

# **Does the Fate of the Soviet Union Await the Commonwealth of Independent States?**

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History's nasty habit of repeating past tragedies in the form of a modernized farce threatens to confirm itself in the destiny of the Commonwealth of Independence States (CIS).

This knowingly shaky and hurriedly tailored formation appeared on the ruins of the old Soviet Union in December of 1991 due to the efforts of three leaders of former Soviet republics--the presidents of Russia and Ukraine, and the chairman of the Supreme Soviet of Belarus. Boris Yeltsin, Leonid Kravchuk and Stanislav Shushkevich were eager to rid themselves, as soon as possible, of the center's guardianship which was embodied in Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev and in Moscow's power structures. Their feeling was so burning and unanimous, that these three extremely different and contradictory politicians decided to undertake joint action; and at first, they even demonstrated a great deal of mutual understanding and cooperation.

Alas, the events of recent months have shown that their dislike for Gorbachev and the Soviet Union had been the strongest, if not the only, unifying factor in the behavior of these key CIS figures. Their positions on nearly all problems of the Commonwealth are drifting farther and farther apart, exposing the yawning abyss among these former Soviet republics. The fact of the matter is that their opposition to Gorbachev was the catalyst which made them become the founding fathers of the CIS. Their goal was opposition to the center. As soon as they (the three members of the former Politburo of the CPSU Central Committee) got rid of their former General Secretary's guardianship (who had put all three on the front stage of the Union's political life), their inveterate mistrust, new ambitions and grievances began to distance them farther away from each other.

## **Ambition as the Driving Force of Disintegration**

Even a fleeting glance at the map of the former Soviet Union is

sufficient to make two basic facts certain: 1) the three republics which caused the collapse of the Union and laid the foundation for the creation of the CIS are decisively different according to their "weight" and influence within this new formation; 2) they are the closest of neighbors, which have their economic infrastructures intertwined to such an extent that they are, in fact, doomed to cooperation and mutual understanding.

This opposing dualism of the current position of these three independent states is a destabilizing factor in their interrelationships. On the one hand, the influence of Moscow, Kiev and Minsk has to be equal according to the declared principles of existence of the CIS as a voluntary union of states which enjoy equal rights. On the other hand, the unequal potential of these republics, the differences of their aspirations, and the objective incompatibility of their national interests all keep them from acting together. Finally, unilateral actions taken by any of them have immediate influence on their neighbors.

In addition, true and imaginary mutual grievances and old scores do not allow these three leaders to work together towards the achievement of common ground on a growing number of concrete problems. But this is not all. As the actions of Ukrainian President Kravchuk, the most radically-minded of the new "triad," have illustrated, these leaders' personal ambitions and their power struggle to lead the CIS might seriously undermine all attempts to establish effective interaction within the Commonwealth. As a result, the escape from excessive guardianship of the center has not brought the republics together, but pushed them apart. In the course of just a few months, many of the connections between them have been broken. These connections had been formed over centuries--not just during the seven decades of the Soviet Union's existence.

And thus, Ukraine and Russia are dividing their belongings, foreign holdings included, like spouses separating after an unhappy marriage. For example, they are unable to agree on the mutual supply of oil and treasury notes, grain, fertilizers, etc. The most outstanding of these absurdities is the attempt by Kiev and Moscow to divide the Black Sea Fleet. Neither of them, in fact, need this fleet unless they intend to compete with the United States over the control of the Mediterranean. It is no secret that the Black Sea Fleet is a disproportionately large and powerful force for an inland sea. It was created as a counterweight to the U.S. 6th Fleet and the naval forces of the NATO countries in the Mediterranean. It is hardly suitable for any other kind of military task.

Moreover, its maintenance threatens to become an inordinately large burden for the ruined economies of both republics.

Therefore, both Kravchuk and Yeltsin have ambitions to take the nuclear fleet "under one's own command"; they are trying to prove that each one has the right to possess this lethal remnant of the Cold War. The commander of the fleet, who is Russian, refuses to take an oath of allegiance to Ukraine. The Kiev-appointed commanders, along with deputies of the Ukrainian Parliament, for a time, were not even admitted onto the naval base. On the military ships, where officers and sailors of many nationalities serve, the national demarcation is under way. Some people are ready to serve Ukraine and others seek to remain loyal to Russia. Even some of the most modern vessels, despite protests by Kiev, are being ferried to the Russian bases in the North and the Far East, leaving hundreds and thousands of their crews' relatives and friends in Ukraine. It has even come close to open confrontations. Jingoists from both sides call for the use of force. Then, the two presidents, at the last minute, decided to postpone a solution to the problem until better times. And then finally, on June 23, 1992, Yeltsin and Kravchuk met in Dagomys and decided to keep the Black Sea Fleet under unified command. This would give each of their countries time "to build its own armed forces," Yeltsin stated.

