transcaucasus Federation created the USSR. However, the Transcaucasus Federation had been abolished without creating a legal successor. Accordingly, all existing creators of the USSR, without exception, adopted the decision to denounce it. Here everything was legitimate.

But then there was good reason to assume that we were creating a Union of Slavic Republics. However, there was a chance to correct the situation. We knew that Kazakhstan's leader Nursultan Nazarbaev was flying to Moscow. Why not invite him to join us? We made up our minds and invited him! It was clear that Yeltsin should be the one to invite him.

We connected with Nazarbaev's plane and put him on speaker phone. Yeltsin informed him that we had gathered and invited him to join us. Yeltsin told him that the meeting would become much weightier if he were involved. Not surprisingly, Nursultan Abishevich politely thanked us for the invitation, immediately accepted it, and promised to fly in after refueling in Moscow. Our Belarusian service took care to find a Kazakhstani flag, affixed it to "my" Zil-117 limo, and prepared to meet the high-ranking guest at the airbase outside of Pruzhan.

At that point I did not think that Nazarbaev would have a different idea about what we had decided. But he subsequently said that he would not sign the Belavezha Accords no matter what. Imagine what had come crashing down on our heads! As I understood later, happily we did not manage to reestablish communications with his plane. However, by other communication links we were informed that Nazarbaev's plane could not leave Moscow for technical reasons. Nazarbaev's every move was an illustration of the conventional wisdom that the "East is subtle." Both before and after Viskuli. It was difficult to understand when he was telling the truth. When he announced that he would never sign the Belavezha Accords or when in Alma-Ata he signed the agreement with great enthusiasm and added that we should consider him and Kazakhstan not only as joiners to the agreement, but as creators. Is it really true that a sign of eastern subtlety is to relate differently to one and the same concept in Belarus, Russia, and Kazakhstan?

Later, after 2000, Gorbachev explained in a television show why Nazarbaev did not fly to join us in the forest. USSR President Gorbachev had promised him the position of chairman of the Supreme Soviet in the renewed USSR.

Late Evening on December 7 in the Bathhouse

Prime Minister Vyacheslav Frantsevich Kebich, who carried the burden of addressing all the logistical details of the meeting, acted in a fully Soviet manner. He did not provide a typewriter or a speed typist since such things were usually not required at a Soviet party meeting. But he did ensure that we would have time in the bath house since summit meetings without the sauna were impossible. And it was not a simple sauna. Lovers of the sauna and steam expected Kebich's personal surprise – a team of masseuses led by an expert who practically had a PhD in massage. According to the

organizer, these impressive folks were able to remove all forms of stress, which is an important factor at a summit. Thus, he replaced the existing massage practice in the lodge since the day of his founding, with one that did not include alcohol, though he did not go to the idiotic extent of the Gorbachev/Ligachev effort to limit wine and viticulture.

December 8

The morning of December 8 was clear. Only Kravchuk and Fokin accepted the invitation issued to everyone to go hunting. Fortune smiled on the Ukrainian prime minister, but the president of our southern blue-eyed neighbors shot ... and missed. But that did not spoil his mood, more like the opposite, since he acted energetically and single-mindedly all day.

I never hunted. During my student days, once when I was sitting in a boat with an acquaintance who was a hard-core hunter, I picked up his gun, shot, and hit a duck soaring overhead. To this day, I feel sorry about this small innocent bird. However, thanks to his demise, I have some hunting experience.

I asked the gamekeepers who prepared the hunt, "How did it happen that one of the best hunters in Ukraine didn't hit anything?" "Well, we tied hogs to a long rope for them, but the first shot cut the rope and the second hit one of the hogs."

I still don't know whether this was just a gamekeepers' joke or the truth.

Most of the high-level guests attended the breakfast from beginning to end. The aides and experts came either in shifts or late. Kravchuk and Fokin were extremely late. One way or another, everyone had a good breakfast and enjoyed a long conversation.

Then it was time to examine the draft. Six people – the top and second-ranking officials of the participant countries – read the text attentively from the title to the last lines. They turned the 18 articles proposed by the drafters into 14. Some passages were combined, others were moved from one article to another. Each article was reworked until no one had any further comments or doubts. The experts/drafters provided excellent help, listening to the requests and advice about what was not clear, what needed to be added, what should be deleted or strengthened, where to place the accents. Without a murmur, they hurried to rewrite and correct the text.

