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August 1991

The attempted coup and its consequences

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1. INTRODUCTION ¹

In recent years developments in what used to be the Soviet Union have presented themselves as a pileup of dramatic and at the same time chaotic and unpredictable events. There has been, however, a certain logic in this apparent chaos. Post-communist societies and structures follow their own lines of development, featuring certain characteristic contradictions and conflicts. The events of August 1991 boosted and brought to the surface a number of smouldering processes, which in the new situation after the attempted coup, soon brought about the collapse of the old structures and institutions of the Soviet state.

One should not, however, consider the developments in Russia and the former Soviet Union only in the light of collapse and disintegration. New political forces are emerging, although slowly, new state structures are being created, and the search is beginning for new ideological conceptions capable of filling the vacuum created by the disintegration of communism.

One of the cardinal questions seems to be: what kind of political structures will supersede the communist superpower? But before embarking on forecastings, let us glance at the most recent past. In the following paragraphs I will try to determine the general outlines of the evolution of "perestroika" and its place in the process leading to the disintegration of Soviet communism and the Soviet state. I will then discuss the attempted coup of August 1991 and the reasons for its defeat. Prospects for the future evolution of internal and intra-republican relations will be discussed in the last parts of the essay.

2. THE RISE AND FALL OF PERESTROIKA

The restructuring period was far from being a continuous and monotonous period of development for Soviet society. It is possible, therefore, to speak about stages or phases in the rise and fall of perestroika.

The *first phase* of perestroika is made up by the years 1985-1987, the time of moderate communist liberalization. It had been launched by Gorbachev after his accession to power as an attempt to revitalize the command economy without disturbing the power establishment. There was

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to be more candour and openness, and some odious limitations on civil rights were abolished. In the economic field, however, Gorbachev did not dare to begin even superficial reforms of the existing system along the lines which had already been tried in for instance Hungary, Poland and Yugoslavia. Soviet society was still not affected too much by the new policies and drowsed on. One could feel, however, the first signs of approaching awakening, particularly concerning the national question.² However, the reforms of this first stage failed to revitalize the Soviet economy, and the old structures were kept intact.

This forced Gorbachev to pass on to the *second stage* of perestroika, comprising the years 1987-1990, which could be characterized as communist reforming. But whatever the original intentions of the perestroika ideologists might have been, this stage ultimately led to the upsurge of democratic and national-liberationist aspirations in all parts of Soviet society. For the Union leader himself these were the years of the most radical reformist policy. The radicalization was facilitated in that by now Gorbachev had managed to neutralize his main rivals, particularly Egor Ligachev, and to consolidate his own power.³ By the beginning of 1988 Gorbachev obviously came to the conclusion that political reforms were necessary. It was at this very point that the transfer of power from the highest party structures to the State started. During the whole of 1988, for instance, the Politburo of the Central Committee of the CPSU did not convene for a single meeting. One key factor in Gorbachev's idea of reform was the revitalization of the Soviets (councils); what was called the return to the Leninist style of rally-based democracy. Until then, the Soviets had served the monopolistic power of the CPSU, without having real power or authority of their own. It proved difficult, however, to make the Soviets the seat of effective authority.

But the essence of this second stage did not lie in Gorbachev's reformist escapades. This was the time when the real awakening of the society, or

² I have in mind the events in Alma Ata, Kazakhstan, in December 1986. The local population protested against the replacement, decided in Moscow, of the corrupt Kazakh leader Kunaev with Kolbin, a Russian. Unfortunately, this omen was not properly appreciated.

³ There is some doubt whether Ligachev was really a serious danger to Gorbachev. Another interpretation could be that this conservative was needed by Gorbachev to act as a symbol of the "extreme right", distracting public dissatisfaction and playing scapegoat.

at least parts of it, started. There was an upsurge of so-called informal groupings and organizations that would later serve as a basis for the creation of non-communist political parties. Also for the first time in decades an opposition had emerged within the CPSU itself. This opposition would soon coalesce into the Democratic Platform. The formation of national-patriotic movements in individual republics gained momentum.

A peak was reached in 1989 in Soviet society's participation in political activity. There were relatively free elections to the new supreme body of political authority, the Congress of People's Deputies. These elections also demonstrated the feebleness of the position of the party *nomenklatura*. The first sessions of the Congress acted as a Union-wide training ground for democratic thinking and behaviour. The nucleus of a parliamentary opposition was formed by the Interrepublican Group of Deputies. On the grass-root level, the miners launched a powerful mass movement of their own, demonstrating that the working class had now entered the political scene.⁴

In 1990 the movements and tendencies which had been set in motion in the preceding years went on gaining momentum. In the spring the local and republican elections increased the influence of radical and moderate forces. Boris Eltsin was elected as Chairman of the RSFSR Supreme Soviet in May, and the three Baltic republics proceeded on their way towards independence. It became steadily clearer that developments in the Soviet Union had slipped away from the Centre's control and entered a new phase.

A struggle had started not only between the political movements, both established ones and those being formed, but between the Centre and individual republics as well. The *nomenklatura* forces were taken unawares by this billow of events. But already from the end of 1989 they gradually regained composure and started to consolidate. What was happening came no doubt as a shock to Gorbachev, who could hardly have been prepared for the chain reaction that followed his cautious reforms of the authoritarian system. From now on Gorbachev became involved in a new phase

⁴ Needless to say, international events also influenced the situation in the Soviet Union, particularly the wave of democratic revolutions in Eastern Europe which led to the collapse of the communist system there. In this paper I have chosen, however, to concentrate on internal factors, although the importance of external stimuli on this and other occasions is obvious.

of political activity in which he had to struggle to confine the effects of the reform he himself had launched.

Meanwhile perestroika entered the *third stage* of its development, the phase of open antagonism of political forces (September 1990 - August 1991). If 1989 and the first half of 1990 had been marked by the onslaught of democratic and national liberation movements, in the fall of 1990 the right wingers went on assault. The conservatives had created their own structures, like the "Soyuz" movement in the Union parliament and the Russian Communist Party. Gorbachev seemed to have given up even limited reformist activities, embarking instead on the consolidation of his personal power. Having succeeded in securing for himself the new title of Soviet president, he seemed to push the other "perestroika structures" into the background.