In the past, the old rivalry among the republic leaders had been skillfully kept behind the closed doors of the Politburo, but now it has broken free. It is a particularly dangerous instrument which has a distracting impact on the public mood in their own republics. For instance, Yeltsin's rating in Russia is dropping because of the worsening economic conditions of millions of citizens who have been living below the poverty line. Then, as if with a wave of a conductor's baton, the Russian mass media begins sympathizing with the government. It supports the maintenance of the Black Sea Fleet criticizing the Ukrainian authorities and reminding them of the illegality of the Crimean transfer to them in 1954. The same situation exists within the mass media in Kiev: the oil supply negotiations end up in a stalemate, the purchasing power of "coupons" (the local currency introduced by Kravchuk) drops. Yet immediately, one can hear the "inexorable" claims for Moscow to give up the Fleet, and to stop "encouraging the Crimean separatists."

The clash of unsatisfied ambitions of the leaders currently in power in Moscow and Kiev is extremely reminiscent of the struggle by members of the old party and economic *nomenklatura*. This struggle

undermined the unity of the USSR long before its disintegration. The same slogans (only with a "democratic" slant), the same methods, the same appeals to nationalistic prejudice manifest themselves in the current struggle.

### **From Belovezhskaya Pushcha to Tashkent**

In November of 1991 Yeltsin, Kravchuk and Shushkevich gathered secretly in the picturesque reserve of Belovezhskaya Pushcha (the old Party elite's favorite spot for vacationing and hunting). There, like a lured wild boar who had lost his vigilance, the Soviet Union was shot down. They hardly conceived the fact that their hastily created Commonwealth might fall victim to acute disagreements between the two leading participants of the deal. Belarus, which always tried to avoid quarrels with either of its more powerful neighbors, could not or did not want to play the role of mediator between them. And so the Ukrainian-Russian disagreements, heated by the rivalry of the two leaders, began to consistently destroy the newly created Commonwealth.

In March 1992, a meeting of states and governments of the CIS was held. It was there, in Kiev, that this destructive work produced its first results. Practically all the questions put on the meeting agenda, from the formation of a unified military control to the financing of the common structures inherited from the USSR, were left unresolved. At the meeting, the conflict between Kravchuk and Yeltsin had gone so far that the Ukrainian president publicly accused Russian leaders of lying. Shortly before the meeting opened, Yeltsin's officials alleged that the Black Sea Fleet problem had been nearly resolved during a phone conversation between the two presidents. "We haven't spoken on the phone since February," coldly stated Kravchuk, who managed during that time to have a few phone conversations with President George Bush and Secretary of State James Baker. By the way, Yeltsin, throughout that period, also communicated with Bush and Baker more frequently than with his Commonwealth partner from Kiev. After the conclusion of the CIS summit in Kiev, the Ukrainian president did not hide his skeptical attitude towards the Commonwealth's prospects. He stated, "If the situation does not change, the Commonwealth is doomed."

The situation had changed by the time of the May meeting in Tashkent; it was a change for the worse. These former Soviet republics failed to find ways to resolve most of the common problems facing

them. The demarcation between the two leading CIS states, Russia and Ukraine, had gone even farther and the fate of the Black Sea Fleet had not been determined at that time. Kravchuk, who went to Washington on the eve of the meeting, agreed to continue the transfer of strategic nuclear weapons to Russian territory, but only due to pressure from the Americans. Russia began to create its own army (the CIS architects earlier supposed that this would not happen), and Yeltsin appointed himself its commander-in-chief. On top of all this, Kravchuk did not show up at the meeting in Tashkent at all. His example was followed by the leaders of three other CIS states--Moldova, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. Only six of the eleven Commonwealth countries joined the defense union, which replaced the past security guarantees provided by the USSR. Moreover, one of these republics, Armenia, at the conclusion of the Tashkent agreement was basically at war with Azerbaijan, over the Nagorno-Karabakh region. It is notable that besides Russia itself and Christian Orthodox Armenia, the new defense union was joined by the predominantly Muslim countries--Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Considering the growing influence of Islamic fundamentalism and these countries' strengthening ties with the Islamic world, this new military formation takes on a very peculiar character. As in Kiev, the Tashkent meeting participants failed to create any effective mechanism for processing and solving Commonwealth problems. The results in other spheres turned out to be very limited as well. Instead of moving closer together after the Tashkent meeting, the CIS members started to float farther apart. It was not surprising that Yeltsin's government, in June 1992, announced that it would establish real inter-state borders complete with guards and customs with Ukraine and Azerbaijan. Between Russia and Georgia, there will only be a customs border set up.