Watching all this, as if from the side, I was reminded of a joke about Gorbachev's contrariness. In the story, Gorbachev out of the blue decided to sit behind the wheel of his limousine and drive it into the Kremlin. When one of the bosses asked a policeman standing watch, "Who's coming?" the policeman answered, "I don't know who, but Gorbachev himself is his driver!"

It was the same with us. Yegor Gaidar led the charge. He was the best at formulating a phrase which removed all doubt. Sergei Shakhrai was almost as good. The others also worked well with the maximum impact.

As a result, by 2-3 pm we unanimously agreed on the text of the agreement, article-by-article and in general, and it only remained to sign it officially.

Who Should Call Whom and When?

Mikhail Sergeevich Gorbachev never tires of repeating that as USSR President he was phoned after U.S. President George Bush.

That is not true.

I phoned him first, as the three of us – Yeltsin, Kravchuk, and I – had agreed. I called much earlier than Yeltsin called Bush on the “troika,” the phone that we had handy. But, at first, he was not the one who answered, someone else picked up. They started asking: Who is calling? From where? I said who I was. Then they answered: I will give the phone to the president. Gorbachev sought to show how important he was by pausing. Then he took the phone. I began to explain in detail the essence of the agreement that we had prepared for signatures and was surprised that he addressed me with the formal “you” in Russian. Until then, we had used the informal version of you.

Seeing that I was talking on the phone and, naturally, not listening to my conversation, Yeltsin began to call Bush. But I had only been speaking with assistants. Yeltsin got through immediately and Andrei Kozyrev translated his conversation. He translated loudly, pressing to his ear a headset that was parallel to Yeltsin’s phone. Bush figured out what was going on immediately. Mikhail Sergeevich, as was his habit, began to instruct me with the tone of a mentor, and said, stretching out his words, something like the following:

“Did you think about how international society will react to your actions?”

“Mikhail Sergeevich, everything is fine. Boris Nikolaevich is talking to Bush about the signing and he is reacting normally,” I said.

After that, there was silence until the line went dead.

Around 4 pm we signed the agreement in a festive atmosphere in front of journalists and television cameras.

I consider signing the Belavezha Accords the second most important event for Belarus and my life. I attach here the full text because dozens of times people have reproached me for signing this text without having read the document or knowing what is in it. But the criticism is for nothing. Serious analysts have declared the document “a masterpiece of legitimate diplomacy at the end of the second millennium.”

Accord on the Creation of the Commonwealth of Independent States

We, the Republic of Belarus, the Russian Federation (RSFSR), and Ukraine, as founding states of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, having signed the 1922 Union Treaty, hereafter called the Supreme Contracting Parties, state that the Union of SSR as a subject of international law and geopolitical reality ends its existence.

Drawing on the historic communities of our peoples and the ties established among them, taking into account the bilateral treaties concluded by the Supreme Contracting Parties,

Striving to build democratic, rule-of-law states,

Intending to develop relations on the basis of mutual recognition and respect for state sovereignty, the inherent right to self-determination, the principles of equality and non-intervention into internal affairs, rejecting the use of force, economic or other methods of pressure, resolving disputes through negotiations and other generally recognized principles and norms of international law,

Considering that the further development and strengthening relations of friendship, good-neighborliness, and mutually advantageous cooperation between our states serves the deep-rooted national interests of their peoples as well as the cause of peace and security,

Confirming our adherence to the goals and principles of the United Nations Charter, the Helsinki Final Act and other documents of the Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe,

Committing ourselves to observe the universally-recognized international norms of the rights of man and peoples,

We agree to the following:

Article 1

The Supreme Contracting Parties form the Commonwealth of Independent States.

Article 2

The Supreme Contracting Parties guarantee their citizens, regardless of their nationality or other differences, equal rights and freedoms. Each of the Supreme Contracting Parties guarantees the citizens of the other parties, and state-less people living on their territories, regardless of their nationality or other differences, civil, political, social, economic, and cultural rights and freedoms in coordination with generally recognized international norms of human rights.

Article 3

The Supreme Contracting Parties, desiring to enable the expression, preservation, and development of ethnic, cultural, language, and religious identity of the national minorities living on their territories, and the resulting unique ethnocultural regions, take them into their protection.