First, at the end of 1990 active preparation for an antireformist coup began. It became clear that the conservatives tried to attract the President to their side and succeeded. It might take some time before the reasons for Gorbachev's "turn to the right" at that moment can be realized. Did he become a hostage of the conservative forces, unable to look for support from the left wing, which was still feeble and often critical of his policies? Maybe he was a prisoner of his own political stereotypes and beliefs, unwilling to waive even a fraction of his power? These and other considerations may have played a role in Gorbachev's sliding to a conservative stance at the end of 1990.

The events in the Baltic republics in January 1991 should be seen as dress rehearsal of the reaction's scheme. It was a simple one: so-called "national salvation committees" had been cropping up, allegedly "initiated by the masses", although the guiding hand of the local party structures could easily be discerned behind them. The committees were to call on the Soviet Army to rescue and help "misguided" republics return to the bosom of a unitary state. The leaders of the Russian Communist Party had started bracing themselves for a similar option. But the scenario flopped; even the events in the Persian Gulf could not serve as a smoke screen for the party conspirators. The second attempt at a coup was made at the end of March the same year, when tanks were summoned to the capital to bring the riotous Russian parliament to heel. And again it flopped. The reason for the conservatives' failure to realize their plans lies in the vacillations of Gorbachev himself. Although he wanted to restore his power and hold back the disintegration of the Union, this could not be done at the price of bloodshed, whereby he would sacrifice his international image as Nobel

prize winner. He also probably understood that if the democratic movement was completely destroyed he would have to face the right wingers. They would hardly forgive a policy of even moderate perestroika.

Then, in the spring of 1991, Gorbachev "turned to the left" and began a dialogue with Boris Eltsin and the leaders of eight of the other republics. How should one evaluate the significance of the process which led to the Novo Ogarevo talks? All the participants in the dialogue obviously pursued their own aims. But it was still important that for the first time the parties seemed to be giving up direct confrontation for direct discussions at the negotiating table. The core of the situation seemed to be that the Centre had lost much of its power and authority, while the new republican structures were still weak and incomplete. The resulting draft Union Treaty did not present solutions to the important dilemmas.

Still, the model of a new federation was met with fierce opposition from the right. These forces were not willing to contemplate even a limited expansion of the role played by the republics. The Union bureaucracy also felt threatened by the prospects of a looser federation. Nor was the proposed structure satisfactory from Eltsin's point of view. It would infringe upon the sovereign rights of Russia and subject it to the power of both the centre and the other republics, the majority of which had a rather conservative leadership at the time. The draft agreement, therefore, although being an attempt at a compromise, hardly suited anybody.

An attempt to curtail the Novo Ogarevo process was made on June 17, when Prime Minister V. Pavlov demanded from the Supreme Soviet that he should be granted additional powers and declared that extraordinary measures should be applied in the country. He was supported by a triad of the mightiest ministers: Kriuchkov - the chairman of the KGB; Yazov - minister of defence; and Pugo - the minister for internal affairs. Although the assault failed - whatever its nature and Gorbachev's role in it - it was a warning of things to come.

Since May, the signs of the coming showdown had been increasing in number. For instance, O. Baklanov, who later took part in the August conspiracy, stated in the reactionary paper *Den'* in May that "the Army is ready to take up the government of the society". Then *Sovetskaia Rossiia* published the "Oration to the nation", which in fact was nothing short of a counterreformist manifesto.⁵ Other events pointed in the same

⁵ *Sovetskaia Rossiia*, July 23, 1991.

direction, for instance the attacks on the Lithuanian border posts. All this culminated in the events of August. These events marked the end of Soviet restructuring, for there was nothing left to restructure. Old structures had crumbled away and new ones had yet to be created. But no less important, the failed coup showed the utter impossibility of a forced return to pre-perestroika Soviet society, to the Soviet empire and the system of Party totalitarianism.

3. THE TURN IN AUGUST: ESSENCE AND AFTERMATH

The *fourth and final stage* of perestroika, the events of August 1991, was hardly an attempted coup d'état in the classical sense of the word. The initiators came from the top level of the hierarchy of power. They belonged to Gorbachev's close environment, and six out of the eight members of the State Committee for the State of Emergency had been nominated to their posts by the President himself. Gorbachev's own place in the plot is a matter for discussion. It is hard to disagree with Eduard Shevardnadze who noted that although Gorbachev might not have been directly involved in the conspiracy, he had done nothing to forestall it. The aim of the conspirators was to launch a process of rightist counter-reformation. They wanted to stop the disintegration of the Union, to restore the unitary state, to neutralize national liberation movements - in short, to return to pre-perestroika times.

The more important question is why the attempted counterreformation failed. It failed despite the fact that it took society unawares as the first signs of the imminent coup were ignored by most people. It failed despite the split in the democratic forces and their feebleness. Several factors are said to have played a role in the failure of the coup: the indecision and inconsistency of the conspirators, the lack of real leadership, the absence of a basic consensus about the actions to be carried out, vacillation among the military and inside the KGB, a fast reaction from Eltsin's supporters who were able to organize their defiance of the putsch, the denouncement of the coup by the international community, lack of active support for the coup from a considerable number of republics, and resistance from the public in some of the large cities. A closer examination of some of these factors makes it clear, however, that the picture was a rather complex one.