### **Demarcation Continues**

In my view, the main threat to the future of the CIS comes not only from the personal disagreements and ambitions of its largest participants' leaders or from the modest results of the summits held so far, but also from the continuing breakdown of the former Soviet Union.

The centrifugal tendencies released by the Belovezhskaya Pushcha deal, like that of a genie out of a bottle, are far from settling down. An example is the declaration of independence by Tatarstan, which was earlier a part of Russia. Analogous steps are being taken by the

representative powers in Crimea, which was illegally transferred in 1954 as a "gift" to Ukraine by the CPSU Central Committee's First Secretary, Nikita Khrushchev (who wasn't even the chairman of the Supreme Soviet or of the USSR Council of Ministers at that time). Even earlier, independence from Russia was declared by Chechenia. There is also a real possibility of the secession by South Ossetia from Georgia and its unification with North Ossetia in Russia.

In the Dniester region (which is still a part of Moldova) ethnic Russians are unwilling to stay under the control of this republic's authorities, who are aiming at unification with Romania. Military actions have been going on there for a long time, and threaten to grow into another "local" civil war. By the end of June 1992, the self-declared independent Dniester region became extremely explosive; Moldovan troops were shelling Bendery, a Russian secessionist stronghold. Yeltsin threatened to use military force in order to defend the local, predominantly Russian population. In the Moldovan Parliament, it was concluded that their small republic (4.3 million population) was at an undeclared state of war with Russia. If the worst happens, Russia will find itself fighting another member of the CIS, only several months after its creation. Today, strong separatist tendencies are felt not only between former Soviet republics, but also in a number of autonomous lands and regions of Russia. They are pressing for greater independence from the "new center," to which Moscow and Russian leadership are often referred.

Unfortunately in most cases, the response of today's democratic central authorities in regard to the expressions of dissent in the provinces appears to be no better than that of the old Party administrative stereotypes. Yeltsin's government opposed the independence referendum in Tatarstan just like Gorbachev tried to prevent the same kind of referendum in Ukraine last year. Similarly, Leonid Kravchuk acted against the referendum in Crimea, threatening to "take measures" including the use of force. The "democrat" Zviad Gamsakhurdia in Georgia treated opposition to his regime in the same manner as those who had imprisoned him in the past. And the Moldovan president, Snegur, dispatches armed forces to suppress any demonstrations by the Dniester region population. Sometimes the similarity in the heavy-handed, self-assured, and (most importantly) inefficient, even counter-productive reaction of the old Union and new republican leaders to the expressions of autonomous regions' eagerness for independence is just striking! Thus, the process of demarcation and breakup of the former

Soviet Union is far from over. It might pose yet more surprises to the CIS leaders and the outside world. And these surprises, I am afraid, will not all be pleasant.

Various latent forces, both evident and hidden, drive this process. The most powerful of them is the rapid strengthening of nationalism, which sometimes borders on chauvinism and intolerance. Often these nationalistic movements are strongly influenced by religion. The obvious insensitivity towards attempts at separation and independence from the "new center" is also, undoubtedly, indicative of the breakup of the economic ties and the incapability of the authorities to carry out their responsibilities in provinces and regions.

As unbelievable as it is, while the central budgets of most republics are suffocating from shortage of funds, the local authorities, intentionally, are not in a hurry to transfer any of the state taxes collected from the population to the central budgets. These vicious defaulters attempt to justify their actions by claiming that Moscow and other capitals fail to carry out their duties of regulating the centralized supply and financing their regions.

It is hard to tell how long the CIS can exist under these conditions. Mikhail Gorbachev stated recently at a press conference in Washington that if the CIS initiators did not manage to achieve real cooperation among the former Soviet republics soon, the world would hear more bad news about the breakup of economic ties, collapse of the banking system, armed forces' disagreements, territorial arguments and violations of human and minority rights.

I have not agreed with Mikhail Sergeevich Gorbachev for a long time now. I must agree, however, with his assessment of the prospective developments in the CIS. If the organizers and main actors of the Commonwealth of Independent States fail to immediately come to agreement about the forms and methods of its functioning, they, at least, need to address the most urgent tasks. They include: restoring broken ties, developing contacts among the republics, ceasing petty arguments and the parading of national selfishness. If the organizers fail to do this, the CIS is threatened with the same fate that befell the Soviet Union in December 1991.

A fast and painful disintegration awaits the Commonwealth of Independent States.