Article 4

The Supreme Contracting Parties will develop the equality and mutually advantageous cooperation of their peoples and states in the spheres of politics, economics, culture, education, healthcare, environmental protection, science, trade, and in the humanitarian and other fields, facilitate a wide information exchange, and will observe mutual obligations in good faith.

The parties consider it necessary to conclude an agreement about cooperation in these fields.

Article 5

The Supreme Contracting Parties recognize and respect each others' territorial integrity and the inviolability of the existing borders within the Commonwealth.

They guarantee the openness of borders, the freedom of movement for citizens, and the transmission of information within the Commonwealth.

Article 6

The state-members of the Commonwealth will cooperate in securing international peace and security and implementing effective measures for reducing armament and military expenditures, as well as general and complete disarmament under strict international monitoring.

The parties will respect the desire of each other to achieve the status of non-nuclear zones and neutral states.

The state-members of the Commonwealth will preserve and support under a unified command a common military-strategic space, including a single monitor over nuclear weapons, whose method of operation will be determined by a special treaty.

They also will jointly guarantee the necessary conditions for storage, functioning, and material and social provision required by the strategic armed forces. The parties will prepare a mutually acceptable policy for questions of social security and providing pensions for the military-service members and their families.

Article 7

The Supreme Contracting Parties recognize that among the activities in their sphere of joint activity, implemented on an equal basis through jointly coordinated institutions within the Commonwealth, are:

- Coordinating foreign policy activity
- Cooperating in the formation and development of a common economic space, common European and Eurasian markets, and in the area of customs policy
- Cooperating in the development of transportation and communications systems
- Cooperating in the field of preserving the environment, participating in the creation of a comprehensive international system of ecological security
- Issues of migration policy, and
- Battling organized crime.

Article 8

The parties recognize the planetary character of the Chernobyl disaster and are obliged to unite and coordinate their strength in minimizing and overcoming its consequences.

They agree to conclude a special treaty taking into account the weight of the consequences of the catastrophe.

Article 9

Disagreements over interpreting and implementing the norms in this Accord should be resolved through negotiations between the parties, and if necessary at the level of the heads of government and state.

Article 10

Each of the Supreme Contracting Parties retains the right to annul this Accord or specific articles in it, providing one year's notice to the other parties to the Accord.

The provisions of the Accord can be amended or changed by mutual agreement of the Supreme Contracting Parties.

Article 11

From the moment of its signing, this Accord does not allow the application of norms from third-party states, including the former Union of SSR, on the territory of the signatory states.

Article 12

The Supreme Contracting Parties guarantee the implementation of international obligations arising for them from treaties and agreements of the former Union of SSR.

Article 13

The current Accord does not affect the obligations of the Supreme Contracting Parties in relation to third-party states.

The current agreement is open for joining to all states of the former Union of SSR, and also for other governments sharing the goals and principles of this Accord.

Article 14

The official location for the coordinating bodies of the Commonwealth is the city of Minsk.

The activities of the former Union of SSR agencies on the territory of the Commonwealth member-states now ceases.

Completed in the city of Minsk on December 8, 1991, in three copies, each in Belarusian, Russian, and Ukrainian, in which each text has equal force.

For the Republic
of Belarus

S. Shushkevich
V. Kebich

For the RSFSR

B. Yeltsin
G. Burbulis

For Ukraine

L. Kravchuk
V. Fokin

Useless Doubts, Ratification

I decided to drive back to Minsk in my car.

“My” official ZIL-117 was unusually voracious and consumed 25 liters of gasoline to transit 100 kilometers. I preferred not to ride in it because I felt fine in my official Volga and remembered that my personal Zhiguli needed only 10-11 liters to go 100 km in the worst case. However, I needed the ZIL to meet the high-level guests at Viskuli for the reception. And now, when it was necessary to go back, I decided for the first time to see how pleasant it was to ride in a limousine created especially for members of the Politburo of the CPSU and called by the common people a “*chlenovoz*.” My bodyguard sat next to the driver and 50 yards ahead was a police Zhiguli with a flashing light. We had brought them into the forest to accompany the guests.