Consider, for example, the reactions from the republican leaders on August 19, the first day of the coup. Most of them were patently slow in determining their stands, obviously waiting for the situation to clarify. The

first reaction of the leaders of the two next-largest republics after Russia, Kravchuk in the Ukraine and Nazarbaev in Kazakhstan, was to issue appeals for law and order to be kept in their republics, suggesting that they did not care about events in Moscow. The Baltic leaders did not hesitate for a moment to take advantage of the coup and sever their ties with the Soviet Union. "You mind your business, we mind ours", this was the leitmotif of their behaviour. The leaders of Azerbaijan and the Central Asian republics unequivocally supported the putschists, though they later on refused to have anything to do with them. It was only A. Akaev, President of Kirgizia, who took a courageous stand and strongly denounced the coup, thus putting his political destiny at stake. It is therefore likely that, had the conservatives got the upper hand in Moscow, most of the republican leaders would have tried their best to find a common language and accommodate with the new Union leaders.⁶

But we still have the "people's uprising", the "opposition of the masses to the coup", as it was presented in the western media. In fact, there was nothing of the kind. In the provinces people kept quiet.⁷ Attempts to organize large-scale strikes failed. Some people welcomed the coup as a long awaited means to restore law and order. Others had become sick and tired of all these continuing shocks. Only an insignificant part of the population participated in protests against the coup. The majority preferred to wait and see.

As for the Army and the KGB, the degree of their democratization should not be exaggerated. When General E. Shaposhnikov began searching for like-minded people who would support the Russian authorities, he could trace only one man, General A. Grachov. It should be noted, however, that

⁶ What about the reaction of the main western powers? President Bush and Prime Minister Major were the only leaders who stood up resolutely against the coup, but even their stance looked somewhat uncertain at first. The other western leaders were patently hesitant, and were, like Francois Mitterand, obviously on the verge of giving the new authorities in Moscow some kind of recognition. It seems likely, therefore, that the world community would soon have adjusted to the new situation.

⁷ According to opinion polls, on the first day of the conspiracy up to 40 per cent of the population in the provinces were in favour of the state of emergency. Even in democratic Leningrad it was supported by 20 per cent of the polled.

units and individuals in the Army and the KGB disobeyed or sabotaged the orders of the conspirators.⁸

However, it was not because they were democratically inclined but because they lacked faith in the coup-makers and their prospects of success. "The coup failed because instead of Marshal Zhukov we had Marshal Yazov", was the explanation given by a fairly well-known representative of the ultra-patriotic forces, Colonel Alksnis.⁹ He was obviously right to some extent. "The Russian factor" also played a part. The Army would have attacked the civil population in Baku, Tblisi and Vilnius without hesitation. It would have been much more difficult to attempt the same in Moscow. Still, the Army would probably have obeyed orders and attacked both the peaceful population and the "White House" had the orders been given. But there seem to have been no orders. The troops had just been ordered to "enter the city and stay there".

The defeat of the coup did not, therefore, mark a victory for the democratic forces, but the defeat of the conservatives. They lost primarily because of their own indecision. They had been too circumspect, waiting for uncertain opportunities and expecting a leader to appear in the belief that their actions were just the prelude to the main act which never materialized.

In retrospect we can observe the buildup of a new mythology of a "people's revolution" and the "courageous defence of the White House". A heroic image of Eltsin and his associates is being created. Of course, they should be rendered their due. The Russian president and his supporters did behave courageously, consistently and with dignity in August. All the more when contrasted with Gorbachev's team and environment. One should not belittle the heroic deeds of tens of thousands of Moscowites who set out to defend the Russian Parliament, marching into uncertainty and possibly risking their lives. The reality of the threat against the "White House" is still a matter for discussion, but this does not detract from the heroic aspects of the events.

Should one speak about the victory of democracy in August in Russia at least if not in the Soviet Union? There seems to be no ground for such

⁸ The KGB elite detachment "Alfa" refused to take part in the storming the "White House", where Eltsin and his supporters had their headquarters.

⁹ *Argumenty i fakty*, No. 32, 1991.

an inference. The defeat of the conservatives does not mean that power has passed into the hands of the democrats. A danger however lies in the fact that the political structure is being filled with new people who are by no means dreaming of radical changes in the very mechanism of power. In short, one can say that so far the new forces have *suffered* a success. From now on they will be kept responsible for leading society out of the crisis and there will be nobody to blame in case of failure. So, the moment of truth is still lying ahead.

4. NEW POLITICAL FORCES

The events of August have accelerated the reshaping of the political landscape both in Russia and in the other republics. As far back as in 1989-90 it was correct to speak about the antagonism between democrats and conservatives, at least in Russia. In some republics, such as the Baltic states, the Ukraine and Moldova, there was a confrontation between the national liberation movements and the supporters of a unitary state whose stronghold was the communist parties. But from the end of 1990 the political landscape became more complex. A new type of polarization had emerged. Simultaneously new compromises and unions, sometimes between yesterday's adversaries, began to appear.

Even the CPSU ceased to exist as a monolith. By 1990 orthodox marxist, liberal centrist and national separatist movements could easily be discerned within its ranks. The Party went on splitting into national republican organizations that were used by local leaderships as bridgeheads for spreading their own influence. The rise of the Russian Communist Party demonstrated the intricate relationship between the old central machinery and the Russian party structure.

Other sectors of the established power apparatuses showed similar separation tendencies. Within the military-industrial complex different approaches both to the Union's future and further reforms became increasingly evident. Here an influential "directors' lobby" took shape which was opposed to being associated with the CPSU and began to search for a new political umbrella. Similar polarization processes got under way in the army and the KGB.

New political trends emerged on the scene. One of them might be defined as a great power or imperialist trend which rallied communists and anti-communists, advocates of maintaining the empire and the return of the

"iron hand". This trend was led by the "Soyuz" (Union) group in the USSR Supreme Soviet. Similar positions were taken by representatives of the Russian communities in the Ukraine (for instance in the Crimea), in Moldova, and in the Baltic states.

Prior to August the *democratic movement* was in a rather amorphous state. The democrats did not succeed in becoming consolidated or in building structures similar to the Czech Civic Forum or Poland's "Solidarity". The "Democratic Russia" movement enjoyed influence only in a number of big cities. The spring of 1991 saw the beginning of a split in the Soviet democrats' ranks. The polarization hinged on a number of matters, such as the future of the Union, the nature of reforms to be implemented, organizational models (a mass party, movement or coalition, and on what platform?). No major non-communist parties have ultimately emerged in Soviet society. The most numerous in terms of membership, Nikolai Travkin's Democratic Party, had a membership of about 35,000 prior to August 1991.