I pressed the button to raise the glass separating the salon from the driver and bodyguard and turned on the radio. The news was filled with

repeated announcements about the collapse of the USSR. On the various frequencies and in numerous languages, they discussed the last names of Kravchuk, Yeltsin, and mine with specific mispronunciations in each of the languages. Unwittingly, I thought “How important I have become!” but the pride quickly passed when I remembered that I was riding back to my professor’s two-room apartment on what was then the edge of town. I mentally sympathized with the policemen, who, through 12-hour shifts, constantly watched the stairway leading up to my apartment. Again I felt important because when I asked why this was necessary, I received an answer from the head of the Supreme Soviet secretariat that it was necessary to guard the residence of the head of state. However, it was not required, and strictly speaking, not possible, to provide even the slightest comfort for these guards defending me and my wife took out to the staircase a kitchen stool.

Sitting in the luxurious salon of the ZIL, I began to worry: Would the members of parliament support the ratification of the Accord. The Communists made up 82 percent of the Supreme Soviet, and although many were inactive, it was possible that they could rise up.

The next day, against the background of Gorbachev’s efforts to conjure a meeting of the USSR Congress of People’s Deputies to discuss the question of the formation of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), I passed the text of the Accord to the Supreme Soviet commission to prepare it for ratification and added the question of ratification to the agenda of the Supreme Soviet of the Republic of Belarus. All of the media were filled with announcements about the events in Viskuli, but the press service of the Supreme Soviet carried Gorbachev’s announcement: “The fate of a multi-national state cannot be determined by the will of the leaders of three republics.” The room designated for smokers was alive with deputies discussing the matter. Only three months earlier, Gorbachev had closed the Congress so that it could not prevent him from ruling, and now he was grabbing for it like a life preserver.

But the train had already left the station! At the December 10 session of the Supreme Soviet there were only celebratory speeches in support of the Accord and for its ratification. The most reserved speeches came from deputies in the Belarus Popular Front (BNF) – BNF leader Zenon Poznyak was completely reserved and as usual edifying – but also in support of ratification. One speech condemned the signing. This was the speech of Valery Gurevich Tikhni, my old acquaintance, a respected professor at the university who had climbed up the steps of the Party hierarchy to the position of second secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Belarus. In the end, there was only one vote against ratification, while all the rest supported it.

On the same day – December 10 – the Ukrainian Rada ratified the

Belavezha Accords and on December 12 the RSFSR Supreme Soviet voted to ratify as well (188 for, 6 against, and 7 abstaining).

That means that we acted correctly!

The West no longer feared that the Accord, signed in the Belavezha Forest, would detonate uprisings or serious armed conflicts on the territory of the former USSR. The official declaration of the end of the Soviet Union, in their opinion, should have immediately united the pro-Soviet forces – the Party nomenklatura, special services, and generals into creating a new coup committee, like the one that appeared in Moscow in August 1991. One of the clearest confirmations of this view sounded during the visit of Russian Federation State Secretary Gennady Burbulis to France in the capacity of a special envoy of the president of Russia on December 12, 1991. French President Mitterrand told him with undisguised concern that he feared great shocks occurring in Soviet territory. But four days had passed and all was quiet.

Afterword

More than twenty years later, we rarely remember the great significance for the Republic of Belarus that the Accord on the Creation of the Commonwealth of Independent States has. Today's staunchly anti-Belarus authorities have gone to considerable effort to reduce its significance. If we want to speak frankly, in the Belavezha Accords, signed by the Russian president and ratified by the Russian parliament, Russia for the first time since 1794 officially recognized the independence of its neighboring colony Belarus.

Pro-imperial Russian politicians cannot accept Russia's recognition of independence for Belarus and Ukraine. Lacking the ability to lead and develop the state in the interests of its citizens and suffering from the age-old complex of feeling that their state is somehow incomplete, first felt by their predecessors who called on the Varangians to rule, on the highest level of the state, they cast incantations, but lack the ability to unite and work in the interests of Russians. Thus on March 15, 1996, the State Duma declared that the decree of the RSFSR Supreme Soviet denouncing the treaty forming the USSR no longer was valid, de facto cancelling the ratification of the Belavezha Accords. However, Russian legislation did not recognize this decision of the Duma and it remained nothing more than hot air – a new incantation, but not a law.