In the spring of 1991 a number of liberal-minded personalities and first-generation "perestroika advocates", former allies of Gorbachev including A. Yakovlev and E. Shevardnadze joined forces with some of the democratic leaders, including G. Popov and A. Sobchak and some leaders of A. Volski's Scientific and Industrial Union in an attempt to form a centrist type of political movement. Their intentions were to rally all the reformist personalities and moderate groupings under the same umbrella. This was how the formation of the Movement for Democratic Reforms was announced. Many people felt, however, that this was part of Gorbachev's efforts to extend his power base, and that the Movement for Democratic Reform (MDR) was a way of extending the life of the Party structures. But there was still another reason why this organization was doomed from the very beginning. An all-union organization trying to play a uniting role - and this was part of MDR's purpose - was hardly feasible when the Union was disintegrating.

The August events produced a vacuum where the CPSU had been before. What kind of forces and organizations will fill this vacuum? After the Communist Party's activities had been suspended in Russia similar decisions were taken in a number of other republics. Because of this many analysts have come to the conclusion that communism has come to an end in post-Soviet society. Indeed, in what used to be the Soviet Union communism seems to have ceased to exist in its traditional form, as a National Ideology and a basis for the unitary state.

But does all this imply that communism will not revive in this society in other forms or in a different modification? This ideology is likely to continue exerting its influence for a long time on not insignificant sections of the population as a levelling mentality and as a combination of certain social conceptions. More than seventy years of indoctrination could not pass without leaving any trace. Communist atavism may make itself felt during the period of transition to economic reforms, and it may serve to generate the striving for authoritarian methods of administration. At the same time, however, the maintenance of communism as a mass party platform appears to be questionable. Communist type parties, whatever their name, will be restored at least in Russia. But they will be marginal, not numerous and will be supported by people of the older generation. However, the formation of new parties of a left-wing, social democratic orientation is inevitable.

At present, indeed, the intention of the old establishment to form parties by changing labels is also quite apparent. N. Nazarbaev was the first to do this. He declared the dissolution of the Kazakhstan communist party and the formation of a Kazakhstan Socialist Party that was composed of the old communist organizations with their full membership.

In the short-term perspective, the new political organizations which may come into being on the ruins of the CPSU are most likely to be of populist or nationalist tendencies. An example of this is the evolution of the Ukrainian communists. Following the August events they turned suddenly into national patriots and began to support almost entirely the conception of their former opponent - the national patriotic movement "Rukh". Similar tendencies were even stronger in Central Asia and Azerbaijan. The local leaders there are trying at any cost and under any labels to maintain the party infrastructures as supporting pillars of the new regimes. Phraseology may change but the essence of authority remains intact.

What is the situation for the democratic movement after August? One would expect that the defeat suffered by the conservatives would have increased its role. It may be argued that quite the contrary has happened. The crisis in the democratic forces has been even more aggravated. It has become clear that the original rationale for their existence was first and foremost the fight against the CPSU, their opposition to and negation of the old regime. The enemy's collapse has deprived the democrats of their main impetus. The question of finding a new platform and a new image

was raised since it was impossible to exist any longer on the basis of anti-communism. However, this seems to be a natural process, if we look at the evolution of the former opposition forces in Eastern Europe.

Thus we are on the threshold of building a system of political pluralism. Which tendencies will dominate? First of all the former division into "democrats" and "conservatives" will become a thing of the past. The very notions of "right wing" and "left wing" will gradually acquire a new meaning. It seems clear that certain political forces - liberals, social-democrats, neo-conservatives, christian-democrats - are keen to build their conceptions and political structures according to the classical western scheme. It should be noted, however, that this process evolves from the top rather than from the grass roots, and sometimes in a very artificial way. Political party constructions do not always correspond to the social trends in society at large. Attempts to build a western-type system of political pluralism are made in a society where the "communist" social structures are generally still intact. Consequently, there may be concealed under the liberal or social-democratic labels quite different and at times unexpected elements.

Does this mean that nationalism in whatever disguise will continue to be a dominating force in the post-Soviet political scene for a long time? First of all it should be pointed out that the political differentiation in various republics and emergent states will not be identical. In most regions the national-patriotic movements will, in fact, be the most influential force for a time. But when independence is secured these movements will disintegrate and new party structures will begin to come into being. This process is already under way in the Baltic countries; the Ukraine will soon follow suit. Nevertheless in some regions nationalism is likely to hold its ground as an influential political trend for a long time. This will be the case in regions where there are ethnic and inter-republican contradictions. Nationalism could also be used as the base for dictatorship power.

Everybody is concerned about which political forces will gain the upper hand in Russia. In my opinion there are still no grounds to believe that Russian nationalism is likely to take shape as a predominant political movement or political course in Russia in the near future. Such an eventuality would mean the transformation of the Russian Federation into a powder keg. At the same time the Russian authorities may none the less be expected to pay increased attention to strengthening the idea of Russian statehood and Russian self-sufficiency. This is an inevitable reaction to separatism and nationalism in the other republics. Yet this factor is not

sufficient to conclude that Russian nationalism is gathering momentum. It should rather be interpreted as an increasing awareness of Russia's special interest as a major heir to the Soviet Union.

In any event the process of attaining a new identity after the Soviet empire will be painful for the Russian people. It will be associated with the struggle against two extremes - national isolationism ("We must get separated from all of them") and great power tendencies ("Russia is responsible for all of them. We are not going to let the old Union disappear altogether").

5. FORMS OF INTER-REPUBLICAN RELATIONS

It is a thankless task to predict the further scenarios of the development of the constituent parts of the former Union when there is no stable structure of social interests, when emotions and irrational behaviour have come to the forefront and new political forces are only in the early phases of self-organization. Some alternatives could, however, be easily ruled out.

A return to the unitary state seems impossible. The restoration of the party-etatist system would be entirely unthinkable too. Even in the most conservative republics communist etatism will gradually be supplanted by new structures and by the emerging new political elite. On the inter-republican level, the chance of a federal solution has been lost. At the same time their absolutely independent development, with all economic relations broken off, appears equally doubtful.

To what extent do the dramatic versions of post-Soviet society's development, such as civil war, a military putsch or military dictatorship or war between the republics seem probable? A civil war in Russia in the near future seems unlikely, since such confrontation implies the involvement of two sides, which have been non-existent so far. But because of the further deepening of social differences, the decline in standard of living for a certain part of the population, higher unemployment figures, the lack of social absorbers in the process of a shock transition to a market economy, scenes of mass protest and social unrest are not unlikely in 1992-1993. Recent events in Georgia have demonstrated the possibility of civil confrontation. Similar events could occur in the Ukraine, in Azerbaijan, and in some of the Central Asian republics.

In view of this to what extent are wars between the former Soviet republics likely? It is hard to imagine which republic would want to become involved in an armed confrontation with Russia; the weight class of the other republics is too low. In the near future armed conflicts are more likely to take place between republics which are already involved in territorial or other disputes, such as Kirgizia and Uzbekistan. The leaders of some republics may stimulate such conflicts in an attempt to create the image of an external enemy in order to consolidate their own position. As has been demonstrated by the protracted conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, interethnic conflicts are generally hard to settle without the mediation of a third party. But Russia's involvement in this role may have negative consequences and even worsen its relations with the conflicting parties. What would appear to yield a more effective result is the establishment of a multilateral machinery for the settlement of such conflicts or the enlisting of international organizations for mediation, as has been the case in the war between Serbia and Croatia.

As for the likelihood of a military coup, it is unfeasible on the Commonwealth scale. It also seems unlikely in Russia itself in the near future. For one thing the Soviet military establishment is utterly inexperienced in independent political action. The officers have always been under the Party's close supervision. Also the army has its own problems to solve. The fact is that at present the former Soviet army is going through one of the most painful periods in its history.

The disparity between the propaganda myth about the most mighty army in the world and the really grievous conditions of rank and file officers has become more apparent. The "Afghan syndrome" that has not yet been overcome in the army is supplemented with the inferiority complex engendered by the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Eastern Europe without the preliminary preparation of any appropriate infrastructure in their own country. The sentiments which evidently prevail in servicemen's circles make up a complex tangle of social and political dissatisfaction. There is a widespread feeling of alienation resulting from the criticism the army has been subjected to by the democratic forces. The officers are politically disoriented and frustrated by the evolving signs of national division. A considerable number of servicemen supported "departization". On the other hand, the existing great-power sentiments and longing for a strong regime among fairly wide sections of the officers cannot be ignored.

In the autumn of 1991 a thorough purge was undertaken in the Soviet army. The upper echelon of the military, which was formerly associated with the communist system, has been retiring from the scene. This generation of the officer class is not likely to muster its strength for resistance. The way to the top has been cleared for the next generation of servicemen. They are less ideologically-minded, more pragmatic and self-sufficient. It is precisely this military echelon that may become an independent political force if there is no proper civil control of the army.

It is much more likely that there will be an escalation of interethnic rather than of social conflicts. They have already occurred in Moldova, Georgia and Central Asia. Given the abundance of armaments in the country in private possession and the forming paramilitary groupings, such conflicts are not only of an armed and bloody character but they may turn into a source of constant interrepublican tension.

Post-soviet society has fallen into a unique trap whose character is largely governed by the versatile, circular nature of its further development. On the one hand, separatism in the individual republics has deepened to such an extent that it will be very difficult to transform the new Commonwealth of Independent States into a community with a single centre. On the other hand, not a single one of the emergent states can survive economically on its own, although Russia and the Ukraine are in a somewhat better position. There are also other reasons to doubt the possibility of the successful independent development of some of the post-soviet republics.¹⁰

What underlies republican separatism? Several factors seem obvious, namely: 1) the desire of individual nations to realize their long-suppressed national identity and to form their own statehood for its protection; 2) attempts by republican leaders to strengthen their own position through appeals to separatist sentiments; 3) the emergence of new political elites who see a basis for their existence in national statehood. It is far from the case that the attainment of national statehood always leads to the acceleration and radicalization of reforms. In the Baltic republics the breakaway from the centre initially accelerated their advance in this

¹⁰ One of the reasons is the prospect of mass migration of different ethnic groups. Thus, 17,4 per cent of the Russians live outside the Russian Federation; the per cent of Ukrainians, Byelorussians and Armenians is 15.3, 21 and 33 respectively. One should bear in mind the artificiality of the present borders between individual republics.

direction. But then the reform process slowed down as the result of breaking off economic relations with other post-soviet republics. In many republics the attainment of formal independence moved the problems of democratization and marketization away from the foreground. On the one hand, the striving of people in the communist empire towards their own independence was natural and inevitable. But sometimes sovereignty is understood as an end in itself. And sometimes one sees the Bolshevik way of thinking and behaviour although in another ideological disguise.

So what then are the most probable ways that Russia and the other parts of the former Soviet Union will develop? At the moment, it seems that the logic of disintegration which is largely beyond control predominates over any constructive processes. But at the same time post-soviet society is no longer a one-tendency entity, and it would be erroneous to tell only about its disintegration when speaking about its complex development as a whole. It cannot be confined within the framework of one model as many people try to do.

The attempted coup in August brought about the last stage of the Soviet Union's disintegration. The old centre virtually ceased to exist. Our society has entered the phase of the final breakup of its economic and social relations. But there is an obvious need for a certain measure of continuity, a bridge between the past and the future. The structures of the new Commonwealth of Independent States are an attempt in this direction. The establishment of provisional, interim structures encountered specific difficulties. First, it was necessary to break down the resistance of the Union's former power structures which were unwilling to quit the scene peacefully and voluntarily. Secondly, it was necessary to secure the consent of the majority of republican leaders to build a "transitional bridge" and to draft a certain "code of conduct" for the transitional period.