From time to time, political clowns like Vladimir Zhirinovskiy remember about such decisions and cast new incantations. Thus in the middle of December 2011, deputies from his Liberal Democratic Party of Russia introduced to the Duma a bill "On evaluating the consequences of the collapse of the USSR" and proposed "bringing to criminal justice

those guilty of destroying the Union.” Naturally, making such gestures, in order to win the attention of a disadvantaged electorate, is not difficult. It is more complicated for Duma deputies to work, for example, on laws which help reduce the number of Russian citizens living in poverty. It is even more complicated to create legislation allowing Russia to receive petrodollar investments in the well-being of Russian citizens, and not for expanding the number of luxuries given to the oligarchs who are parasites on the body of the country.

In Belarus, as well, such incantations are much more common than work on legislation aimed at state-building. Even some high-level representatives of the Belarus Popular Front have declared that independence absolutely unexpectedly was presented to us on a silver platter. According to their interpretation, you see, it was received without blood, without trials, and therefore it was not somebody’s achievement and in general no kind of independence. Even Zenon Poznyak, though delicately, found a way to cast a shadow on the Belavezha Accords. He claimed that it resembled a new Union Treaty.

And many home-grown political scientists, mostly yesterday’s lecturers on the history of the CPSU, Marxist-Leninist philosophy, scientific communism, and other such disciplines, become overwrought and repeat that independence fell on the head of Belarus unexpectedly, like snow.

Think, gentlemen! Just because you or your predecessors did not have a hand in it does not mean that it happened by itself. The most worthy sons of Belarus gave their heads for independence.

It means little to receive independence *de jure*, it is necessary to make it a fact. The state must learn to build independence patiently and persistently. Even here, the steps of this construction do not proceed without blood or the disappearance of people. It is no simple matter to remove the slave-like subordination mentality that has been beaten into the consciousness of millions of people. This subordination is deeply anti-Belarusian even though it is dressed in the clothes of a kind older brother. It is necessary to teach people how to build things on their own and not give advice to others on how to do it. Above all, it is necessary to collect the remainders of the Belarusian intelligentsia and their heirs, who lived under conditions of terrible anti-Belarusian repression. It is necessary to ask their advice: What should be done so that Belarus became Belarusian? As people commonly say now, we need to combine forces to develop a road map.

All states in Europe are national and built on the national idea. The duty of the Belarusian national intelligentsia is to create a contemporary Belarusian national idea that is attractive for all the citizens of Belarus.

The final goal is a Belarusian Belarus.

I recognize that even I have to some degree entered the path of

casting spells. But in my situation and in the situation of those who as the result of a criminal state coup were removed from the process of state building, to say nothing of what was done to the voter-endowed deputy rights, given in free elections, it is hardly possible to do something different than to propose a program, scheme, and set of principles for the progressive reform of the Belarusian state.

On December 20, 2011, in Moscow the anniversary summit of the CIS took place, marking December 21, the date when an additional eight republics of the USSR joined the Accord on the creation of the CIS, signed in Viskuli, at a meeting in Alma-Ata. Then, as now, Nazarbaev's egoism did not allow him to consider himself as joining anything and he insisted that the treaty not be called one of joining the CIS, but of creating the CIS, a proposal that the signatories of the Belavezha Accords did not oppose. Throughout the entire world, December 8, 1991, is considered the date of the treaty signing that brought an end to the USSR *de jure* and that the three signatories were Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine. Nazarbaev insists on naming a different date and another group of signers. As they say, let him have it his way, since he has a legal basis for this because a document creating the CIS was announced and signed by him in Alma-Ata.

The peaceful dissolution of the USSR and the consequent peaceful completion of the Cold War is viewed today by eminent political scientists as a "masterpiece of legitimate diplomacy during the Twentieth Century." Indeed, the decolonization of the former Soviet republics was peaceful in comparison with the collapse of the Russian, Ottoman, Portuguese and other empires. In recent years, diplomats have defined inter-state borders in the post-Soviet space and new political systems have appeared. Their constitutions declare the principles of rule of law, democracy, and human rights. In practice, these systems are far from the standards of democracy and human rights that are accepted in the contemporary civilized world.