It was the "big three", Gorbachev, Eltsin and Nazarbaev, who undertook to tackle these problems. They coped with a part of their tasks. The Union's supreme body of state authority, the Congress of People's Deputies, agreed to retire from political life, without any serious resistance. A first agreement was also reached to form an interim power system for the transitional period.¹¹ The decisive role in the new transitio-

¹¹ As a result the following three-storey structure was established: the State Council comprising the leaders of the nine republics including Gorbachev; a new two-chamber Supreme Soviet, which was to be formed on a quota basis by individual republics, and an Interrepublican Economic Committee responsible for

nal power system was transferred to the State Council, i.e. to the "Club of Presidents". Legislative assemblies acquired purely decorative functions. The Union government, the great bulk of which supported the coup, was dissolved. Only four union posts - the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Minister for Internal Affairs, Defence Minister and KGB Chairman - were maintained and new nominees took over office (mainly on the recommendation of the Russian administration).

The interim Centre had to decide whether to make arrangements for the final divorce and the division of property, or for a new marriage. "The big three" undertook to pursue a course towards forming a new confederation. The first step in forming a Commonwealth of Independent States was to build an economic union. The ad hoc negotiations held in Alma Ata in October 1991 yielded encouraging results at first. Thirteen republics expressed their desire to join this community in one form or another. But then things came to a standstill. Some of the Russian authorities failed to accept the terms of the economic agreement which they regarded as unfavourable for Russia.¹² However, an agreement concerning a new economic community was finally signed. The Gorbachev team even began drafting an agreement on a political union. But it was clear to everyone how shaky and unstable a new structure was going to be, and how stubbornly the republics were striving to attain independence, at times regardless of any logic or common sense.

It is an open question, therefore, whether the emerging Commonwealth of Independent States in lieu of the old Union will be a long-term venture. Theoretically it makes it possible to combine the longing of individual republics for self-rule and the joint implementation of those functions which the republics would find it difficult to carry out separately (a collective security system, control over nuclear forces and nuclear energy, transport and communications). But the attempts to set up a confederation of the post-Soviet republics will meet with serious difficulties. The community will consist of states with different political systems and cultures (democratic, national-populist, national-partocratic), varying socio-economic structures, and the general level of development is quite different. Conflicts between the republics appear to be inevitable. The

coordinating the economic strategies of the nine republics.

¹² "Russia will become again a milk cow for all the other republics which are already parasitizing on her", Russian Vice President A. Rutskoi said in this connection.

members of the Commonwealth will even find it difficult to coordinate their economic strategies because their leaders adhere to different views on the market and privatization. Instability will be inherent in the structure because individual leaders will use nationalism as an instrument to consolidate their internal position in their respective regions and to strengthen their authoritarian regimes.

The relationship of Russia with the other republics and their leaders constitutes a special problem. The republican leaders evidently fear Eltsin's rise to power suspecting him of hegemonical and great-power ambitions. Immediately following the attempted coup in August the Russian team took a number of steps that gave rise to speculation about the emergence of a new "Russian imperialism". Reference is made inter alia to the warning by Eltsin's press spokesman to the effect that the complete breakup of all union structures would raise the question of revising common borders. The statement was obviously an attempt to put an end to separative tendencies. But the reaction of the republics concerned was exactly the reverse. In the Ukraine the statement provoked even more intense activity among the nationalist forces and accelerated the republic's advance to independence.¹³ Nazarbaev made the following comment: "I don't know who has whispered it in his ear [i.e. Eltsin's], but the Russian leadership has missed a chance to make peace. Everybody looked at him [i.e. Eltsin] with confidence. But this was like a fly in the ointment".¹⁴

But the main reason for the discontent of many republican leaders was that the Russian authorities nominated their candidates to the key Union posts, with the apparent intention of turning the all-union assets into Russian property. These actions undertaken by the Eltsin team could be understood and explained to a certain extent. Following the discrediting of the Union bodies it was urgent that personnel were replaced in the top echelons especially in the Army, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the KGB in order to rule out the possibility of a new attempts to block the reform process. As for the transfer of all-union property on RSFSR territory into Russian property, the other republics were doing the same

¹³ The Ukrainian movement "Rukh" issued the following statement: "The attempt aimed at the Ukrainian revival, has given rise once again, just as 72 years ago, to a strong reaction now on the part of Russia's democratic leaders who won the victory over the putsch. We see again the illusion of Messianism, "Big Brother" syndromes and imperial aspirations...".

¹⁴ *Izvestiia*, September 9, 1991.

in their respective territories. But even discounting these specific incidents, powerful Russia cannot help provoking fears in the less powerful states and emerging republics surrounding it.

To sum up: the discrepancy in weight class between the individual members of the new Commonwealth, the unequal level of economic development, the increasingly varied types of social structures, the differently balanced political forces, to say nothing about the different traditions, cultures and national mentality - all these factors, taken together, will prevent the Commonwealth from evolving into a stable entity. Indeed, historical experience seems to show that a confederation is essentially a traditional form. It tends to develop either into a federation or fall to pieces. A complete breakdown of all centralized structures would have dire consequences for Russia and the other republics. Among other things, it would be necessary to face problems over revision of borders and the resulting millions of refugees among the Russians in particular. Another effect would be a spiralling of the economic crisis resulting from the breaking off of economic relations between the republics.

Representatives of the Russian government from time to time express the view that the process of building a new union should be given secondary priority and that Russia should basically proceed further "on its own". The unilateral introduction of the price reform in Russia from January 2, 1992, obviously resulted from this way of thinking. As the argument goes, Russia should proceed to make further radical changes without waiting for the other republics, and without wasting time and effort on endless arrangements to be agreed upon with other republics. Accordingly, when Russia overcomes the crisis and becomes a fully fledged state, this very fact will give rise to a rapprochement of the other states. Russian isolationism would by no means be an optimum scenario in the development of the post-Soviet territories. Russia's independent evolution would inevitably mean an increasingly reactionary political system in a number of other emerging states, particularly in Central Asia, while the ability of the Russian state to exert its influence on them would be further reduced.

When thinking about the future of the post-Soviet territories, one should not only think in terms of a single model - federation, confederation, commonwealth or disintegration. A new pluralistic entity is emerging in lieu of Soviet society. Despite apparently chaotic present situation, some features of future intra-republican relations have already begun taking

shape. In a not quite foreseeable future the Commonwealth of Independent States might develop into a multistory structure with elements of federative and confederative types. The structure will look asymmetric - each republic or state will try to find its own way of joining it. Such a polytypic form of relations will give rise to quite a few coordination problems. But the unification of these relations seems unlikely in the foreseeable future. Some republics will establish confederative relations with each other, some will join an economic community, some will form just a military union and the remaining republics will embark upon an independent course.

The future multistory edifice would in no way be a constant structure destined to last for long. It would inevitably undergo evolution. Some republics might change from federative relations to confederative and vice versa. Some states might try to develop independently at first, and later establish closer relations with other states. There is no doubt that Russia will be a single centre of attraction around which relations of different types will be built up. However, Russia's participation in any entity will require its leadership to display maximum flexibility and to give up any hegemonical aspirations to which its partners are extremely sensitive, and which could compel them to avoid any alliance with Russia, even if this is to their obvious disadvantage.

One should not underestimate the likelihood of the emergence of new centres of attraction, leading to the formation of other regional and subregional associations. The idea of a Central Asian Union has been in the air for a long time, and Kazakhstan's president Nazarbaev clearly claims the role of leader in this region. Closer forms of cooperation between the Baltic states are already emerging. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's idea of a "Slavonic Union of States" may also be considered. There are few doubts about the future rapprochement between Moldova and Rumania, possibly in the form of a confederation between the two states.

In the near future, however, we will evidently have to go through a phase of euphoria over national independence. At present, many of the post-Soviet states are primarily concerned with strengthening their self-sufficiency. They may be forced, I believe, to seek a union with one another by the emergence of an imminent external threat, real or imagined, or an utter economic collapse. Meanwhile they are keen to find partners among more powerful states rather than allies among their weak equals.

The process of regionalization goes beyond the borders of the former Soviet Union. At present we can observe a tendency among a number of the post-Soviet republics to seek rapprochement with other states based on the similarity of the political regimes or their leaders' views, on regional interests or national-ethnic or religious sentiments. For example, it is quite clear why Kazakhstan, whose leadership advocates authoritarian economic modernization, is striving to establish closer economic relations with China and South Korea. The reasons for rapprochement between Azerbaijan and a number of Central Asian republics with Turkey and Iran are equally obvious.

The international factor plays an important role in the further development of the post-Soviet region and in the building therein of new state structures. In all of the former Soviet republics a powerful impetus to attaining independence is provided by the hope for international assistance, including economic aid, to be rendered by the industrialized countries. As soon as the republican elites overcome their illusions about forthcoming abundant international assistance these republics will enter a new phase of their development. Unrestrained separatism will give way to endeavours to achieve rapprochement with other republics. The criteria for such rapprochement will include first of all socio-political orientation, prospects for mutually profitable economic relations, geographical vicinity and common ethnic and cultural roots.

However, the process of achieving stable new structures and relationships between the former Soviet republics will take years. This should not come as a surprise. Throughout this period the former Soviet area will be a turbulent picture. But judging by the way in which events are developing today, there is no reason to allege that the Yugoslav bloody scenario will inevitably be repeated. It is still possible to avoid it on a large scale though the Yugoslav syndrome is likely to be repeated locally.

What, then, will ultimately emerge in lieu of the former Soviet Union? A powerful Eurasian Union? A plurality of mutually hostile states? Or a great Russia, again dangerous because of its unpredictable character, surrounded by quiet vassals? But internal developments in Russia, and the policies of the international community will have decisive influence on the final outcome of the current phase of turmoil in post-Soviet society.

6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

What is the first priority task facing post-Soviet society at the moment? "Transition to market, of course", many people will say. This is correct, but not entirely, since all attempts in that direction are being impeded by the existence of a still greater problem - the one of power.

This is what makes the situation in the territories of the former Soviet Union a unique one. New bodies of supreme power have been elected in all the republics and states. In many instances it was the former opposition that took the upper hand. However, side by side with the institutions symbolizing the continuing changes is the foundation of the old Soviet system, which is no longer functioning since it cannot carry on without being bolstered by the party and the *nomenklatura*. Typical of the situation is an institutional "cover" with nothing inside - just the lack of local power and the absence of a vertical mechanism to execute the decisions being adopted. By rephrasing a well-known saying, the situation in the former Soviet Union can be described as follows: the existence of absolute power leads to stagnation, while the absence of power leads to absolute stagnation. In addition, the "cover" of the new political system is one-sided in all the republics. In typical case it leans towards a presidential system of power, with correspondingly weak legislative and judicial authorities. This situation may partly be explained by the fact that the new structures emerged in 1990, at a time when the position of the communist parties was still rather strong. Today, in terms of their composition, neither the parliaments nor the judicial bodies reflect the new ratio of public forces. Evidently, parliaments in some of the republics will soon be pushed aside and some of their functions will be taken over by the presidents. Early elections will be held in some places. So far the executive branch of the constitutional system has been enhanced without serious opposition from any quarter. To a certain extent this trend should be understood as the result of critical circumstances which call for prompt and efficient management. The problem is, however, to draw the line between warranted firmness and authoritarian rule. Some republics, namely Georgia, Azerbaijan, Tadjikistan, Turkmenia, Uzbekistan and Moldova, have already provided grounds for speculation about the appearance of new regimes of personal power.