In the beginning it seemed that there would be a new configuration in which Russia would not have unconstrained dominance over the newly formed states. Such an arrangement would have served the spirit and letter of the Belavezha Accords. But gradually, especially after the end of President Boris Yeltsin's term, Russia returned to the old management and command positions, making itself attractive by supporting the authoritarian rulers. At the December 2011 summit in Moscow, Islam Karimov and Alzambek Atambaev openly stated, with no objections from the others, that Russia, as before, was the center of the post-Soviet space and that it was logical for all the rest to remain in its zone of patronage. Nobody mentioned the fact that this patronage tied the satellite states to the sub-optimal order and principles that had taken root in Russia long ago.

Russia feels that its own wealth is insufficient. It wants to control the entire potential of the CIS, which is enormous: 16.4 percent of the

territory and 4.4 percent of the population of the planet; 20 percent of world oil reserves; 40 percent of natural gas reserves; 25 percent of coal; 10 percent of electricity production; 25 percent of world forestry supplies; nearly 11 percent of global renewable water resources, and 13 percent of arable lands. Recent years have pushed Russia to seek out forms of integration which would confirm its leadership while simultaneously encouraging the CIS countries to join the proposed union. It achieves this goal with guarantees that the authoritarian, pro-Russian leaders will be able to remain in power. Russia finds it easier to deal with these authoritarian leaders than with democratic regimes. This is one of the reasons for the transformation of the Commonwealth of Independent States into the commonwealth of states with authoritarian governments (almost becoming the Commonwealth of Dictators).

The numerous treaties between Russia and Belarus, including the treaty on the union state, the agreement on the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), the Eurasian Economic Union, and the Customs Union are further confirmations. Then Russian President Dmitry Medvedev announced at the December summit, “there is no alternative to the CIS in the form of a united platform for bringing together the efforts of interested states in all possible spheres of cooperation, and I want to assure you, respected colleagues, that for Russia this position will be immutable.”

Preserving Russia’s role as a system-forming element in the CIS could proceed along the path to modernization of the political systems of both Russia and the CIS or state management along the lines of the European Union. But, given the imperial designs of Russia’s rulers, such a development is unlikely. The alternative is the economic dictate of Russia, preserving its economic strength thanks to the economic power of its petrodollars. Now Russia has only announced its slogan – “Creating the Eurasian Economic Union is the main goal of Russian foreign policy.” Officially, neither the union’s territorial nor political boundaries have been defined, but it is clear that the Russian authorities seek to control the CIS as a whole, and further, as a minimum, everything that once was in the sphere of Russian influence.

The countries in the CSTO – Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Russia, Tajikistan – are states with authoritarian governments and their characteristic insurmountable flaws – corruption, telephone law, poor implementation of laws, etc. In Belarus, with Russian backing, there is a dictatorial regime; Kazakhstan has conceived a leader-for-life of the nation who rules like the old members of the Politburo. Kyrgyzstan is trying to move toward democracy, but judging by Alzambek Atambaev’s speech at the December 2011 summit, the first priority is allegiance to Russia, and this is obviously a hindrance to democratization. Authoritarianism is also obvious in non-CSTO members like Azerbaijan and Tajikistan. In the near future, we can

keep the hope that the former USSR republics like Moldova, Ukraine and former CIS member Georgia, will not be knocked from the path of Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia toward building democratic states.

Politically active youth, through their personal convictions, have set an example for more fruitful and wider associations than the CIS. The Commonwealth has considerable potential for social support. Already on June 21, 1994, in Minsk, there was a congress of the Party of CIS Supporters, created by an initiative group of students and graduates of the philosophy section of the History Department of Belarusan University, under the coordination of Sergei Shilov. The goal was to support the geopolitical development of the Commonwealth on the basis of the principles of European liberal federalism, drawing on the experience of the British Commonwealth of Nations and the European Union and to establish a CIS Consultative Center in Minsk with the support of non-governmental organizations. The Belarus Ministry of Justice did not register the party and the Supreme Court rejected the founder's appeal, pleasing Lukashenka. In March 1995 a representative of the organizing committee of the party, S. N. Nosov, participated in the Forum of Non-governmental Social Organizations "For Social Development" in Copenhagen. Party activists worked toward developing the CIS Consultative Center. At that time the center worked in conjunction with the British Open University in Belarus. However, after the Belarusan authorities closed this non-governmental educational center in 1996, Shilov emigrated to Russia, where he became an assistant to former State Secretary Burbulis.