It is impossible to create a workable system of power and conduct free elections without the existence of an advanced multi-party system. However, the establishment of relatively stable parties in post-Soviet societies will still take some years, until a new and diversified structure

of social interest has emerged. Here we encounter a typical syndrome of post-communist society. On the one hand, a fresh system of socio-economic aspirations cannot develop without intensive activity from the political parties. On the other hand, the latter's appearance is impeded because of the absence of new and advanced social groupings with clear-cut interests.

The next problem is concerned with the kind of leaders who have come to power in the post-Soviet republics and states. Today we have leaders of roughly two types: those who have emerged from the depth of the party and *nomenklatura* system; and those who were previously opposed to that system. Conspicuous among the first group is Boris Eltsin, who ventured to break away from the party structures surrounding him when the former power structures were still strong. Because of this he has so far been credited with great trust from the masses enabling him to go ahead with his course. The rest of the *nomenklatura* type of leaders left the sinking party ship only at the very last moment. Their turning into democrats therefore looks somewhat unreal or unconvincing. As for the other type of leaders, they came to power on a wave of anti-communist and nationalist and populist demagoguery (Landsbergis in Lithuania, Gamsakhurdia in Georgia, Snegur in Moldova). They have continued using the same type of emotional symbolism, while the new situation calls for the leadership to drop primitive ideologization and revolutionarism for pragmatic down-to-earth policies.

After Gorbachev's demise from the political scene, post-Soviet politics is heavily influenced by three of the republican leaders, namely Eltsin, Nazarbaev and Kravchuk. Their position is strengthened by the fact that they each have the support of a large republic. The first two at any rate have proved to be outstanding and original political figures.

The foremost of the three is of course Boris Eltsin. His stance regarding the future interrelationship between Russia and the other post-Soviet republics has so far been ambiguous. Although he has supported the new Commonwealth of Independent Nations, he might still opt for Russian isolationism, or develop the claim that Russia is the sole legitimate successor of the Soviet Union.

In pursuing his internal policy Eltsin is faced with a vicious circle. As long as he enjoys popularity and the people's support he must proceed without delay with further radical economic reforms. But this very process, which started with the liberalization of most prices on 2 January 1992,

will most certainly erode his popularity. He is expected to perform miracles or at least make constructive and swift changes, not least in the economic sphere, whereas any substantial improvement will take years to materialize. The Russian leader's drama lies in this simple fact.

Eltsin should not be treated in a simplified way, as a "populist" or a potential "iron hand". He is an outstanding political personality capable of taking extraordinary decisions. At the same time it should be borne in mind that Eltsin's whole life experience and his previous career have left their stamp on him, limiting his abilities as the architect of a new system.

Let us look at Nazarbaev, an important and influential leader. At present he seems to be in favour of the confederation. The considerable number of Russians living in Kazakhstan restrains him from displaying too strong separatist attitudes. Judging not only by his declarations, however, Nazarbaev is trying to pursue a fairly independent policy and his ambitions are not confined to his own republic alone. He is more unpredictable than Eltsin and is capable of manoeuvring to a greater extent according to a continuously changing balance of forces.

Of the "big three" the Ukrainian leader Kravchuk is noted for being the most inconsistent politically, the reason for this lying in the intricate split of forces in the republic. In any event he has abandoned his communist and federalist affections with ease and turned into a supporter of liberalization and the complete independence of the Ukraine. This stance also secured him the victory in the elections for the presidency. Kravchuk will have to take into account the separatist position of the republic's main political force, the "Rukh" movement. In addition, he himself has no objection to playing up the idea of full independence in order to strengthen his personal independence of Moscow. But as a result relations between Russia and the Ukraine have become the most complicated factor in building a new community.

As for the other republics, their future stance will be heavily influenced by the position and policies of the "big three", although not only the leaders are important, but also the political elite as a whole. In a number of republics (Azerbaijan and Central Asia) the former *nomenklatura* groups, while trying to change their ideological tendencies, continue to be in power. One should not have any illusions as to their reformist inclinations. But it is also unlikely that such opportunities might exist within the national-patriotic opposition movements.

Another possible trap is related to the very fact of the former opposition's accession to power. "Opposition in power" in post-communist society is worth a special analysis of its own. This phenomenon will have a decisive influence on any further progress, considering that decisions will have to be made by people who have no or only limited experience in politics and administration. They are people who introduce into the administration their old behavioral stereotypes, i.e. elements of dissidence, disobedience, opposition and antagonism. However, the more serious questions are who will supplant them in society, who will play the role of a new opposition? Who will oppose Eltsin, Nazarbaev, Kravchuk, Landsbergis from the left and the right? It is evident that it is no use thinking about building civil society without a real opposition to the governments in power.

Finally, there is yet another trap which is far from being the last, but is probably the most serious one in the further development of post-Soviet society. I have in mind the danger of a neo-communist syndrome recurring in any form. This may include putting the cart before the horse, i.e. attempt to make society bypass the necessary transformation stages by means of using methods based on strength. It may also mean the recurrence of political intolerance, giving top priority to loyalty and "democratic" or "patriotic" criteria to the detriment of professional skills in the selection of the new cadres. However, the most serious ordeal seems to be the necessity of overcoming the purely Bolshevik temptation to rush through processes that must develop naturally. In contrast to Western societies which have their internal sources of self-renewal, the post-communist structures need to be given an impetus, a resolute pressure from outside in order to transform. But what are the limits to this pressure? Could it give rise to a new type of authoritarianism since there is a base and traditions for this?

Unfortunately, there have been more questions than answers so far. Nevertheless there is no need to conclude the discussion of the future of the post-Soviet territories solely on a sad tone. It is clear that these societies have entered a complicated epoch, full of inevitable conflicts and struggles. There will, no doubt, be more serious ordeals in the future, disappointments in the new leaders and frustration resulting from the unfulfillment of the illusions arising from the present revolutionary enthusiasm. It is likely that failures and setbacks, even dramatic confrontations will be encountered in the future. But one thing should be stated with confidence right away. It is no longer possible in our society to revive communist myths or return to the past.